

Intersectionality and Women's Advancement in the Discipline & the Academy  
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Intersectionality, the assertion that social identity categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality and ability are interconnected and operate simultaneously to produce experiences of both privilege and marginalization has transformed old conversations while inspiring new debates across the academy. Intersectionality encourages recognition of the differences that exist *among* groups, which moves beyond simply the differences *between* groups. Originating from discontent with treatments of "women" as a homogenous group, intersectionality has evolved into a theoretical research paradigm and a basis for social action and change. At its core it helps us to understand the interaction of various social identities and how these interactions define societal power hierarchies. Intersectionality also encourages us to embrace the complexities of group based politics by critically examining the variances in social location that exist among those claiming membership in groups.

At the same time that intersectionality helps to make sense of the experiences of people who find themselves living at the intersections of social identities, intersectionality also is concerned with the systems that give meaning to the categories of race, gender, class, sexual identity, among others. In other words, at the societal level intersectionality seeks to make visible the systems of oppression that maintain power hierarchies that organize society while also providing a means to theorize experience at the individual level.

At its core foundations, intersectionality is concerned with:

1. *Resisting additive models which treat categories of social identity as additive, parallel categories and instead theorizes these categories as intersecting;*
2. *Anti-essentialism and insists upon variation within categories of social identity;*
3. *Recognition that social identity categories and the power systems that give them meaning shift across time and geographical location;*
4. *Embracing the coexistence of privilege and marginalization acknowledging that they are not mutually exclusive;*
5. *Changing the conditions of society such that categories of identity are not permanently linked to sustained inequalities in efforts to build a more just world.*

Intellectually and politically, intersectionality is grounded in critical theory and is focused toward social justice outcomes. As such, several of its tenets are relative to a discussion of increasing opportunities and creating more democratic practices within political science and the academy more broadly. For the sake of space, I will highlight several tenets that I find particularly useful in our discussion of diversity issues in the discipline.

Lesson from Intersectionality Scholarship

Intersectionality encourages us to think about inequalities as multiply determined and deriving from multiple systems and structures of oppression, rather than emanating from a singular system such as patriarchy. In helping us to understand and appreciate the multitude of social identities present and the social and political relevance of those multiple identities at any given time, intersectionality offers salient advice to those interested in moving toward greater equality in our discipline and throughout the academy. In this essay, I use the framework of intersectionality and its major values to examine the importance of identity to organizing efforts, building allies among similarly situated groups, the ways social identity categories interact with leadership and traditional norms associated with leadership, and how those at the intersections can find productive spaces for growth that emanate from embracing intersectionality as an asset rather than only as multiple disadvantage.

#### Categories of Identity as Intersecting- Producing New Identities

Perhaps the most popularized and simplistic lesson of intersectionality scholarship is that categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality do not operate as singular axes of power. It is not enough, as many intersectionality scholars argue to “add race and stir” and assume that the perspectives of women of color or other groups are included or represented. Intersectionality requires that we recognize that systems of oppression and hierarchy are not interchangeable nor are they identical. ***Identity categories are not parallel; instead they are best understood as co-constitutive, intersecting categories.*** As these categories of identity intersect, they produce new meanings. Each informs the other and taken together, they produce a way of experiencing the world at the individual level as sometimes oppressed and marginalized and sometimes privileged and advantaged depending upon the context. Social categories such as race, gender, and class have differing organizing logics such that race, for example works differently than gender, class or sexuality. Power associated with these categories is not configured in the same ways nor do they share the same histories therefore, they cannot be treated identically (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006).

As I have argued in my own work on African American women state legislators, the convergence of multiple identity categories such as race and gender create experiences that are qualitatively and significantly different (Smooth, 2008). As well, the intersection of race and gender mediates or transforms the meaning of other identity categories and shifts the nature of norms and traditional operating procedures. What it means to be an African American woman committee chair in a state legislature differs substantially from others’ experiences in that position. As leaders, women of color have long articulated that traditional norms and customs are often renegotiated when viewed through the lens of race and gender. We can see extremes from cases in which the traditional power extended to those in leadership positions is undermined when women of color occupy such positions (Smooth 2008) to situations in which their rarity produces an over extension of an individual’s power.

In the context of the academy, what it means to operate as a full professor (or even simply a tenured professor) is transformed when viewed through the lens of race and gender. This can translate into creating multiple venues of power and influence, for example serving as the token, often lone voice of authority on women’s issues and racial issues on a campus. In converse, and most often it means that the limited number of women of color occupying such positions amounts to women who are extensively strained by exhaustive mentoring demands,

university service demands, limitless requests to review for tenure and promotion cases and discipline- wide representation based requests. Unfortunately, these demands begin at once for newly tenured women of color, often far above the reasonable demands for an associate professor, which can prolong their promotion to full professor.

### Variation Within Categories

Intersectionality takes into account that there is great variation within categories of social identity. Understanding social identities as mutually constitutive produces an array of ways of experiencing blackness, working class, or sex and sexuality. This encourages us to move away from *essentializing* or reducing experiences to “*the* Latino experience” or “*the* lesbian experience” and allows for multiple ways of experiencing these social categories as they link and are informed by other categories.

Cathy Cohen (1999) argues that when we embrace differences within identity categories, we avoid producing *secondary marginalization* in which issues are defined based upon the needs of the more privileged of a group and not in the interests of those who are impacted by multiple systems of oppression or who suffer forms of oppression that are deemed beyond the parameters of particular communities. Embracing variation within identity categories reduces the lure as well to privilege one aspect of a person’s identity at the expense of other aspects. In *Affirmative Advocacy*, Dara Strolovich (2008) shows how this secondary marginalization process happens among advocacy groups that purport to represent complex identities often marginalized in US politics. She finds that despite claims of representing the totality of their constituents, advocacy groups representing marginalized groups seldom represent their constituents who are intersectionally marginalized--even among the most well intentioned groups.

Intersectionality scholarship warns of identity caucuses and movements that attempt to represent the category “women” as the question often arises as to “which women” the group stands to represent (Smooth, 2011). As Cohen and Strolovich articulate, the claims of the dominant, often more simplistic aspects of group claims are privileged as opposed to the more complex work of intersectional representation.

Among feminist scholars and advocates involved in policy efforts to expand equality under the law using an intersectionality framework, there is a tendency to articulate concerns for equality under the larger rubric of “*gender equality*” or “*gender mainstreaming*.” Though multiple forms of inequality are often acknowledged by these approaches, the primacy of gender and gender inequality are still fore grounded.<sup>1</sup> As such, the goal of equality is understood as relating first and foremost to matters of gender. Operationalizing intersectionality in this way violates the insistence on understanding categories of identity as multiply and simultaneously constituted and experienced. ***Asserting the primacy of gender operationalizes it as a primary category of analysis and returns to understandings of gender and patriarchy as the primary systems of oppression, the very work that intersectionality from its inception works against.***

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of such policy approaches in implementing intersectionality frameworks see Verloo 2006 and Lombardo and Verloo 2009).

## Context Specific

While intersectionality places great emphasis on understanding the means by which power is configured, it also establishes power as dynamic and shifting rather than static and fixed. As such, we cannot conclude that power operates in the same ways across contexts of time and location. Intersectionality insists that *depending upon the context*, those who are marginalized and those who have power differ. Therefore, we cannot evaluate oppression and marginalization without a sense of history as well as the social, political and economic opportunities available to various groups at any given time. The systems of power that dictate whether a social identity is a marker of privilege or marginalization change according to context.

The context provides the parameters for understanding which categories are most salient for our analysis. Gender may or may not act as the defining salient category for organizing dependent upon the context, set of issues for consideration, and the existing political opportunity structure. The salience of identity categorizations shift and evolve often over time and as they interact with political institutions, structures and movements. What it means to be a woman, a woman of color, a lesbian, a theorist, and/or an international relations scholar in a department shifts according to the particular politics of that department space, that university, and even the publishing trends of the discipline. Whether these categories have meaning at all or produce marginalization or privilege is a matter of context. Those interested in greater social equity in the discipline and in the wider academy, must envision gender as one of many possible social cleavages that interact with other cleavages such as, but not limited to race, rank, and subfield. Whether gender is the most salient of the categories that give meaning to one's experience is a matter of critically understanding the context and accepting the shifts in its salience across contexts. Just as the salience of categories shift in an intersectional analysis, so must the strategies employed to enact change. They must be fluid enough to adjust to the local context and times in which organizing takes place.

## Privilege and Marginalization

Privilege and marginalization are central to studies of intersectionality. While many might assume that these two categories are mutually exclusive, intersectionality scholarship has focused on their coexistence. One can experience oppression along one axes and privilege along another. Intersectionality focuses on power across categories and in relation to one another understanding that power is not equal across categories. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) situates race, class, and gender as interlocking systems that create an overarching "matrix of domination" in which actors can be victimized by power but can also exercise power over others. Collins highlights the contradictory nature of oppression suggesting that few "pure victims" or "pure oppressors" exist. Penalty and privilege are distributed among individuals and groups within the matrix of domination such that none are exclusively marked by one or the other.

For women in the academy, recognition that one can occupy both the role of the oppressor and the oppressed is necessary for organizing across difference. For white women, accessing the privileges of whiteness is as much a part of their experience in academia as the wrath of sexism propagated by gendered institutions. As well, for women of color intersectional

identities do not always result in institutional disadvantage and accepting the possibilities of power at the margins and how one chooses to exercise that power is also a necessary element of organizing for greater equality. As Audre Lorde reminds us all in *Sister Outsider* (1984), it is far easier to recognize the ways in which we have been victimized by the systems of oppression we seek to escape, but it is a far more difficult task to accept that bit of the oppressor that dwells inside of us all.

The version of intersectionality to which I subscribe is informed by a plethora of scholarly thinking on the parameters of intersectionality (for a full discussion see Smooth 2010). Intersectionality can apply to everyone, as we all have a race, gender, sexuality and social class, whether we experience our social locations as inequalities or privileges. Our social locations are not fixed such that we are permanently construed as oppressors or the oppressed.<sup>2</sup> Intersectionality is context specific; structural and dynamic (Weldon 2006). The relevant axes of power for investigation are determined by the situation and site under study. As Hancock surmises, the intersectional approach "...changes the relationship between the categories of investigation from one that is determined a priori to one of empirical investigation" (2007, 67). It asserts that categories are relevant and have an impact on understanding material lives and at the same time it is interested in disrupting the impetus to render categories as fixed and mutually exclusive.

#### Intersectionality as an Asset for Cultivating Women's Leadership

While so much of the work on intersectionality focuses on intersectional *disadvantage* produced by multiple identities, this is not automatically the case. Intersectionality should not be understood as an automatic culmination of multiple disadvantages. Instead, intersectional identities can produce advantages.

African American women in electoral politics are experiencing substantial shifts in the black political opportunity structure, and they have thrived in the wake of such changes. Their experiences offer an example of the potential found in leveraging intersectional identities. As support for majority minority districts contracts, African American women candidates have devised political strategies that use their intersectional identities as an asset in their election bids.

A stellar example is Representative Gwen Moore of Wisconsin's 2004 election to the House from a district in which whites held the majority stands out as an example. She built a winning coalition in the midst of shifting district demographics. She adopted a political strategy that maximized a broadly constructed progressive coalition consisting of traditional civil rights groups and labor with the addition of women's organizations. She and other African American women elected officials are practicing an intersectionality politics that may inoculate them from the shifts in the black political opportunity structure. This practice allows them to leverage their identities as situated between and across multiple groups. Equally important, their understandings of public policies as located in the in between spaces of group power make these women political assets to numerous groups.<sup>3</sup> Their intersectionality politics increases their

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Nash (2008) in "Rethinking Intersectionality" raises salient points regarding the coexistence of power and privilege in intersectionality scholarship.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of such an intersectional policy moment on the House floor, see Representative's Moore passionate debate on funding Planned Parenthood during the budget

crossover appeal, rendering them legible to multiple communities complicating notions of group representation.

Moore and others like her draw upon strong ties to not only the African American political community but also the women's political community drawing in critical support from EMILY's List and the NOW political action committee. Representative Moore established these relationships after serving sixteen years in the Wisconsin legislature as a staunch advocate of women's issues, including crafting legislation that extended the state's Medicaid provisions to cover cervical and breast cancers.

The coalitions that Moore and others like her are building afford them crossover appeal among white voters and donors beyond their districts, and among white women in particular. The type of coalition building African American women candidates do based upon their own identities at the intersection of gender and race politics may become all the more critical for securing black political representation and increasing women's representation. Understanding their coalition strategies and deep linkages within and across communities is instructive in our own quests for women of color to gain access to leadership positions in the academy. This often requires moving beyond traditional paths to leadership and enacting political change within institutions. In adapting their lessons to the academy, we see the need to build varied networks and build deeply in varied communities to fully utilize intersectional identities as assets.

#### Building Institutional Networks beyond Departmental Spaces

Dominant understandings and narratives of leadership and power are disrupted when viewed from an intersectionality perspective, which highlights the ways leadership and power are deeply gendered and racialized constructs. Race and gender and other categories of identity impact the paths to power and influence available to potential leaders, the ways women of color and other marginalized group acquire leadership skills, and the ways of negotiating institutions so as to maximize their capacity for enacting social change. When traditional paths to power and influence are either unavailable to them or fail to yield the desired outcomes, women of color and other marginalized groups are confronted with devising alternative strategies to remain relevant and realize greater institutional equality for themselves and those who come after them. Here I explore a few ways, often non-traditional that create pathways for women of color and other marginalized groups in the academy.

#### **The Joint Appointment; Faculty Affiliations**

Joint appointments, are often considered the recipe of doom for faculty who's work crosses disciplinary boundaries or is focused on a particular identity group be that women , African Americans, Latina/os. However, it's not the joint appointment itself that has failed so many. Instead, it is the failure to adequately discuss and commit to a set of conditions that are most likely to make a candidate successful in the pre-tenure stage that is at fault. Well- designed joint appointments have the potential to add to scholars' communities, provide an alternative to hostile "home" departments, enhance the rigor of one's scholarship and allow scholars to build networks across the academy. Such appointments create win-win situations, rather than

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debates in 2011. She articulates a class, race, and geographic analysis of the role of Planned Parenthood in the lives of women across economic classes.

doomsday scenarios. Such formal relations with other departments allow scholars to exercise their coalitional sensibilities beyond a single discipline or department and deepen their scholarly networks and mentor opportunities.

### **National Organizations**

Participation in national organizations within the discipline that support one's research agenda and provide a place for political solidarity are essential for women of color to cultivate the leadership skills needed to advance in the discipline and take on leadership roles. My own growth as a scholar is marked by my participation as a member of the ***National Conference of Black Political Scientists***. For me, and scores of black men and women in the discipline, NCOBPS has served as that leadership skills building space, and as an intellectually affirming space that provides a sense of political solidarity and friendship. Established in 1969, NCOBPS was organized to "*study, enhance, and promote the political aspirations of people of African descent in the United States and throughout the world. It aims to contribute to the resolution of the many challenges that black people confront. Our organization promotes research in and critical analysis of topics usually overlooked and/or marginalized in political science scholarship. We believe that our scholarship must address wide-ranging "real world" issues and not the narrow, and often manufactured, concerns of the discipline*" (NCOBPS Mission Statement). In unapologetic terms, NCOBPS centers the study of black political engagement across the diaspora as important research. In doing so, it also celebrates, mentors, and advances the scholarship of its members.

The NCOBPS annual meetings provide a rigorous, yet nurturing environment for the advancement of scholarship and the cultivation of professional mentors and friendships. Members can as easily be heard debating the contours of the new black politics, as well as inquiring about the status of one's family members. In that space of shared goodwill, one can learn the dynamics of organization design, how to successfully facilitate a meeting, organize a conference program and extend one's networks across the discipline. It is through this organization that I first learned to present a paper as a graduate student, chair a panel, organize a section, engage in peer to peer mentoring and establish my voice in the discipline. I now serve as President-Elect poised to assume the Presidency at the 2013 meeting in Chicago, IL. I stand in a long line of women political scientists who have led the organization including our former president of APSA, Dianne Pinderhughes. In addition to the leadership skills it provides its members through its annual meetings, NCOBPS also publishes *The National Political Science Review*, which serves as a critical outlet for publishing on race and racial politics, a topic often excluded in the major journals of the discipline. As such, this organization has provided the skills necessary for success, friendship, and intellectual engagement to scores of scholars.

### **Interdisciplinary National Conferences for Women of Color**

Critical and necessary to the advancement of women of color in the discipline is seeing other women of color who have mastered the strategies of survival in the academy. Several national convening over the years have created forums for women across disciplines and across universities to reflect on their roles in the academy and advance strategies for achieving their own personal goals. Such conferences as Black Women in the Academy, a conference first organized by MIT in 1994 and later at Howard University and subsequent conferences such as the 2009 Black Women Academics in the Ivory Tower sponsored by Rutgers University and the

upcoming Inclusive Illinois: Women of Color in the Academy have all become critical spaces for mentorship, renewal and exhaling in the collective comfort of women who are all too familiar with the often troublesome experiences of life in the academy as women of color. These conferences produce priceless interactions and introductions to legendary women of color in the across fields and offer a glimmer into their tool box of survival and thriving in the academy.

### Conclusion: Intersectionality and Institutional Change

So as much as researchers categorize intersectionality as a descriptive framework or research paradigm, it is very much a political concept grounded in an emancipatory politics with social justice based outcomes as the goal (Smooth 2010). Intersectionality is understood as rooted in efforts to change societal conditions that create and maintain oppressive power hierarchies. In addition to recognizing the differences that exist among individuals and groups, intersectionality is invested in modes of institutional change designed to remedy the effects of inequalities produced by interlocking systems of oppression. The first step of such institutional change begins with the recognition that women experience departments, universities, and the discipline differently according to their social location and the convergence of their many intersecting identities. These intersections produce both privilege and marginalization and to move toward institutional change, we must all be willing to accept the responsibilities that the unevenness of the system produces both privilege and oppression. Even in our efforts to engage in social change we are most capable of organizing our energies toward alleviating our own oppressions, the oppressions produced by the experiences of dominant women, all the while overlooking the oppressions of the other. Recognition of this and guarding against such tendencies is essential work of intersectionality based organizing for social change.

We must develop frameworks for understanding and addressing women's interests as complex, fluid and varied while maintaining the political possibilities of group mobilization. Such a framework may or may not find that women's caucuses are the answer. Such a framework must account for the existence of shared, as well as divergent interests to coexist under the label of women's issues. Intersectionality offers ways to think about women's interests in dynamic, nuanced ways accounting for the complexity in what constitutes women's issues. Intersectionality helps us to move away from frameworks that homogenize women's interests, and moves us toward embracing the common as well as divergent interests of women. This often requires embracing a both/ and strategy rather than operating as if one organizing framework (i.e. gender equality or women's caucus) is sufficient. Caucuses organized according to issues rather than identity- only become not only more attractive to women of color, but also address the structural issues that impact multiple marginalized groups that are adversely affected by dominant group interests. This organizing strategy is particularly useful for departments that are diverse and producing marginalization along lines beyond gender (i.e. racially diverse, sexual minorities, field marginalizations), yet lack a critical mass among any singular marginalized group. Through such an organizing strategy, new temporary alliances are built that are useful to addressing the issue at hand.



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