Intersectionality: A Transformative Paradigm in Feminist Theory and Social Justice

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Intersectionality: A Transformative Paradigm in Feminist Theory and Social Justice

Bonnie ThorntonDill and **Marla H.Kohlman**

As a Black scholar writing about women's issues in the mid-1980s, Thornton Dill joined with several colleagues in calling for a feminist theoretical paradigm that would expose the disconnect between experience and theory in the often untold stories of women of color and those without economic privilege (Baca Zinn, Cannon, Dill, & Higginbotham, 1986). They understood that feminist theory was quite limited without the purposeful integration of the notion of difference, beginning with race, ethnicity, class, and culture. They also understood that the integration of race and class into the gendered discourses extant at that time would change the nature of feminist discourse in important and powerful ways.

More than two decades later, one of the first things students learn in women's studies classes is how to look at women's and men's lives through multiple lenses. The concept of *intersectionality* has been a key factor in this transition. This conceptual tool has become integral to both theory and research endeavors, as it emphasizes the interlocking effects of race, class, gender, and sexuality, highlighting the ways in which categories of identity and structures of inequality are mutually constituted and defy separation into discrete categories of analysis. Intersectionality provides a unique lens of study that does not question difference; rather, it assumes that differential experiences of common events are to be expected.

As scholars producing intersectional work began to apply their insights to institutional dynamics, they began to speak and write about the challenges and opportunities that exist within and through the academy and the labor market, and in law and public policy. Thus, intersectional scholarship is engaged in transforming both theory and practice across disciplinary divides, offering a wide range of methodological approaches to the study of multiple, complex social relations. In her widely cited 2005 article, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” sociologist Leslie McCall states that “intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (p. 1771).

In this chapter, we are charged with mapping the developments in intersectional theorizing and institutional transformation in the past decade while also offering our views on the future of intersectionality for feminist theory and methodology.

Roots and History

Intersectional scholarship emerged as an amalgamation of aspects of women's studies and race and ethnic studies. Its foundations are in the scholarly tradition that began in the 19th century with Black women such as Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, and Anna Julia Cooper and men like W. E. B. DuBois—intellectuals who first articulated the unique challenges of Black women facing the multiple and simultaneous effects of race,

gender, and class. What distinguished this early work on Black women was that it argued forcefully and passionately that the lives of African American women could not be understood through a unidimensional analysis focusing exclusively on either race or gender.

Intersectional scholarship, as we know it today, fused this knowledge from race and ethnic studies with aspects of women's studies and refined it in the debates and discourse that informed the civil and women's rights activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Before that time, women's studies emphasized the importance of gender and sexism while Black and Latino studies focused on race and racism as experienced within these respective communities. Each field sought to interrogate historical patterns of subordination and domination, asserting that we live in a society that is organized around complex and layered sets of inequalities. For example, the research of Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei (1991, 1996) applied this emerging mode of analysis and demonstrated how oppression was experienced differently by racial-ethnic groups, and men and women within these groups, as participants within the U.S. labor market over time. Moreover, they used their research to make a strong argument about the mutual constitution of inequalities.

> The essentially economic nature of early racial-ethnic oppression in the United States makes it difficult to isolate whether peoples of color were subordinated in the U.S. economy because of their race-ethnicity or their economic class. Whites displaced American Indians and Mexicans to obtain their land. Whites imported Africans to work as slaves and Asians to work as contract laborers. Puerto Ricans and Filipinas/os were victims of further U.S. expansionism. Race-ethnicity and class intertwined in the patterns of displacement from land, genocide, forced labor, and recruitment from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. While it is impossible, in our minds, to determine which came first in these instances—race-ethnicity or class—it is clear that they were intertwined and inseparable. (Amott & Matthaei, 1991, p. 19)

Categories of race/ethnicity, class, and gender were defined as major markers and controllers of oppression in the earliest discussions of intersectionality, with limited attention given to other categories such as sexuality, nation, age, disability, and religion, which have been discussed in more recent years. One result of this historical trajectory is a perspective asserting that individuals and groups can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege. Mere recognition of this history is not sufficient to form a complete understanding of the extensive ranges of "structures and experiences produced by intersecting forms of race and gender": neither does it ensure proper acknowledgment of the "interlocking inequalities, what Patricia Hill Collins calls the 'matrix of domination'" (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996, p. 326).

Collins explains that "the matrix of domination is structured on several levels. People experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions" (Collins, 1990, p. 227). Collins distinguishes her conceptualization of interlocking theories, or oppressions, from the traditional additive models of oppression found in much traditional feminist theory, which place

> emphasis on quantification and categorization … in conjunction with the belief that either/or

> categories must be ranked. The search for certainty of this sort requires that one side of a dichotomy be privileged while the other side is denigrated. Privilege becomes defined in relation to its other.
>
> Replacing additive models of oppression with interlocking ones creates possibilities for new paradigms. The significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity … [This type of analysis also] opens up possibilities for a both/and conceptual stance, one in which all groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system. In this system, for example, white women are penalized by their gender but privileged by their race. Depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed. (Collins, 1990, p. 225)

By noting the ways in which men and women occupy variant positions of power and privilege across race, space, and time, intersectionality has refashioned several of the basic premises that have guided feminist theory as it evolved following the 1950s. Many have explicitly recognized that the prototypical model for feminist theory post-1950s was based on the lives of White women whose experiences as wives, daughters, and mothers were to be strictly differentiated from the experience of Black women as informed by historical precedent. “Judged by the evolving nineteenth century ideology of femininity, which emphasized women's roles as nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands, Black women were practically anomalies” (Davis, 1981, p. 5). Indeed, “one cannot assume, as have many feminist theorists and activists, that all women have had the same experience of gender oppression—or that they will be on the same side of a struggle, not even when some women define that struggle as ‘feminist’ … [F]or peoples of color, having children and maintaining families have been an essential part of the struggle against racist oppression. [Thus, it is not surprising that] many women of color have rejected the white women's movement's view of the family as the center of ‘women's oppression’” (Amott & Matthaei, 1991, pp. 16–17), which many find to be the decisive message of books regarded as pivotal foundations of the second wave of the feminist movement such as *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan or *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich. We do not mean to imply, either, that all women of color would renounce the accounts offered in the pages of these books. We offer these textual examples as evidence that intersectional scholarship has been able to highlight the myriad ways in which the experiences of some White women and women of color differ in the nuances of the maintenance of family. More specifically, these differences are to be found within the inextricable lines of racial ethnicity and gender that were influential in the fomentation of a feminist consciousness for some women that was both distinct from and dependent upon the experiences of other women.

Indeed, the family has been for many women of color a sort of “haven in a heartless world” of racism that provides the needed support to fight against oppression of many types (Dill, 1979; hooks, 1984). Drawing on the work of a number of the pioneering Black feminist intersectional scholars, Landry (2000) argues in his book on Black middle-class women that this support enabled Black women to produce a new ideology of womanhood that permitted the formation of the modern dual-career and dual-earner family. This

model of womanhood rejected the notion that “outside work was detrimental to [Black women's roles] as wives and mothers” (Landry, 2000, p. 73). Indeed, Black women of the late 19th and early 20th centuries realized that “their membership in the paid labor force was critical to achieving true equality with men” (p. 74) in the larger U.S. society in a way that was not available to White women under the cult of true womanhood that constrained them to the exclusive domains of hearth and home. Women of color, having always been regarded as a source of labor in the United States, were never the beneficiaries of this ideology of protectionism and were not, therefore, hampered from developing an ideology that saw beyond the dictates of traditional feminist principles based in the experience of gender subordination perceived as endemic to all women (see, for example, Davis, 1972).

Winifred Breines (2006) provides an interesting reflection on the role and relationship of early intersectional thinking that promoted an understanding of mutually constituted structures of difference and inequality in feminist experiences. As she argues in *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*,

> In the development of the feminist movement, one of the most dramatic political shifts was from a desire to overcome difference to its promotion. Integration or interracialsim as a goal migrated toward difference and an embrace of identity that precluded togetherness. This was a disturbing process but, in retrospect, probably inevitable. Postwar young people, especially whites, knew very little about racism and sexism. They had to separate to learn who they were in the race, class, and gender terms constructed by American society. … Just as identity politics divided the society that created such politics in the first place, they divided the movements. (Breines, 2006, p. 16)

Breines (2006) concludes her text on the differences that emerged between Black and White women in the feminist movement with words from several young feminists, one of whom contends that “unlike second wave feminism, which has operated from a monolithic center, multiplicity offers the power of existing insidiously and simultaneously everywhere. ‘Women’ as a primary identity category has ceased to be the entry point for much young activist work” (p. 196). Breines (2006) follows this with the admonition that young feminists have come to this knowledge having read the experiences of those who struggled before them: “They may not be aware of it, but the racial learning curve that began in the early 1960s continues among younger—and older—feminists in the twenty-first century” (p. 199). Similar to the project embarked upon by Breines, the research and writing of feminist scholars of color continues the tradition of theorizing the experience of women of color who have been ignored in the scholarship on both race and gender. These scholars have produced landmark studies based on lived experience at the intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.[1]

Growth and Dissemination: Emerging Inquiries and Controversies

As an approach to creating knowledge that has its roots in analyses of the lived experiences of women of color—women whose scholarly and social justice work reveals how aspects of identity and social relations

are shaped by the simultaneous operation of multiple systems of power—intersectional scholarship is interdisciplinary in nature and focuses on how structures of difference combine to create a feminist praxis that is new and distinct from the social, cultural, and artistic forms emphasized in traditional feminist paradigms that focus primarily upon contrasting the experiences of women in society to those of men. Intersectionality is intellectually transformative not only because it centers the experiences of people of color and locates its analysis within systems of ideological, political, institutional, and economic power as they are shaped by historical patterns of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, and age but also because it provides a platform for uniting different kinds of praxis in the pursuit of social justice: analysis, theorizing, education, advocacy, and policy development.

The people who engage with this work do so out of strong commitments to diversity, multiculturalism, and human rights, combined with a desire to create a more equitable society that recognizes, validates, and celebrates difference. The social justice agenda of this scholarship is crucial to its utility in fomenting theory and praxis specifically designed for analyzing inequalities of power and privilege, and, consequently, intersectionality is of interest to persons outside the academy who share concerns that underlie this scholarship. As Catherine MacKinnon contends, “What is important about intersectionality is what it is doing in our world, how it is traveling around the world and being used in defense of human rights, not just what it says” (MacKinnon, 2010).

The intellectual vibrancy within and around intersectional theory is yielding new frontiers of knowledge production that include, but are not limited to, scholarship on identity and the applicability of intersectionality to groups in other social locations or in multiple social locations simultaneously (Browne & Misra, 2003; Henderson & Tickamyer, 2009; Kohlman, 2010a). Discussions about methodologies, language, and images most accurately convey the complexities of these interrelationships. For example, the development of the queer of color critique (Ferguson, 2003; Johnson & Henderson, 2005) as an intervention into sexuality studies establishes race and ethnicity as critical dimensions of queer studies, scholarship on globalization and international human rights moves intersectionality beyond the U.S. context (Davis, 2008; Knapp, 2005; Mohanty, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006), and work that continues explicitly to link theory and practice provides an analytical foundation for social justice and critical resistance. Within each of these topics, there are disagreements about approach and perspective, which we explicitly address in what follows, and the debates and discussions contribute to the vibrancy of the topic and thus to advancing this scholarship and producing knowledge that illuminates the many factors that shape processes of experiencing multiple identities and social locations.

Because the contemporary growth of intersectionality as a theoretical approach is relatively recent and has developed in a number of different fields, future growth is largely defined by the trajectory of current debates and inquiries. This chapter identifies some of these important debates, particularly with regard to sexualities/queer studies, globalization and transnationalism, methodologies, and new ways of linking theory and practice in academe, law, and policy.

Sexuality/Queer Studies

An intersectional approach emphasizing multiple dimensions of identity and their relationship to systems of power has been an important part of sexuality and queer studies and has been used to reveal the heterosexism of institutions, broaden understandings of gender, expose the artificiality of presumed sex differences, and expand knowledge of sexual desire (Ingraham, 2005). At the same time, sexuality studies have been critiqued by scholars of color for using intersectionality primarily as a methodological tool that fails to address the ways in which race, ethnicity, and culture structure the experience of sexual identity and the politics of sexuality in U.S. and international contexts. These scholars specifically argue that, by largely ignoring race and failing to incorporate the insights of intersectional analysis with regard to race and racialization into its larger theoretical frame, this field of study has continued to perpetuate the commodification of sexuality as normatively White and heterosexual.

Correctives to this are found in the work of such scholars as historian John D'Emilio (2003), whose book on the life of labor and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin examines the complex ways race, gender, and sexuality intersected in Rustin's life and affected key strategies and actions of the civil rights movement. Rustin is now widely known to have been the organizer of the March on Washington in 1963 and the architect of much of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s strategy of nonviolence. It was Rustin who learned, from an early age, of the teachings of Gandhi while also being raised according to Quaker, or the Society of Friends, religious doctrine and practice. Because of the widespread homophobia in the United States at that time in history, Rustin remained closeted and behind the scenes. He and those with whom he worked understood that, because Rustin was a gay Black man and social activist, his sexual practices could easily be used to attack the movement. The analytical lens of intersectionality immediately exposes the multiplicative and interlocking power dynamics Rustin was forced to contend with in order to be a part of the civil rights struggle while simultaneously being silenced because of his sexual orientation.

Another scholar, Roderick Ferguson, in his book *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2003), develops what he calls “queer of color analysis” that reveals the interconnections among sexuality, economic inequality, and race not only in the history of U.S. labor but within various forms of knowledge production. His book lays out the historical role sociology has played in labeling African American culture as deviant, and, by carefully highlighting this process, Ferguson reveals how identity is inextricably linked to power, political representation, and the ever-shifting power dynamics of identity politics.

Additionally, in their book, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology,* E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (2005) provide a useful analysis that illuminates the significant limitations of the theoretical modalities espoused in both queer studies and Black studies by presenting a thoughtful discussion of the “multiple subjectivities” incorporated within analyses of each group. More specifically, they question the effectiveness of queer studies in addressing issues of public policy that have had a direct impact on gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color. They argue, in effect, that it is more useful to pursue the intersectional project of Black queer studies and the queer of color critique in order to theorize sexuality in a manner that is fully inclusive of the ways race, class, and gender mutually shape and are shaped by each other. Johnson and Henderson (2005) state that “*Black Queer Studies* serves as a critical intervention in the discourses

of Black studies and queer studies” with the object “to build a bridge and negotiate a space of inquiry between these two liberatory and interrogatory discourses” (p. 1). They point out that both fields emerged from political movements and strategies that focused primarily on only one dimension of selfhood, and each erased difference and the mutually constituted nature of identity that shapes lived experience.

Doug Meyer's (2008) work, “Interpreting and Experiencing Anti-queer Violence,” is another example of intersectional scholarship that challenges classical definitions of race, ethnicity, and nationality while also repositioning debates about identity politics in the United States. He specifically notes that his interviews provided evidence that

> some queer people highlighted the importance of gender and sexuality in structuring their experiences of violence; others argued that their violent experiences could not be reduced to two aspects of their identity. These comments were particularly common among queer people of color. Many queer people of color highlighted the role of racism, as well as homophobia and sexism, in structuring their violent experiences. (Meyer, 2008, p. 269)

Meyer's research reveals the ways in which cultural notions of race, gender, and sexuality intersect to determine the experience of hate crimes directed toward queer people.

Nevertheless, work in the area of queer studies may still need to be attentive to concerns raised by matters such as shifts in language usage and terminology, from “gay” to “queer” or, as Ferguson suggests, a “queer color of analysis.” This connotative shift has not been accomplished without controversy. As Rhonda M. Williams suggested in 1998, although queer is seen as a “necessarily expansive impulse, we must understand how it still also reflects and, in some cases, might blur the complexities of sexual orientations and racial politics among Black gays and lesbians” (Harper et al., quoted in Williams, 1998, p. 154). For example, this blurring Williams references may lead to the erasure of the experiences of transgender or intersexed individuals who have been actively involved in the struggle over equal marriage rights for couples regardless of their gendered identities. Johnson and Henderson (2005) note that the authors in their collection “question the effectiveness of queer studies in addressing issues of public policy that have had a direct impact on gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color” (p. 7). The intersectional project of Black queer studies and the queer of color critique is to theorize sexuality in a manner that is fully inclusive of the ways race, class, and gender mutually shape and are shaped by each other. At the same time, queer of color studies also challenge intersectionality scholarship to theorize race and racialization in a manner that is more fully inclusive of sexuality as a dimension of inequality, a point also argued by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Sexual Politics* (2004).

Transnationalism(s)

Work that examines international and global perspectives is another area that advances this scholarship. For example, work examining the social constructions of race within a transnational context, along with work on African, Latino, Asian, and other diasporic groups, is seen as developing important new insights, not

only for understanding the world outside the United States but for understanding the U.S. context as well. Chela Sandoval's (2004) transnational approach to feminist theory stands in opposition to feminism as a clear, monolithic political agenda and requires us to define feminist praxis by identifying current situations of power with which we are faced and, only then, to self-consciously select the ideological form best suited to push against that form of power's current configurations. This approach is most useful because of the focus on identifying oneself in relation to others as a meaningful process of self-examination that requires more commitment to the development of pragmatic feminist theory.

The outsourcing of goods and services and the development of labor markets outside the United States have contributed to a dispersion of labor markets, the relocation of U.S. workers, and the displacement and replacement of low-wage workers. For example, benefits information on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) has been outsourced to workers in India (Hu-Dehart, 2007). Public policy decisions such as these disproportionately impact poor women and women of color in the United States who, if working, are often working in low-wage jobs in competitive industries. For African American and Latino women recipients of TANF, who are the least likely to obtain training or a position that would lead to economic self-sufficiency, as Jones-DeWeever, Dill, and Schram (2009) found, such strategies are deeply ironic. The search for cheap labor across transnational markets exploits the labor of poor third world women from the global South at the same time that it increases economic vulnerability and limits options and opportunities for economic self-sufficiency and social mobility for women of color in the United States. Further, drawing on data presented in several studies described in the paper, they argue that, for those women who remain TANF recipients, the ability to access information on benefits is decreased by a “provider group” that is unfamiliar with the U.S. social and political context and is less likely to be linguistically appropriate to the recipients of the service.

Chandra Mohanty (2003) uses the terms “feminist solidarity” and “comparative feminist studies” to describe intersectional scholarship as a project “based on the premise that the local and the global are not defined in terms of physical geography or territory but exist simultaneously and constitute each other” (p. 242). She argues that, in addition to conceptualizing identity in multiple categories, it helps to foreground ideas of nationhood and citizenship that may in turn be used to elucidate the position of women of color throughout the United States and in international contexts. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2002), in her book *Unequal Freedom*, demonstrates the illuminative quality of intersectional analysis with regard to citizenship, race, and gender in the U.S. context, and Rhacel Parreñas (2001) illustrates the global ramifications of intersection theory in her work on Filipina domestic workers in the United States and abroad. Theorizing about third world/southern women done in the framework of comparative women's studies, then, has had the result of making power and inequality visible and bringing attention “to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 223). This scholarship is advancing our knowledge of how political structures, U.S. hegemony, and geographic space and place shape definitions and roles of gender and sexuality.

Linking Theory and Practice

Because intersectional knowledge is grounded in the everyday lives of people of diverse backgrounds, it is

seen as an important tool linking theory with practice. Intersectional work can validate the lives and histories of persons and subgroups previously ignored or marginalized, and it is used to help empower communities and the people in them. Professors Barbara Ransby, Elsa Barkley-Brown, and Deborah King, whose paid newspaper ads applied an intersectional analysis to the vilification of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas's distorted use of the concept of lynching during his Supreme Court confirmation hearings, present an early and classic example of this intersectional work. Signed by over sixteen hundred African American women scholars, the statement offered an interpretation of those events that went beyond the singular focus on sexual harassment, which had become the overriding concern of many White feminists, and the concurrent racial victimization narrative evoked by Clarence Thomas's "high-tech lynching" claim. It applied intersectional ideas to illustrate that constructs of race and gender intersected in the treatment of Anita Hill to demean and discredit her in a way that was consistent with the historical pattern of treatment of Black women who speak out on sexual matters or publicly criticize Black men. The statement, published in the *New York Times* and six African American newspapers, offered a perspective on the case that had been totally omitted from public discourse and debate. It challenged Americans to reckon with the fact that, as Kohlman (2010b) argues, there was no true recognition of the intersections of experience from which Hill emerged as she was forced to wage this battle. Instead, the most simplistic notions of feminist theory and praxis—ones that focused on gender only—resulted in initially championing her cause as feminist, even as many ignored the racist narrative that was used to delegitimize the experiences she recounted. As Kimberle Crenshaw has argued,

> America simply stumbled into the place where African-American women live, a political vacuum of erasure and contradiction maintained by the almost routine polarization of "blacks and women" into separate and competing political camps. … Because she was situated within two fundamental hierarchies of social power, the central disadvantage that Hill faced was the lack of available and widely comprehended narratives to communicate the reality of her experience as a black woman to the world. (Crenshaw, 1992, pp. 403–404)

Perhaps as a result of this earlier experience with the media and the American public, a much more assertive, confident, and fully integrated (raced *and* gendered) Anita Hill emerged in the wake of publicity surrounding the release of Clarence Thomas's memoir (2007) and his statement that Hill had been "a mediocre employee who was used by political opponents to make claims she had been sexually harassed" (Sherman, 2007, ¶ 1). On October 2, 2007, Anita Hill published an op-ed in the *New York Times,* emphatically stating, "I will not stand by and allow him, in his anger, to reinvent me" (¶ 4). Anita Hill, at this point in history, clearly exemplifies many of the qualities she was given credit for espousing in the early 1990s. Her words and actions now, however, are self-determined, borne of her own will and reflective of an intersectional presence that the American public was able to disregard completely almost 20 years ago. This is in stark contrast to the testimony elicited from her during the confrontational legal process of the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings, her inability to effectively respond as she might have wished within the organizational framework of that legal setting, and much of the media discourse that followed (Kohlman, 2010b).

Methodological Concerns

Debates around methodologies center on the concern of remaining grounded in the questions, struggles, and experiences of particular communities that generate an intersectional perspective. At the same time, methodological debates about intersectionality often extend this approach to identify common themes and points of connection between specific social locations and broader social patterns. Stated somewhat differently: How do we benefit from comparisons and interrelationships without negating or undermining the complex and particular character of each group, system of oppression, or culture? Answers to this question are embedded in discussions about the language and metaphors that most effectively convey the concept of intersectionality as well as in debates about the use of qualitative and historical versus quantitative research methodologies.

Central to the discussion of language have been disputes about the adequacies and limitations of the term “intersectionality” and the metaphors associated with it. Scholars working with these ideas continue to seek ways to overcome an image that suggests that these dimensions of inequality, such as race, class, and gender, are separable and distinct and that it is only at certain points that they overlap or intersect with one another. This concern was specifically articulated by Deborah King in 1988 when she called for a model of analysis permitting recognition of the “multiple jeopardy” constituted by the interactive oppressions that circumscribe the lives of Black women and defy separation into discrete categories of analysis. The modifier “multiple” refers not only to several simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well (King, 1988, p. 47). It is now widely recognized that intersectionality is more than a car crash at the nexus of a set of separate roads (Crenshaw, 1989). Instead, it is well understood that these systems of power are mutually constituted (Weber, 2009) such that there is no point at which race is not simultaneously classed and gendered or gender is not simultaneously raced and classed. How to capture this complexity in a single term or image has been an ongoing conversation.

Recent work by Ivy Ken (2007) provides a useful overview of a number of the conceptual images in use: that is, the notion of “intersecting versus interlocking” inequalities, which has been expressed in metaphors such as crossing roads or a matrix or the importance of locating oppressions within “systems versus structures versus institutions.” She then moves on to analyze the limitations of these analytical approaches and suggests aspects of intersectionality that remain unexplained. She further proposes an innovative and promising approach to thinking about these ideas using the processes of producing, using, experiencing, and digesting sugar as a metaphor for describing, discussing, and theorizing intersectionality (Ken, 2008). For example, she addresses the importance of context-specific relationships in understanding how race, class, and gender oppression is “produced, what people and institutions do with it once they have it in their hands, what it feels like to experience it, and how it then comes to shape us” (Ken, 2008, p. 154). Ken argues that the relationships among sources of oppression, like race, class, and gender, start with production—every aspect of race, class, and gender has been and is produced under particular social, historical, political, cultural, and economic conditions.

Given the intersectional argument that race, class, gender, and other axes of inequality are always intertwined, co-constructed, and simultaneous (Weber, 2009), questions and debates have arisen about how

quantitative approaches that rely on the analysis of separate and distinct variables can account for such interactivity. Two issues frame this debate. The first is the idea that these axes of inequality are not simply characteristics of individuals to be used as variables, isolated from the particular histories, social relations, and institutional contexts that produced them (Amott & Matthaei, 1996; Stacey & Thorne, cited in Harnois, 2009). The second is the task of developing quantitative approaches that address and reveal the overlapping differences present in intersectional analyses in a way that will yield important, generalizable results.

The work of Leslie McCall (2001, 2005) with regard to race, class, and gender in different types of labor markets has been particularly important in efforts to rethink the use of quantitative tools so that they can reveal the differential ways race, class, and gender interact within different social contexts. Her *Signs* article (2005) has been an important tool in efforts to provide empirical evidence of the value of intersectional analysis in the quantitative social sciences. Specifically, McCall applies an intersectional approach to an examination of the impact of economic restructuring on wage inequalities (see also Hancock, 2008; Simien, 2007; Valentine, 2007). To do this, she studies the effect of multiple factors on different racial/ethnic, class, and gender groups and on the relationships both within and between those groups in different regional economies. What she finds is that the patterns are not the same: that a single economic environment may create advantages for some in a group and disadvantages for others in the same group relative to other groups, thus making some environments more appropriate for one set of social policies while a different set may be more appropriate for another. She states: “different contexts reveal different configurations of inequality [and] no single dimension of overall inequality can adequately describe the full structure of multiple, intersecting, and conflicting dimensions of inequality” (McCall, 2005, p. 1791).

Kohlman (2006, 2010a) has utilized intersection theory to illustrate how the experiences of men and women who report having experienced sexual harassment in the U.S. labor market differ because of the interaction of several forces of oppression that influence behavior simultaneously. She employs quantitative methods to illustrate successfully that it is both possible and imperative to deconstruct commonly used additive models of analysis, which mask the intersectional effects shaping the experiences of those embedded within them. Catharine Harnois (2005, 2009), by applying multiracial feminist theory in the design of a quantitative analysis of women's paths to feminism, has both revealed and offered meaningful explanations for variations among women by race and ethnicity, differences within racial-ethnic categories that had not been thought to exist.

Because empirical findings from quantitative analyses dominate the social sciences, are seen as authoritative and generalizable, and often provide the documentation upon which social policy is built, quantitative research that demonstrates the importance of intersectionality offers the opportunity to expand the framework's applicability and impact. The danger, however, is that these axes of inequality may be read as a reductive analysis of the interaction of a set of individual characteristics, thus diluting the power and full meaning of the experiential theory these interactions have been constructed to illustrate. Quantitative methodologies, when read in conjunction with findings produced from the qualitative studies that continue to dominate research within the intersectional paradigm, provide analytic frames that complement, apply, and extend the impact and understanding of intersectionality.

It is also important to note that debates about methodology are not limited to a quantitative versus qualitative discussion, but, rather, embrace the idea that we must continue to explore and expand the approaches we use to address an even broader range of questions that can be generated by this scholarship. These should include applied and theoretical and interdisciplinary and transversal modes of inquiry, among others. Interdisciplinary research must embrace multiple methodological approaches to capture the complexities and nuances in the lives of individuals and the experiences of groups of people (see also Hancock, 2007). A key criterion is to avoid essentializing people's experiences by burying intragroup diversity within isolated analytical categories.

Legal scholar Francisco Valdes offers a viable solution for avoiding this type of essentialization within legal jurisprudence by conceiving of intersectionality as occurring at the intersections of legal doctrine, legal theory, and social life. In his analysis, theoretical intersectionality reflects the specific configurations of social life rather than legal doctrine, while doctrinal intersectionality is dependent upon the law itself as it is manifest in the adjudication of cases. He notes that judges, when confronted with a case that is intersectional in nature, often ignore those portions of a legal claim that fall under legal categories protected by Title VII legislation and the resulting judicial precedent established by case law (e.g., sex, race, age, or national origin) and, thereby, push the entire claim into unprotected categories (e.g., sexual orientation). In advancing this argument, Valdes identifies several categories of intersectionality that have been problematized in legal cases and therefore have been either acknowledged and then discussed, dismissed as untenable, or not recognized at all. He then posits that the gap to be found between theoretical intersectionality (lived experience) and doctrinal intersectionality (legal recognition and adjudication) is a map of the dysfunctions within the law. Valdes argues that by specifically taking note of the distinctions between doctrinal intersectionality and theoretical intersectionality, we should be able to formulate a meaningful legal praxis for addressing the range of experiences within the “gap” between the two. We can then move toward addressing the reductive impulses of juridical consideration in law. Such praxis would also provide a powerful tool for scholars to effectively identify the concepts within law and social policy that require redress in the name of social justice (Valdes, 2010).

Knowledge Production and Institutional Transformation: Identity, Law, and Higher Education

The production of knowledge is an academic enterprise and has been controlled and contained within predominantly White, elite, and middle-to upper-class institutional structures. Within this context, research is ostensibly guided by normative roadmaps, which are presumed to be neutral or objective theoretical frameworks and methodologies, but, in actuality, many aspects of these roadmaps are built upon assumptions that are subjective and convey particular images of various population groups. The culture of science, which rests upon claims of neutrality, empiricism, and positivist thinking, maintains invisible structural arrangements that perpetuate patterns of inequality. Thus, the meaning and interpretation of the numerous studies on race,

ethnicity, and poverty that appear under terms such as disparity and social gradient must be unveiled with respect to the systems of power and inequality that structure the processes of knowledge production in the sciences and social sciences and that often work against changes in public policy.

The research of Valdes and others doing intersectional theory in law and policy powerfully illustrates, then, that intersectional theory and praxis is, to a large extent, about identity and the ways in which identity politics have been the subject of considerable scholarly and popular debate over the past two decades. While these political realities remain contested and much debated, extant social constructions and academic discourses about intersectionality will continue to illuminate the nature of both individual and group identities in this area. The concept of intersectionality as it relates to identity should help us understand the multidimensional ways people experience life—how people see themselves, and how they are treated by others—while also providing a particularly useful lens for examining categorical treatments of race, gender, and sexuality. This is not to say, however, that intersectionality can be reduced to a theoretical or methodological conversation about competing identity structures (Ribet, 2010). To be most useful, this interrogation must take place not only on the individual level but also at the macro level, examining how economic, political, institutional, and ideological structures construct, perpetuate, and reify group identities.

In the discourse surrounding identity, it is the tension between intersectionality as a tool for illuminating group identities that are not essentialist and individual identities that are not so fragmentary as to be meaningless that provides the energy to move the concept forward to the future. As a point of fact, one central premise of intersectionality as a paradigm of analysis is that one cannot separate a single portion of one's identity from the rest. Arguing from this perspective, Adrien Wing (1997) asserts that one cannot see individuals

> as merely the sum of separate parts that can be added together or subtracted from, until a white male or female stands before you. The actuality of our layered experience is *multiplicative.* Multiply each of my parts together, 1 × 1 × 1 × 1 ×1, and you still have one indivisible being. If you divide one of these parts from one you still have *one*. (p. 31)

Recognizing this fine distinction, Davis (2008) correctly cites several studies framing the controversy as to “whether intersectionality should be conceptualized as a crossroad (Crenshaw, 1991), as ‘axes’ of difference (Yuval-Davis, 2006) or as a dynamic process (Staunæs, 2003)” (p. 68).

At the individual level, then, identity studies continue to call attention to dimensions of difference that have been largely unexplored and ignored. Among promising aspects of identity studies has been the growth and expansion of studies of race and ethnicity that examine processes of racialization for groups other than Blacks and Whites in the United States. For example, the article “On Being a White Person of Color: Using Autoethnography to Understand Puerto Ricans’ Racialization,” by Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (2004), provides an example of the ways identity studies have been productively enhanced through the inclusion of concepts of nation and nationality. Vidal-Ortiz (2004) challenges classical definitions of race, ethnicity, and nationality while also repositioning debates about identity politics in the United States. He argues that an alternative racialization process occurs when Puerto Ricans represent themselves while living in the United States, as

opposed to when they do the same while living on the island. By studying the impact of more than one racialization system, he shows how categories of analysis like gender, class, and sexuality may be mobilized differently depending on an individual's own geopolitical location.

Intersectional work emerging predominantly from the social sciences and humanities is an alternative mode of knowledge production that seeks to validate the lives and stories of previously ignored groups of people and is used to help empower communities and the people in them. The production of knowledge to address real-life social issues and problems and the application and use of this knowledge to solve problems of inequality have been fundamental to the intersectional project of promoting social justice.

The necessary links between theory and social justice that enable institutional transformation have been demonstrated quite effectively in the work of critical race theorists (CRT). Arguments in CRT scholarship include analyses of White privilege as structured throughout the legal system and other sociopolitical structures, as well as the examination of civil rights law that operates through “race-neutral” principles to sustain White dominance. Linking theory, policy, and practice is the principal focus of the field of critical legal theory (CLT), and this is exemplified in the work of the CLT scholars Kimberle Crenshaw and Luke Harris, cofounders of the African American Policy Forum (AAPF). The AAPF is recognized as one of the leading organizations in the field of race and gender equality, sponsoring research that explores affirmative action policies that are both global and domestic.

Two spin-offs of CLT that also extend theory on race and racialization beyond Black and White are LatCrit theory and Asian Pacific American critical race theory. Stefancic (1997) argues that Latina/o critical theory, although relatively unknown, has been around for a long time but is only recently increasing in visibility. LatCrit theory (Latina & Latino Critical Legal Theory, Inc., 2011) calls attention to the way in which conventional, and even critical, approaches to race and civil rights ignore the problems and special situations of Latina/o people—including bilingualism, immigration reform, the binary black-white structure of existing race remedies law, and much more (Stefancic, 1997, p. 1510). The invisibility of Latina/o issues is evident in multiple fields including health education and child welfare, as noted by the research of Zambrana and Logie (2000), and citizenship status, as noted by the research of Mary Romero (2008) on immigration raids and the attendant effects on mixed-status families.

LatCrit is a national organization of law professors and students whose members seek to use critical race theory to develop new conceptions of justice by actively engaging in what they term “anti-essential community building.” Linking theory and practice, especially in work that brings together scholarly analysis with community organizing, is seen as a vital dimension of this scholarship, one that grows out of its roots in lived experience and is directed toward its goal of social justice. Recognizing that the knowledge produced in the field of law affects structures of power in society, LatCrit seeks to focus its analytical lens on policies and areas of the law that have previously been overlooked. No single community, LatCrit scholars argue, can produce a theory about intergroup justice without connections to other groups, and yet every single social justice movement has had a problem with essentialism, giving primacy to some aspects of its identity while ignoring others that intersect with and reform that primary identity (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). As a result,

LatCrit seeks quite consciously to present Latino/a identity as a multifaceted, intersectional reality. Latinas/os, they argue, are Black, White, Asian, gay, and straight and speak many different languages and have many different nationalities, requiring that we stop categorizing Latinas/os as a one-dimensional monolithic entity. The term “anti-essentialism” has particular meaning for them because the work of LatCrit is primarily focused on incorporating issues of identity, hybridity, anti-essentialism, and liberation into the analysis of law and in legal institutions, discourse, and process. But also, as with other groups, the need to break apart the global category “Latina/o” into its many important differences is an attempt to hold the shared experiences and the factors that divide and differentiate in productive tension. For example, many will recognize this as a similar debate advanced against the term “Hispanic” in the late 1970s, recognizing that Latinas/os as an ethnic group were classified as White up until 1980, although their historic mistreatment had been documented by Chicano scholars (Almaguer, 1994).

Asian Pacific American critical (APACrit) theory focuses on the intersecting formations of race, gender, nation, citizenship, and immigration. APACrit frames analyses of social inequalities and poses possibilities of social justice that take into central account contentious national identity processes. Foregrounding formations of “Asian America” reveal critical race theory's limitations, particularly its constricted focus on the black-white binary and its lack of attention to issues of immigration and citizenship. Additionally, APACrit scholarship approaches formations as simultaneously raced and “nationed” within the context of border maintenance, national security, immigration laws and policies, racial profiling, sexual harassment laws, hate speech, and the nation-form's identity project. By foregrounding experiences of Asian American women and men and critiquing cultural representations of racial-sexual policing, APACrit also examines identity formations as simultaneously gendered, sexualized, raced, classed, and “nationed.”

Since the mid-1990s, APACrit has continued to grow and expand as interdisciplinary scholarship committed to social justice. Gotanda (1995) is one of the first CRT scholars to place issues in Asian American studies and CRT in conversation. He challenges legal liberalism's presumption that identity formations rest outside the law, such that the Japanese American internment, for example, is understood in legal liberalism as a result of bad decisions and misunderstandings and certainly not as the result of broader structural inequalities in society and the legal system. As a politically productive challenge to legal liberalism, Matsuda (1996) proposes “outsider jurisprudence” that considers the histories and experiences of marginalized groups, including immigrants and those positioned outside the national identity. Chang and Aoki (1997) argue that CRT scholarship centers the immigrant in analyses of the social construction of borders, race, and national identity. Cho (1997) analyzes sexual harassment cases involving Asian Pacific American (APA) women university faculty members and calls for a change in how the law conceives of harassment. Due to the confluence of race and gender stereotypes shaped by immigration laws and cultural representations, APA women are constructed as the model minority female—as especially vulnerable to “racialized (hetero)sexual harassment” (Cho, 1997). Finally APACrit has moved into the post-9/11 world with Volpp's (2002) examination of the racialization of “Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim” people as terrorists and their disidentification as citizens. The formation of this new identity category is shaped by structures and ideologies of citizenship, nation, and identity. Some significant foci of APACrit are the shifting nature and definitions of citizenship, the

exclusionary and discriminatory practices of immigration laws, and the standardization of APA groups as foils for real Americans (Jen, 2008).

Postmodernism has also been a major factor in reshaping identity studies—challenging it to move beyond its early "essentialist" tendencies to more complex and nuanced notions of the meaning, nature, and construction of both individual and group identities. Critiques of "identity politics" have come from many sectors: for example, from parts of the political right that perceive it as a form of balkanization of U.S. culture, from sectors of the political left that see it as a way of undermining class solidarity, and from postmodernist theory that sees it as an attempt to codify a continually shifting and contested set of ideological categories (Moya, 2002). To some extent, this critique stems from a conflict between two conceptualizations of identity—one that focuses on identity as a personal struggle taking place in the tension between the individual and the "groups" in which that individual holds membership and another that sees identity as part of a system of power and inequality in which certain categories and individuals within them receive unmerited rewards and benefits. These debates also reflect a split between theory and lived experience, between abstract ideas and political realities. As Martin Duberman (2001) astutely pointed out in an earlier column in *In These Times*,

> Many minority intellectuals are troubled about the inability of overarching categories or labels to represent accurately the complexities and sometimes overlapping identities of individual lives. We are also uncomfortable referring to "communities" as if they were homogeneous units rather than the hothouses of contradiction they actually are. We're concerned, too, about the inadequacy of efforts to create bridges between marginalized people. Yet we hold on to a group identity, despite its insufficiencies, because for most non-mainstream people it's the closest we have ever gotten to having a political home—and voice. (¶ 17–18)

The meanings and complexities of language and the images used to capture the insights and knowledge that intersectional analyses have produced continue to be central concerns for intersectional theory. Questions of language are compounded by the multiple intellectual domains in which this work is being generated and discussed. Each field approaches these issues through its own specific lens and specialized vocabulary. This process yields new insights and interdisciplinary ways of viewing the world, yet it readily lends itself to misinterpretation and miscommunication across disciplinary lines within and outside of academic spaces. Intersectional scholars must think carefully about whether or not there are ways to negotiate this tension so that intersectional scholarship provides greater clarity with regard to some of the most central concerns at issue—for example, what is social justice?—while allowing room for the vibrancy and messiness that interdisciplinary ideas necessarily generate.

Patricia Hill Collins suggests that we need debates that will clarify what is meant by social justice, and, at the same time, we must attend to the important work of providing a framework broad enough to accommodate people's different locations within these debates (Patricia Hill Collins, personal communication, 2001). She finds herself wanting to return to language with long historical roots that resonate for people outside the academy. For example, she prefers the notion of racism to that of race because, she argues, racism is a term that people recognize as politicized—one in which notions of power and inequality are embedded. It

is also a term that is not limited to the U.S. context. Additionally, intersectional scholars can facilitate these discussions by seeking to explicate with even greater specificity the differences in form, structure, and impact of the different dimensions of inequality. Gender, for example, creates distinctions (male, female, etc.) that are structured to interact in intimate ways in social institutions (families) while race creates distinctions (Black, White, etc.) that are often structured into separate and unequal institutions (ghettos, Jim Crow segregation). Examining these kinds of similarities and distinctions will provide considerable richness and nuance to the field in the future.

Embedded in discussions of identity are debates about authenticity and representation as they concern national, international, and global affairs. These concerns are raised not only in the scholarship but also in the hiring, tenure, and promotion of faculty. Among these debates is the issue of who studies whom and who speaks for whom—that is, who represents the “authentic” voice or voices of a particular community or communities. Questions of speaking for and writing about “the other” have been central to the development of this scholarship.

Faculties and departments where there is a growing emphasis on scholarly questions related to race and ethnicity often face a limited supply of faculty of color and, therefore, often find themselves grappling with these issues in hiring decisions and in those attendant to reappointment, promotion, and tenure. Once hired, faculty of color most often come to realize that they are expected to “represent” people of color as a kind of “spokesperson,” in a variety of service capacities, none of which are incorporated fully into their compensation or tenure evaluations. Even departments and institutions with good intentions of making race, ethnicity, and difference central to their work rely heavily on a very small number of scholars of color who are personally committed to institutional change (Baez, 2000). This is a process that faculty members must traverse carefully, ensuring that they are sensitive to the needs of the institutions where they are employed, the needs of the students they serve, and their own personal comfort and commitment to social justice work. In addition, institutions need to make a stronger commitment to providing a climate in which scholars of color can grow and flourish. This means not only training and recruiting more scholars of color but working hard to support and maintain them in the distinctively “ivory” tower of higher education.

It is worth noting, however, that scholars on an academic career track continue to find it particularly challenging to engage in theory-practice connections. Many do this work on their own time because, as in most academic locations, they will not get credit for the practical or applied side of their work. Social justice work is not as well regarded nor as well rewarded as academic publishing, and junior scholars are often warned against “widening their focus” beyond the traditional requirements for tenure. In addition, this work takes a sustained investment of time and personal energy to ensure that one maintains one's focus on social justice and outcomes that impact the lives of everyday people. These scholars must conceive of the challenges enumerated previously not as obstacles but as roadmaps illuminating the pedagogy that grows out of the lived experience of people from disadvantaged social, political, and economic locations; therefore, research must be conducted in such a way that it is neither intrusive nor exploitive of the community on which it is focused. Developing these linkages between scholarship and praxis takes an inordinate amount of time

and requires the nurturing necessary to ensure some benefit to local communities. In short, these projects should benefit the community as much as, or perhaps even more than, the individual researcher or team. Although the concept of the "engaged university" offers some acknowledgement of this kind of work, it will require continuous effort to move engaged scholarship closer to the center of university missions.

Intersectional work primarily takes place in institutional settings composed of scholars and practitioners dedicated to bringing about change, and, given this, the primary agenda for utilizing this theory must be in creating and discovering previously unlooked-for analyses and histories. Using an intersectional framework means more interdisciplinary work will be focused on the historical and geographical context of events, attitudes, and cultures—and on work that is meant to transform rigid boundaries between existing institutional structures (Weber, 2009).

For a variety of educational, social, economic, and political reasons, colleges and universities are increasingly working to develop programming and public images that highlight diversity. Most often, this notion of diversity focuses on improving human relations throughout the campus by increasing awareness, acceptance, understanding, and appreciation of human differences. Rarely does it focus on the inequalities of power and resources embedded in these differences because this would require more confrontation and redirection of the very diversity initiatives being proposed than most institutions are willing to sponsor. Perhaps because of this institutional dilemma, it is even more rare that the expertise of intersection scholars is seen as central to this interdisciplinary enterprise. The push for diversity and multiculturalism coincides with a push toward a more business-centered and entrepreneurial academy, rising tuition and fees, reduced state and federal support, and increasing student debt. By its own definition, intersectional scholarship must be produced in pursuit of social justice that purposefully interrogates how power infiltrates the research and funding processes. Intersectional work often engages with off-campus communities and integrates nonacademic voices and experiences into its findings. The results aim to fuel changes in unjust practices across a wide variety of dimensions of social and political life.

Conclusion

In 1979, Audre Lorde stood before an audience at a conference devoted to Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* in New York City and spoke these words:

> Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that *survival is not an academic skill.* It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we all can flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. (Lorde, 1984, p. 112)

More than three decades later, Lorde's clear mandate for social justice resonates at the very core of what

intersectionality was, is, and must continue to be in order to serve the aims of those individuals who have found themselves to be situated in different social locations around the margins of feminist debates and inquiries. Just as Lorde called for feminists to turn difference into strengths, the theoretical paradigm of intersectionality has provided a voice and a vision to scholars seeking to make visible the interlocking structures of inequality to be found within the academic and everyday concerns that shape both our livelihoods and our experiences of the world.

Intersectionality has traveled a long distance, and, indeed, we recognize that it has taken many forms across academic disciplines and life histories. Intersectionality has now reached the point where it may be regarded as a member of the theoretical cannon taught in courses on law, social sciences, and the humanities. Intersectionality has, thus, increased in strength and, perhaps alternatively, suffered significant dilution in application as often happens when any theoretical tool is either misinterpreted or misapplied. As to the evidence of intersection theory's increasing strength, we know that intersectionality has been the practice of Black feminist scholars for generations; in that respect, this paradigm is not at all new. It has just been a long time coming into its own, and now, having been newly embraced as a powerful tool of social justice, social thought, and social activism by a larger population of feminist researchers, it has become more visible than ever before.

As to the evidence of its misapplication, we caution scholars to be mindful of what we consider to be “strong intersectionality” and “weak intersectionality.” “Strong intersectionality” may be found in theoretical and methodological rubrics that seek to analyze institutions and identities *in relation to one another.* That is, “strong intersectionality” seeks to ascertain how phenomena are mutually constituted and interdependent, how we must understand one phenomenon in deference to understanding another. On the other hand, “weak intersectionality” explores differences without any true analysis. That is to say, “weak intersectionality” ignores the very mandate called for by Audre Lorde and seeks to explore no more than how we are different. “Weak intersectionality” eschews the difficult dialogue(s) of how our differences have come to be—or how our differences might become axes of strength, fortification, and a renewed vision of how our world has been—and continues, instead, to be socially constructed by a theory and methodology that seeks only occasionally to question difference, without arriving at a deep and abiding understanding of how our differences are continuing to evolve.

Part of the proliferation of “weak intersectionality” may be found in the interdisciplinary narratives advancing the argument that this paradigmatic tool operates in different ways in different institutional spaces. This argument is also reminiscent of the contention that intersectional theory has been individualized within separate fields of knowledge. We can only reply to such arguments by, first, acknowledging that intersectionality has developed disparately within different spheres of knowledge because of the way in which intersectional theorizing is applied across disciplinary fields. For example, some might encounter intersectionality as a concrete reality that hinders effective litigation under the law because whole people are literally required to split their identity(ies) in order to be properly recognized in a court of law. But when this same legal phenomena is read and discussed in the social sciences or humanities, the scholars at issue

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might study it as a structural impediment or analytic frame that defies discrete analysis. That being said, this dilemma has the very real potential of diverting one's attention away from the theoretical imperative of intersectionality as source of illumination and understanding to one that distorts and misrepresents lived experiences of the law, social norms, and social justice.

But we also recognize, as a second proposition, that intersectionality has developed differently across spheres of knowledge because of the differing experiences and privileges we enjoy as scholars and everyday citizens of the world. We noted previously, for example, that intersectionality has benefited tremendously from differing methodological applications and transnational discourses, even as we remain steadfast in our contention that this paradigm was born of the experiences of Black women in the United States that could not be properly understood using the unidimensional lens of race or of gender in academic and legal discourses.

Having established the foregoing premises of “strong intersectionality” and “weak intersectionality,” we now see intersectional theorizing developing into a paradigm of analysis that defies separation into distinct fields of knowledge because of its explanatory power as a theoretical tool that does not require tweaking “to make it fit,” so to speak. This is because the primacy of the basic core principles of intersectionality—that is, mutually constituted interdependence; interlocking oppressions and privileges; multiple experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and so forth—are now more widely recognized as such and scholars are more apt to hold one another to these basic rules of application, whatever methodology is employed. In fact, the debates occurring within intersectional scholarship today reflect the growth and maturation of this approach and provide the opportunity to begin, as Lynn Weber says, to “harvest lessons learned” (as cited in Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 287).

Among the lessons learned and knowledge produced is a broader and more in-depth understanding of the notion of race, racial formation, and racial projects. Another is a broader understanding of the concept of nation and of notions of citizenship both in the United States and globally. Concepts such as situated knowledge (Lorde), oppositional consciousness (Sandoval), and strategic essentialism (Hurtado) offer ways to theorize about difference and diversity. A third lesson is the knowledge that there is no single category (race, class, ethnicity, gender, nation, or sexuality) that can explain human experience without reference to other categories. Thus we have and will need to continue to develop more nuanced and complex understandings of identity and more fluid notions of gender, race, sexuality, and class. The work relies heavily on a more expanded sense of the concept of social construction and rests much of its analysis on the principle of the social construction of difference. Organista (2007) contests the dominant culture's imperialism and resistance to discussion of human differences within and across cultures and calls for a discussion of difference “beyond the kind of defensive and superficial hyperbole that leaves social oppression unchallenged” (p. 101). And, although the scholarship still struggles with the pull to establish either a hierarchy of difference or a list that includes all forms of social differentiation, both of which are antithetical to the specific objectives of intersectionality, a body of knowledge is being produced that provides a basis for understanding the various histories and organizations of these categories of inequality. This evolving body of knowledge is helping us better understand what differences render inequalities and how to resist reductionist impulses.

As a theoretical paradigm,[2] intersectionality is unique in its versatility and ability to produce new knowledge. We remain optimistic about the future of intersectionality, particularly if this scholarship respects its crucial commitments to laying bare the roots of power and inequality, while continuing to pursue an activist agenda of social justice.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the historical and theoretical origins of intersectionality?
2. How is intersectionality distinct from other theoretical paradigms explaining inequality?
3. What has been the impact of intersectional theorizing on developments in transnational feminisms, sexuality studies, and legal policy?
4. How has the experience of Black women been instrumental in the articulation of intersectionality?
5. What does it mean to be "essentialized"? Have you ever had this experience? What are the practical implications of essentialism—positive and negative? Can intersectional theory be considered an essentialist concept? Why and/or why not?
6. Describe some of the ways our legal system reflects the concepts inherent in intersectionality. What other societal institutions reflect most of these concepts?

Online Resources

African American Policy Forum

http://aapf.org/

The African American Policy Forum works to bridge the gap between scholarly research and public discourse related to inequality, discrimination, and injustice. The AAPF seeks to build bridges between academic, activist, and policy-making sectors in order to advance a more inclusive and robust public discourse on the challenge of achieving equity within and across diverse communities.

University of California, Berkeley, Center for Race & Gender

http://crg.berkeley.edu/

The Center for Race & Gender (CRG) is an interdisciplinary research center at the University of California, Berkeley that fosters explorations of race and gender, and their intersections.

Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity

http://www.crge.umd.edu

The Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity (CRGE) at the University of Maryland is an interdisciplinary

research center that promotes intersectional scholarship through original research, mentoring, and collaboration. CRGE's work explores the intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, and other dimensions of inequality as they shape the construction and representation of identities, behavior, and complex social relations.

Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey: Background Briefing on Intersectionality

http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/globalcenter/policy/bkgdbrfintersec.html

This page provides information about the issue of intersectional discrimination as it has been recognized by the human rights system of the United Nations.

Relevant Journals

Advances in Feminist Research

Feminist Studies

Gender & Society

Meridians

Race, Gender and Class

Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society

Notes

1. This list is not meant to be exclusive or exhaustive but a reflection of the breadth of early intersectional scholarship: Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Dill (1996), Audre Lorde (1984), Angela Y. Davis (1981), Cherrie Moraga (1983), Chela Sandoval (1991), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), and bell hooks (1984).
2. In 1998, Collins referred to intersectionality as an “emerging paradigm.” In 2007, Hancock argues it has become a normative and empirical paradigm.

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