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INTERSECTIONALITY

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Coined by American civil rights advocate and leading scholar of critical race theory Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to the study of overlapping discriminations. Understanding the critical framework of intersectionality allows for an exploration of how, for example, racism, sexism, heteronormativity, misogyny, ableism, classism, trans- and homo-hate, and hostility towards other cultures, work together. The discriminations happen on several levels, often simultaneously; they are interrelated, and create, maintain, and build up systems of oppression.¹ Crenshaw posits that experiences of oppression cannot be understood independently but must be grasped in their interactions, where they frequently reinforce each other. It is important to note that intersectionality is not only about identity – how one identifies or is identified – but encompasses how structures help to oppress and privilege individuals or groups.

The origins of intersectionality are found early among Black, Aboriginal, and Indigenous feminisms where systems of oppression like racism or sexism are recognised as linked and constituting each other. The concept helps to understand how identities in their manifold composition can experience and create differently both opportunities and obstacles (including simultaneously) within what Collins calls a “matrix of domination”.² Intersectionality is a framework to understand these moments and structures of opportunities and oppression within an ethos of social justice³ and to transform those for the better.⁴ For example, applied to white feminism, an intersectional approach would shed light on its colour blindness, hierarchies, hegemonies, and exclusivities.

Understanding intersectionality

As individuals living and working in universities, we are never seen simply as an “educator”, “administrative staff member” or “student”, but as complex beings

with a profession or function and various identity markers like age, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, skin colour, social background, language, religious beliefs, class, academic line, and so on. This “composition” changes over a lifetime depending on context, geography, time, experiences, the way we tell ourselves and others our story, and how others see and conceptualise us. The identity markers never mean anything by themselves; quite contrarily, we ascribe meanings to them. Despite or because of this fictive (sometimes authentic) character, these categories have very real consequences for individuals because of the structures of difference and discrimination that work along their lines.

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw introduced the extremely successful term “intersectionality” and its metaphor of the crossroads⁵ to theorise the “various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences”.⁶ Subject to her analysis was the DeGraffenreid vs. General Motors court ruling, where five Black women sued General Motors, alleging that the employer’s seniority system perpetuated the effects of past discrimination against Black women.⁷ Crenshaw understood that Emma DeGraffenreid and her peers were discriminated against both as women and as Black people. However, the court did not understand that discrimination along the lines of race and gender here played together, or in other words, were intersecting. The employer was cleared of the allegation of discrimination because they factually did employ Black people (but only men) and women (but only white). By judging the case through the single-axis framework (race or gender), the court “theoretically erased” the Black women.⁸ In this case, however, there was, besides the axes of race and gender, also that of class: “in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex- or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race- and class-privileged women”.⁹ One could also say that being compared to those who had actually acquired a job was already a heavy misconception of the unemployed Black women. Here Crenshaw applied the concept of multidimensional experiences, which is rooted in Black feminist thought, and came to the following picture:

The point is that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional. Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in the intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.¹⁰

Transferring the analogy to the university, one might imagine a Southeast Asian (read ciswoman) standing at the intersection of two hallways in the Department of Theoretical Physics of a University of the Global North. Busily, human resource employees and academics head through the hallway to a job interview. The

applicant has not been considered relevant for the job, despite having the qualifications. When litigating, she would receive the answer that there was no discrimination at work, proven by the fact that the department has previously hired women (but only White European and/or American) and Southeast Asians (but only men) – this means that the institution is supposedly not responsible for this specific problem. As a result, the Southeast Asian woman “falls between the cracks” – there is no acknowledgment that she is discriminated against because of her ethnicity and gender in combination, thus deeming the issue at hand irrelevant. As Crenshaw said later about Emma’s case: “there was no name for this problem. And we all know that, where there’s no name for a problem, you cannot see a problem, and when you cannot see a problem, you pretty much cannot solve it”.¹¹

What makes “the problem” even more difficult to grasp, using the analogy of the traffic intersection, is that there might be different cars that hit the person: sometimes it is race and gender, as Crenshaw showed; sometimes it is ability, sexuality, and gender; other times it is sexuality and ethnicity minus gender; and at yet other times it is all the cars at once. Having a name for the problem – intersectionality – is the necessary condition to begin addressing it. The notion of intersectionality sharpens the understanding of what an individual who differs from the dominant group experiences because of who they are/their identity markers. Moreover, it heightens the awareness of the “traffic” at a university: what cars you, as administration staff, might sit in; what obstacles the “traffic” might cause to people who are read as “different from the dominant group”; and that it might be important to slow down the cars to reflect on one’s own and institutional practices. Intersectional thinking can be understood as a theoretical framework that helps to dissect situations thoroughly and choose measures accordingly relative to the specific case.

In resistance to patriarchy and white feminisms, the ideas behind intersectionality have been pronounced at different moments in US history, in South-Asian scholarship, or by Indigenous voices like Miri woman and Aboriginal activist Dulcie Flower in the 1950s. Already, roughly a century before that, an abolitionist, Sojourner Truth, famously asked: *Ain’t I a woman?* With this, the former slave and then preacher pointed out that Black women were welcome neither in white women’s movements nor in Black (male) anti-slavery movements – and their specific problems, thus, remained unaddressed. Another early treatise on what would later disembark under the term intersectionality was Anna Julia Cooper’s (1891) *A Voice from the South*, where she has brought together the interdependences of race, gender, class, region, and nation. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Black women in the US allied with Chicanas, Latinas, Asian-American and Indigenous women,¹² Black liberation movements on the African continent, the African diaspora, and across geographies with anti-colonial struggles in general.¹³ A decade later, the Black queer Combahee River Collective challenged the racism and heteronormativity of white feminist scholarship and activism which had sought and still seeks white women’s liberation from the oppressive structures of the heteropatriarchal home through the exploitation of Black, Chicana, and Latina women, and women from the Global South and Global East. In that spirit, Crenshaw drives home her point

through a threefold description of intersectionality in her article “Mapping the Margins”¹⁴: *Structural intersectionality* (often evoked in the operationalisation of literature) refers to “ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender, makes their actual experiences of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different from that of white women”.¹⁵ *Political intersectionality* describes how, historically, feminist and anti-racist discourses in the US functioned in “tandem to marginalize experiences, needs, and political visions of women of color”.¹⁶ Crenshaw argues that women of colour are situated within at least two subordinate groups that pursue conflicting agendas with neither of them construed around their (women of colour) experiences; instead, anti-racism reproduces patriarchy, and feminism reproduces racism. To Crenshaw, ironically, women of colour are asked to choose between these two inadequate analyses, each of which “constitutes a denial of fundamental dimensions of their subordination”.¹⁷ *Representational intersectionality* thus relates to ways in which images of women of colour are produced, drawing on sexist and racist narratives and the ways in which critiques of those representations continually marginalise and reproduce the objectification of women of colour.¹⁸

Transferring intersectionality to the university: to understand how the different strands of discrimination work together and affect lives, one needs to analyse power relations among individuals in their respective contexts. Helpful here is the framework of the “domains of power”.¹⁹ With this framework, Patricia Collins developed a device with which intersecting systems of power can be understood in their situatedness. This is specifically helpful for analysing intersectional power relations in universities, where the circumstances inevitably differ around the globe. The framework encompasses the relevant levels that make a university: power is executed through the institution (so-called *structural domain of power*); through rules and regulations of everyday life and policies (*disciplinary domain of power*); through (non-) representations, ideas, and ideologies shaped by media and journalism, which are a part of academic and university life; or by curriculums that build the foundation of every programme and course (*cultural domains of power*). Finally, the *interpersonal domain of power* refers to the human interaction that brings every university system to life.²⁰ To understand how power is exerted and resisted in an institution, university, department, or centre, the domains can be analysed separately in terms of how they work together.

There has been some critical scholarship on intersectionality. A case in point is made by Delgado who presents a two-fold critique through a conversation with Rodrigo.²¹ *Practical consequences*: Rodrigo critiques the intersectionality framework of identifying sub-groups within a category, yet, without an explicit practical solution. To Rodrigo, the best those in the subgroup get is more attention. Rodrigo, however, posits that the same attention could harm members of that very group because the formalism created can “invite in power, but can also show it the door”.²² The framework, therefore, cuts both ways, for example in the US, an intersectional group – children of undocumented parents – could end up being deported when authorities decide to send their parents back home.²³ He further

adds that the emergence of new subgroups and the demand for recognition, incidentally, create infinite divisibility in the sub-categories. To Rodrigo, this creates challenges for the legal system and political work, which naturally presupposes groups,²⁴ because there is no guarantee that emerging groups will not consider the operating frame of analysis as too broad. It then becomes a vicious cycle of accusations and subgroups that “paralyzes progressive work and thought”.²⁵ *Conceptual incoherence*: Rodrigo also critiques the intersectionality framework of standing on a weak conceptual footing, presupposing essentialism, and being a social construction.²⁶ He argues that special treatment of intersectional categories should not presuppose that a “comparison group is better off, they may not be, at least not all of them”.²⁷ He adds that members of subgroups could be misled to believe that they are endowed with a feature that justifies special treatment, yet nobody out there wears the label “intersectional person” or “person who occupies one category”.²⁸

Experiences of intersecting discrimination

Drawing on both Crenshaw’s dimensions of intersectionality and Collins’ framework of domains of power, which are seemingly at work in academia, we, with the following, elaborate some fictive examples in order to extract experiences of intersecting discrimination.

Example 1: N

N is a Black transgender woman (and has been using the pronouns “she/her” for three years now) who lives in a psychologically abusive relationship. As her financial situation is strained and she has earlier experienced open discrimination by potential landlords, she avoids moving out. N had been enrolled in an arts program at a college in a US city, but after having experienced everything from micro-aggressions²⁹ to blunt misogyny, she has quit the programme and is now enrolled in a minor in gender studies. N likes the programme and engages in discussions, but when her teacher encourages her to contribute to the department’s blog, she reacts with disbelief and paralysed inactivity. In assignments, she regularly faces writer’s block and rarely submits on time. Because N approaches topics creatively and with mixed methods, because she is orally very articulate, and because she speaks from her massive experience, N has recently yielded to the plea of her teacher and finally joined a tutor team for a course in her programme. Here, she steadily learns to experience herself as an intersectional educator and as an important agent for the empowerment of others to understand and embrace their own and others’ intersectional identities.³⁰ Pursuing a career in academia seems to be out of reach for her despite her talent and her intelligence. She is simply too different.

N lives “with three strikes” as a transgender activist and scholar.³¹ With a subject position that experiences intersecting discriminations through racism, trans-hate,

and misogyny, her life is, literally, high risk,³² and her academic future is insecure in a non-transformed university. Physical violence is likely to happen to her, and the fear of it alone will affect her body and thinking. Consequently, her (written) academic performances are fragile. It is the responsibility of administrative staff and teachers at the institution to use their disciplinary power to facilitate exams when needed or wished. On an interpersonal level, N is read as different by the heteronormatively socialised white majority of teachers and students which can hamper cooperation on academic subjects. On the level of the cultural domain of power, N explores and transforms the representation of trans issues in the curriculum if the teachers allow her – creativity is a strand in her academic thinking through which she explores alternative research methods like arts from her specific positionality. This not only empowers her but also diversifies the voices in the classroom. As such, her positionality is a strong asset in educational work that seeks to be powerful and transformative for both teachers and students.³³

Example 2: O

Five years ago, O (21) migrated from Turkey and moved to a mid-sized city in Denmark, together with his family.³⁴ Here, the three siblings attended middle school, but in contrast to the sisters, P, and Q, who quickly found their way into the social and formal requirements and expectations of a Danish school, O did not “land”. The other, mostly white ethnic, students of Danish nationality refer to him and his boys as “the Turks”, as “the immigrants”, or, in the worst moments, as the “sissies”. When O and his friends try to defend their self-respect with scuffles, the teachers and head of school (white, non-racialised ethnic) interfere. Their overly strict handling of the boys and him confirms his perception that they, “the Turks”, are seen and treated as inferior. At home, his parents fully trust the school system and the teachers. They are convinced that the teachers do their best for O and hardly follow up – neither when it comes to penalties nor to homework. They seldom check his presence at school, as his mother works at a major company before and after office hours and his father works in shifts and is often exhausted. A physical education teacher who has a Turkish background understands that O is a troubled young man and encourages him to attend some extracurricular sports activities. The two bond over a workout, and O’s scholarly ambition flares up, but shortly after transitioning into 11th grade, O drops out of school. While his sister P has decided on an apprenticeship in administration, and Q pursues a bachelor’s programme at a business school, O sends out applications to potential employers when forced to go to a job centre. He is rarely invited to interviews, and he doubts that he will fit into a white Danish workforce. Hanging with his boys is where he feels more complete.

O’s school career is characterised by the intersectionality of sexism and racism, both on the interpersonal level as well as on the cultural one; this young man is othered based on his cultural background. He is teased in the schoolyard, and his perspectives based on his background play no role in the curriculum. The

representatives of the school hardly contextualise his reaction to the teasing and silencing, and consequently penalise him harshly, executing a formalised, stiff disciplinary power. For O, both on the disciplinary as well as on the interpersonal level, the ethnic and cultural discriminations intersect with those of gender. The developing masculinity of O is troubled.³⁵ His female siblings are seen as more conforming to the structures of the school system, and, consequently, will proceed to university and into the job market, although they might experience the intersection of (female) gender and ethnicity.³⁶ The short positive interpersonal relationship with a teacher (who has themselves obviously found a career but should not be used as proof of non-discriminatory practices at educational institutions) is too short and unsupported by the institution to make an impact on O's education. O is an example of a student who has never entered university due to intersecting discriminations earlier in school.

Example 3: S

S is a young *rawlunlunuy* woman who belongs to the *tebrakunna* country in Tasmania in the unceded land now called Australia; she is also a sociologist. The research she undertakes is guided by a commitment to social justice for her people and emerges from and benefits her community, as it puts her people's needs and interests to the fore.³⁷ Of course, her research unfolds from Indigenous knowledge and methodologies. Despite a growing body of Indigenous scholarship and its visibility, she experiences harsh headwinds at her institute: it is said that her research questions are of little relevance to greater audiences, and her methodology is subjective, even unscientific. In teaching, her suggestions to include Indigenous voices in the syllabus are silenced. Also, she had expected more support from her male (Indigenous) colleagues, but they seem indifferent at best, openly sceptical and disruptive at worst as she investigates from the standpoint of a racialised female Indigenous body. But how could she not? Taken together, plus her internal battle with how to be a part of an institution that resides on unceded lands and is driven by capitalist values, she does not see much of a future for herself in academia. There are less contested, more effective ways to benefit her people. What about working for an NGO?

As an Indigenous ciswoman, S is committed to her community's ontology, axiology, and epistemology³⁸ and stands at the intersection of institutional racism and sexism, and perhaps also ageism for being a young scholar, both on structural and cultural levels. Her positionality as an Indigenous scholar and her language competencies are both an asset as well as a burden³⁹ – from the perspective of institutional power, being non-white is an obstacle to entering institutions⁴⁰ and her research is often marginalised as irrelevant and unscientific within the mainstream academy. This happens both on a cultural level when receiving reviews of her submitted papers and on an interpersonal level during discussions in the lunchroom. The cultural power through the representation of her and other Indigenous voices in curricula is mostly blighted. In her specific field, however, her

research is novel, trans-disciplinary, and highly relevant for her community and beyond. In sum, she constantly negotiates the oppressor's system and values of the white patriarchal university and the benefits for her community. This tension is demanding on a personal level.

Oppression and privilege at work through an intersectional eye

Intersectionality is a powerful tool to understand how both oppression *and* privilege work. As institutions are “stable, valued, recurring patterns of behavior”,⁴¹ as a university staff member, as a teacher, and/or as a student, one needs to check from which (privileged) position one behaves and create a culture by these recurring actions where one's privileges lie, helping oneself. This can be used to support and care for (multiple) marginalised and oppressed subjects.⁴² Studies show that in the US, the chances that an application will be successful shrinks if the applicant identifies as Black and female (in relation to the default white male applicant), and in Norway, the chance of being called in for an interview as a son of immigrants is lower than that of a daughter or one who bears a foreign-sounding name.⁴³ On an institutional level, and in the role of a decision-making employer or member of a committee, it is then important to ask where stereotypes and implicit biases influence a decision against a candidate and to counteract those biases. Moreover, you must ask how your attitude and decision contribute to (re-)producing the majority of the dominant social categories in this specific work environment. Those biases come seldomly as open racist testimonies and can be veiled, for example, as the “under complexity” of the theoretical approach, a “too personal” writing style in the papers, or a non-comprehensible swing in the curriculum vitae or similar. In cases where a candidate who does not resemble most colleagues chosen (in any department, not only departments for “gender and diversity”), it is not enough to have employed them but one must work constantly, self-reflecting on a transformation within all domains of power. What unimagined thoughts and ideas suffice with the new colleague? Be self-critical: do you feel resistance because these ideas question the institution's (and with that: your own) tradition?⁴⁴ Finally, a question to ask would always be who has not applied at all (also on the student level), why, and how one might reach out to those individuals.

Intersectionality is an essential analytical tool for facilitating the transformation of the academy, considering that we are part of it and hope to see others therein and those to come, leaving above the vices of social stratification. The academy consists of individuals with different capacities – students, employees, lecturers, and support staff who are faced on a daily basis with social, structural, political, disciplinary, interpersonal, and representational challenges rotating around power and oppression. Intersectionality becomes a term/perspective and a theoretical/methodological framework that facilitates a holistic comprehension of such challenges. Considering that academia ought to harness democracy, educational and administrative discourses should embrace multidimensional approaches that promote the same. Premises and parameters in educational spaces that tend to marginalise individuals, whose experiences cannot be described within tightly drawn parameters,

inadequately capture the facets of marginalisation in their totality. Moreover, frames of interpretation of disadvantaged people's experiences are equally part of the multi-dimensional intersections of their experiences. Ironically, our judgments of those experiences (as stakeholders in the academy) often consist of inherent biases emanating from our own situatedness. Contrary to the predominant ascriptions, like the uni-directional single-axis analysis framework that tends to shroud disadvantaged people's experiences and obstruct redress to their needs and claims, intersectionality engages and analyses intersecting systems of power based on situatedness, thereby giving impetus to social justice. These reflections should also influence curricula, syllabuses, and classroom interaction to not only facilitate a pedagogical transformation in the academy, but also the experiences of the individuals therein.

Summary

- Intersectionality is a concept for analysing social differences (and samenesses) and the multiple ways in which discriminations affect subjects along the axes of race, gender, sexuality, social class, socio-economic status, nationality, geographical position, and other lines of difference.
- Intersectionality is not necessarily about identity – how one identifies or is identified – but about how societal structures help to oppress and privilege individuals or groups.
- It is a concept, a scholarly theory, and a methodology for research across several disciplines; it is a lived reality; it is central in social movements and political activism, as well as a transformative approach in work-centred processes like university administration and pedagogical discourses.
- The concept of intersectionality with its predecessors puts words on the hierarchical heterogeneity of women and the inequality between them, and critiques white feminism's exclusion practices.
- In the first instance, researchers, students, and administrative staff need to be self-reflexive of their own situatedness and privileges, and use these privileges to change application processes, curricula, grading, and evaluation to be less discriminating.
- Privileges need to be unlearned.
- Understanding intersectional experiences and working for the disruption of a system that allows discrimination is messy and complicated. However, a system that builds on the disempowerment, violation, and exploitation of others cannot be called good enough or even excellent.
- Intersectionality always needs to be approached critically to set against identity politics and the emptiness of an overused term.

Questions for discussion

- What is my privilege?
- How is a person's situation shaped by discrimination?

- How do discriminations along several social axes (ethnicity, ability, gender, etc.) overlap and enforce each other?
- How is my perception of a situation shaped by cultural expectations, traditions, and stereotypes? Where are my biases?
- How can I let go of organisational short-cuts that hide behind “the system”? What is my agency in this institution?
- How far is my department/office/classroom aware of intersectional discrimination and how does it discuss and approach it?

Suggestions for further reading

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Notes

- 1 Crenshaw 1989
- 2 Collins 1990
- 3 Collins and Bilge 2016, 147
- 4 de los Reyes and Mulinari 2020, 185
- 5 For a recent critique of the crossroads metaphor, see Rodó-Zárte and Jorba 2022
- 6 Crenshaw 1989
- 7 Crenshaw 1989, 141–142
- 8 Crenshaw 1989
- 9 Crenshaw 1989, 140
- 10 Crenshaw 1989, 149
- 11 Crenshaw 2016; see also Antonsen, this volume
- 12 Collins and Bilge 2016, 65
- 13 Bilge 2020; see also: Davis 1981; Moraga 1983; Smith 1983; Spelman 1988; Higginbotham 1992; Collins 1990
- 14 Crenshaw 1991
- 15 Crenshaw 1991, 1245
- 16 Crenshaw 1991, 1252
- 17 Crenshaw 1991, 1252
- 18 Crenshaw 1991, 1283
- 19 Collins 2017
- 20 Collins 2017, 26
- 21 Delgado 2011
- 22 Delgado 2011, 1267
- 23 Delgado 2011, 1266
- 24 Delgado 2011, 1263–1264
- 25 Delgado 2011, 1264
- 26 Delgado 2011, 1268
- 27 Delgado 2011, 1269

- 28 Delgado 2011, 1269
- 29 See Branlat, this volume
- 30 See Lester 2018
- 31 Lester 2018
- 32 See National LGBTQ Task Force, n.d.
- 33 hooks 1994
- 34 See Staunæs 2003
- 35 Staunæs 2003
- 36 Chakrabarty 2000
- 37 Moreton-Robinson 2013
- 38 Moreton-Robinson 2013
- 39 Smith 2012
- 40 Midtbøen 2014; Quillian and Midtbøen 2021
- 41 Huntington 1965
- 42 Gay 2014
- 43 Midtbøen 2014
- 44 Penner 2021

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