

On Intersectionality
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Introduction

On March 17, 2021, I posted the following explanation of intersectionality to Facebook. Within a week, it had been shared more than 20,000 times.

I wrote this piece in direct response to the murders of Delaina Ashley Yaun, Paul Andre Michels, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, Yong Ae Yue in Atlanta, Georgia on March 16, 2021. I also wrote it in response to my own misconceptions of intersectionality and the misconceptions I had seen circulating in higher education and online. Since the piece “went viral,” I have received numerous requests to make it available in a more permanent form. You are welcome to share this piece with whomever you choose. When you do so, I only ask that you do three things:

- 1) Make sure you are also sharing the original works by Kimberlé Crenshaw and the Combahee River Collective that my post cites. My piece is an introduction to complex theories articulated by Black feminists. It is not a replacement for them.
- 2) Include this introduction, with acknowledgment of the eight humans murdered in Atlanta. Recognize that this piece cannot be divorced from the context in which it was created and should not be shared without honoring their lives.
- 3) Include my name.

On Intersectionality

When I first learned about Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, I misunderstood it. I misunderstood it for years, until I started teaching it, and my students started to parrot back my misunderstanding, and then -- as things often do when you teach them -- something new clicked. I want to say a little bit about what I got wrong and what I've since come to understand because I think intersectionality is crucial for actually conceptualizing and articulating events like the racist, misogynistic murders in Atlanta. And I don't believe we can fight or heal what we can't understand or articulate.

So.

When I first learned about intersectionality, I thought the concept was this: Each of us come from a particular standpoint, which is the intersection of our various identities: our race, gender, dis/ability, sexual orientation, class, etc. Because various forms of oppression (like racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and classism) play out across these identities, we all have different experiences of privilege and oppression based on where we stand. For example, some of us—myself included—experience sexism. Some of us—myself included—experience sexism and homophobia. Others experience sexism and homophobia and racism. Still others experience sexism and homophobia and racism and ableism and transphobia and fatphobia and classism...

you get the idea. My understanding of intersectionality was that some of us have a burden and some of us have more burdens and that this is important to remember.

I think of this now as the "additive" model. Each new -ism adds on the ones before it, compounding the experience of oppression. At its best, the additive model is useful for remembering that not everyone's experience is like our own, for understanding we all experience some forms of privilege and some forms of oppression, and for keeping in mind that liberation and social justice are never (and can never be) single-issue struggles. But the additive model also sets us up for what people before me have called the "Oppression Olympics" -- the ranking of different experiences to decide who has oppression the worst, who wins Most Oppressed in the grand arena of awfulness that is our world. This is, for starters, not necessarily the best basis for building empathy, coalition, and solidarity. It is also, and maybe more importantly, actually impossible to calculate. Who's more oppressed? A Black disabled immigrant or a Native lesbian? Spoiler alert: there's no answering questions like that. And it's not super useful to ask them. It's also not intersectionality. Because intersectionality isn't only or even mostly about how oppressions add onto other oppressions (or privileges add onto other privileges). In other words, it's not about (or just about) what it's like to struggle with this AND that. It's about what it's like to struggle with the place where THIS and THAT are so interwoven that you can't actually tell them apart. It's about how multiple forms of oppression are experienced simultaneously in ways that make them INEXTRICABLE from each other. In the middle of the 8th/ Pine intersection, you can't say whether you're on 8th or Pine. You're on 8thPine -- it's both, it's more than both, it's mixed. Crenshaw argued that the intersections of oppression are like this, that Black women experience racism and sexism in a way in which you can't parse out where one stops and the other begins. The racism changes the shape of the sexism and the sexism changes the shape of the racism. And what's left is a particularly racialized form of misogyny and a particularly misogynistic form of racism that targets Black women, specifically.

It's like this: When we're taught about sexism and feminism in predominantly white institutions, we learn that women are stereotyped as weak, in need of protection, and kept at home. But this is really only true for white women. If we think about sexism centering Black women, we come up against entirely different (and in some cases straight-up opposite) stereotypes: the strong Black woman, the loud aggressor, the laboring Mammy who never got the chance to stay in the home with her own damn kids in her life. And if we look at Asian-American women we're met with entirely different stereotypes, including the sexualized stereotypes that are already being used to justify or dismiss the murders in Atlanta. Sexism looks different and operates differently for AAPI women, Black women, Latinx women, and Native women because of the ways it's racialized. Sexism against white women is also racialized, but in ways that go unmarked. We (white women) find our experience generalized to stand in for "what sexism looks like." But it's not. It's what sexism looks like for white women. And the point isn't to try and figure out whose version of sexism is most heinous. The point is to try and understand how sexism is operating against different populations of women so we can begin to fight for all women.

This isn't "just" about sexism, obviously, or even "just" sexism and racism. Crenshaw was writing about the experience of Black women, but her point applies more broadly, across the different axes of identity, including ability, sexual orientation, size, etc. It also applies to other women of color, including AAPI, Native, Latinx, Middle Eastern women and others.

It's also not just about stereotypes (like the ones I used as an example above). Crenshaw is a legal scholar and she coined the term intersectionality as a challenge to one particular social institution: law. She laid out this framework as a specific challenge to the limitations she saw in anti-discrimination law, namely its failure to protect Black women. Basically, she pointed to particular court cases in which Black women weren't allowed to sue for sexist discrimination because their experience was racialized (not the "universal" experience of sexism applied to white women) and weren't allowed to sue for racist discrimination because their experience was gendered. (If Black men were getting hired, clearly racism wasn't in play... or so the courts said). Her point was that the particular intersection where racism and sexism met targeted Black women in a way that was invisible to people who insisted on universal experiences of "sexism" and "racism" as separate forces.

In that original piece, she compares the harm done by these "interlocking oppressions" (to borrow from some more badass Black feminists, the Combahee River Collective) to being struck down by a car while you're in the middle of an intersection. Imagine that, before you're allowed to get medical attention, you have to name the direction the car came from before it hit you. Sure, you're plastered to the pavement, but did the car come from Racism Drive or Sexism Ave? It's often literally impossible to say, and more so to "prove." And in the meantime, people bleed out.

I say all of this (and god love you if you've read it) because I think we desperately need this nuanced concept of intersectionality to be as viral and internalized as the additive version that's become a buzzword over the past ten years. It's only when we can see the ways that racism and sexism (and all the other -isms) are fusing together in particular ways that we can challenge them effectively. If you're lucky enough to reach a point in your education where you learn about anti-Asian racism, you will probably learn about the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first U.S. law that barred a particular nationality from entering the country. But hopefully you will also learn about the Page Act, which passed 7 years prior, and barred Asian women, specifically. Barred them, moreover, on the basis that they were considered likely to be prostitutes. Because it's only when we start to learn the history of oppression in the U.S. not as a single story or a series of separate stories (the racism history, the sexism history, etc), but as a clusterfuck of interlocking stories that we can begin to challenge them.

And when someone tells us that what happened in Atlanta wasn't racist because it was misogynistic, we can know two things for sure. 1) We are being gaslit because those things co-exist. And 2) the murder of Asian American women based on some dude's sexual fantasies and fears is an age-old version of what misogyny looks like when it targets Asian women. It couldn't be more racist if it tried.

But it will try. I hope we'll keep trying too.

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ETA: Much of what I've shared here is specifically drawn from Crenshaw's 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics." You can read that article in its entirety through Chicago Unbound:

https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf&fbclid=IwAR3xReKyvionwQuBq6OmmEW8NNRMCKI_uHaKuTImdOr-rSvfx4wTum1wCS4

The "interlocking oppressions" concept comes from the Combahee River Collective, a groundbreaking group of Black lesbians/ feminists. Their full statement (originally published in 1977) is available here: https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/?fbclid=IwAR0DQFU30y38SOzmfMx0Pup_XfoeX3k_gOYe8SeZsZ-fW--vRfTnwx7KiM