

INTERSECTIONALITY

What Is Intersectionality?

A group statement published by the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black feminists, marks an important step for the development of intersectional analysis. This collective saw their “particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” (Combahee River Collective 1978)

A **knowledge project** is any intellectual undertaking, and **resistant knowledge projects** are those that seek to challenge dominant discourses and “grapple with the existential question of how individuals and groups who are subordinated within varying systems of power might survive and resist their oppression.” (Collins 2019, 88) The aim of intersectionality as a resistant knowledge project is “to resist the social inequalities within intersecting systems of power.” (Collins 2019, 96)

An intersectional approach considers the ways that systems of oppression interact with each other to shape the experience of those who are subjected to them. For example, the misogyny encountered by trans women often takes on a very different tone and form from that experienced by cis women because of the intersection of transphobia.

Sources:

Brah, Avtar. 1996. "Difference, Diversity, Differentiation". *Cartographies Of Diaspora*, 95 - 126. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203974919.
Collins, Patricia Hill. 2019. "Intersectionality And Resistant Knowledge Projects". *Intersectionality As Critical Social Theory*, 87-120. Duke University Press. doi:10.1215/9781478007098-004.
Combahee River Collective. (1977). "The Combahee River Collective Statement". <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>

“If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”

— The Combahee River Collective

The above quote from the Combahee River Collective makes a powerful statement about the importance of intersectionality to their resistant knowledge project. Systems of oppression that on first glance appear unrelated to either gender or race (such as class and disability for example) are nonetheless essential to dismantle in order to guarantee the freedom of ALL black women. This is because all axes of oppression have the potential to intersect with and thus be amplified by dynamics of misogyny and racism.

Keywords and Concepts:

Discourse - the way a topic is framed and defined in both casual and academic contexts, many discourses on any given topic can coexist and challenge each other

Oppression - the use of power to suppress and/or marginalize people on the basis of perceived identity (ie. whether or not someone identifies themselves as a member of an oppressed group matters less than whether or not those in power identify them as such)

Identity Politics - the use of shared identity as a basis for political alignment and organization, based on the assumption that all members of a given oppressed group share the same political interests and motivations; often focused on the goal of inclusion into the dominant group of existing power structures rather than questioning and destabilizing unjust power dynamics

Misogyny - a power structure based on the subjugation of women and those perceived to possess ‘feminine’ characteristics including cis men who are deemed not to be sufficiently ‘masculine’

Why an Intersectional Approach?

Intersectionality has strong potential as a tool in the analysis of disparate systems of oppression. Where identity politics have often led to the creation of hierarchies of oppression and the epistemological error of treating membership in an oppressed group as a guarantee of certain politics and moral standing, intersectionality seeks to undertake the difficult task of understanding how certain identities and social positions inform relations of power and vulnerability