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## Abstract

Intersectionality is a black feminist theory of power that recognizes how multiple systems of oppression, including racism, patriarchy, capitalism, interact to disseminate disadvantage to and institutionally stratify different groups. Born out of black women's theorizations of their experiences of racism, sexism, and economic disadvantage from enslavement to Jim Crow to the post-civil rights era, the theory accounts for how systems of oppression reinforce each other, and how their power must be understood not as individually constituted but rather as co-created in concert with each other. Sociologists of gender adopted and adapted intersectionality widely in the 1990s, using the theoretical lens to account for their own standpoint and positionality in the research process as well as to expand their analyses to include the experiences of people who were disadvantaged across multiple systems of oppression. The popularity and utility of intersectionality as a theory, both within sociology and beyond, has in some ways obscured its emphasis on interlocking systems of structural power and

domination. Yet, gender theorists are positively positioned to return power to the center of analyses of inequality and to cover new substantive ground in research on oppression.

## 1 Introduction

Although the term intersectionality is a late twentieth century intellectual innovation,<sup>1</sup> as a theoretical practice, intersectionality can be traced to black women's theorizing about their lives in nineteenth century America. In its early iterations, intersectional theorizing sought to highlight how black women's "doubly disadvantaged" gender and race statuses meant that they were at once not quite women and also especially vulnerable to gendered violence and capitalist exploitation. Later, theorizing shifted from "double jeopardy" (Beale, 1969) to "triple constraints" (Barnett, 1993) to "multiple jeopardy" (King, 1988), mathematical metaphors devised to capture the systemic, institutional, and micro-level, interpersonal discrimination black women experienced. Today, it is used as a

<sup>1</sup>Legal scholar Crenshaw (1989, 2015) coined the term "intersectionality" to account for how discrimination law, as well as measures to address discrimination, lacked the ability to understand how two systems—racism and patriarchy in this instance—operated together to disadvantage black women and render their distinct experiences of discrimination invisible.

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broad, widely-applicable theory of power that understands everyone, regardless of status, to be located in what sociologist Collins (1990) has called the “matrix of domination,” where systems of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability oppression intersect to locate and either constrain or enable individuals based on their multiple intersecting statuses. Though it emphasizes power relationships over individual identities, in recent years, intersectionality has been used increasingly to theorize individuals’ multiple identity intersections (e.g., Bettie, 2002; Bowleg, 2008; Wilkins, 2004). Intersectionality’s insistence on accounting for how multiple systems of power simultaneously act on individuals has sometimes put it at odds with gender theory, which at times has imagined a universal subject that experiences gender advantage or disadvantage in relatively uniform ways.

Intersectionality is at once a stand-alone theory of structural power relationships, a key form of gender theorizing, and an alternative to conventional gender theory. As a theory of power relationships, intersectionality highlights how various systems of oppression, including racism, sexism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy intersect and reinforce each other in order to stratify and dominate minority groups. As a form of gender theorizing, intersectionality compels a recognition of how gendered bodies also inhabit other categories of difference, opening new and important pathways into gender theorizing that took seriously the impact of other forms of difference on power outcomes. Intersectionality is also an alternative epistemology to the conventional practice of gender theory, which often assumes implicitly normalized gendered subjects as race-less, middle class, able-bodied, or white. Intersectionality makes such normative assumptions visible by focusing on power relationships (Cho et al., 2013).

In the twentieth century, gender theorists intervened in a rigid Marxian inequality discourse that situated class and capital as the essential form of domination, with gender domination only a consequence of class domination. They deftly demonstrated how gender dominance exists and persists in a multiplicity of

economic contexts beyond capitalism; how sexism functions in concert with capitalism; how capitalism was and is used to achieve gender discrimination in order to uphold patriarchy; and how individuals are thoroughly socialized into “doing” the work of gender difference to enforce this order. They deconstructed gender roles, the body, reproduction and reproductive labor, and labor market inequities, advancing Marxian feminist analyses that rigorously assessed the intersection of gender and class oppression (Andersen, 2005).

Yet, for all of gender theory’s careful attention to how gender oppression yielded and was integral to the functioning of class oppression for women and femmes, the intersection of gender and oppression and racial oppression was absent from much of nineteenth and early twentieth century gender theorizing not done by black women (Fox-Genovese, 1988). The “Negro Question” and the “Woman Question” were seen as separate issues because the “Negro Question” was inherently about black men and the “Woman Question” was chiefly about white women, and often economically privileged white women (Beale, 1969). This epistemological ignorance about black women simultaneously inhabiting disadvantaged race and gender positions meant that gender theory, which was interested in gender and class, and race theory, which was interested in race and class, developed on two different tracks for much of the twentieth century. Black women, then, were contributing to burgeoning critical race theories of the United States and the “third world” as well as gender theories that excluded, unintentionally or not, their experiences. Intersectionality is born of and rooted in black women’s standing and theorizing in the gap.

To talk or theorize about gender is to always already be talking or theorizing about race, class, and sexuality. This widely-accepted tenet of research on the interplay of performed identities and structural inequalities has undergirded intersectional interventions in gender theory but not necessarily gender theory writ large, particularly in the field of sociology. Understanding how gender identity and disadvantage are

experienced differently across social statuses is central to uncovering and delineating how power works. Intersectionality insists on the recognition that these systems reinforce one another and that no system of power, not even capitalism, exists in a vacuum.

## 2 Intersectionality in Slavery and Early Freedom

As an assessment of the interlocking nature of structural power relationships, intersectionality first emerged in the writings of enslaved and formerly enslaved women in the nineteenth century U.S. These writers, including the activist Sojourner Truth (White, 1999), the memoirist Jacobs (1861), and the sociologist and journalist Ida B. Wells (Wells-Barnett, 1995), recognized how gendered power structures were organized simultaneously with racialized power structures and delineated how these intersecting structures disadvantaged black women, both enslaved and free. Women's historiographies of slavery and early freedom, including work by Hine (1989), White (1999), Davis (1983), and Fox-Genovese (1988), further theorized black women's simultaneous experiences of gender, class, and race oppression as well as the structural and everyday systems of power that shaped and enforced dominance. Collectively, this work highlighted the unequal categories of difference that left black women without access to the privileges and protections of womanhood but facilitated white women's dominance. Indeed, white womanhood was created in juxtaposition to blackness and black womanhood, such that black women's experience of gender was always fundamentally different from that of white women. This work laid the basis for an intersectional theory of gender categorization and hierarchy from enslavement through white women's suffrage.

Although there is historical dispute about whether or not Sojourner Truth actually uttered the words or if they were penned by a white woman abolitionist, "and ain't I a woman?" reflected the epistemological grounds of black

women's experiences in the antebellum U.S. Truth's critique, like that of other black women, was of the class, race, and gender structures that conscripted her and other black women to slavery but also enabled white women, and mistresses in particular, to avoid the reproductive, domestic, and physical labor rigors to which black women were routinely subjected. Enslaved women were well aware of how their status as women was contorted by their condition of servitude, and in some cases ensured distinctions were upheld. Jacobs ([1861]1987) famously appealed to white women, pleading with them to think of themselves and their daughters in a situation where their womanhood was threatened, and where they were constantly molested and threatened with rape. She writes of the severe constraints in which she found herself as a teenager, determined to resist her owner's intention to make her his mistress:

Buy, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair. (83)

Jacobs was strongly critical of the slave system and discursively deploys Victorian principles of purity to both shatter stereotypes of enslaved black women as sexually promiscuous jezebels and to cast herself as not unlike her elite and free white readers. Slavery, she asserts, constricts her ability to be a woman, which inherently meant maintaining her "purity" against the pursuits of men. Her status as black and thus unfree placed her outside of the traditional gender norms and mores of the day. Embedded within her narrative is a critique of the capital aims of slavery, of white men's relentless sexual violence against

black women, and of women's ability to choose their partners. Even through a Victorian lens, intersectional analysis was a clear indictment of the interlocking systems of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy.

White women, too, were also aware of the gender, race, and caste status inequities between themselves and enslaved women. Drawing on the diaries of white slave mistresses, Genovese (1988) recounts a story of a well-respected mammy, Harriet, who admonished her young white women charges not to ever go in the kitchen: "nobody but niggers go in there" (162). In this usage, "niggers" signaled class and gender status, as the women in the kitchen were black and lower in the hierarchy than she was as a mammy, and certainly lower than young white ladies. Of course, "niggers" was also used to refer to enslaved black men, which both blurred the gender roles of men and women and obscured the specifically women's labor—caring for, nurturing, and nursing children (black and white), sewing, cooking—that black women performed in addition to performing "men's" work in the field. The kitchen was a separate space where black women labored. Because this was not the labor of elite white women, it was not "ladies'" work but "niggers'" work.

The delineation of class, gender, and race that emerged from enslavement continued to shape the order and nature of systems of oppression long after abolition. While only elite white women could achieve and do "ladyhood," with the advancement of the suffrage cause, all white women, even poor, yeoman white women, gained access to a valuable sociopolitical tool that further marked out the racialized boundaries of gender. The battle over suffrage—whether it should be given to "the Negro," which meant men, or to women, which ultimately meant white women—reinforced the importance of intersectionality, as black women suffragists advocated for the franchise to be given either to everyone or to black men. Black men's economic and class disadvantage was exacerbated by their lack of access to the franchise, and because of their sophisticated understanding of systems of oppression, black women saw their economic

and social fortunes as tied to the franchise for black people in general.

Yet, the suffrage movement again revealed gender fissures and obfuscations that rendered black women invisible in the process. White women frequently used fear of black men and black masculinity, which white masculinity had been constructed against, to advance their sociopolitical power in the public and private sphere. In order for white women to be protected, black men must not have the same access to patriarchal privilege as white men. Further, some white suffrage organizations advocated for the franchise only for white women, which would maintain the existing racialized gender power hierarchies established during slavery. Although black men were legally given the right to vote with the passage of the fifteenth amendment and black women were legally given the right to vote with the passage of the nineteenth amendment, their racial status subjected them to rigid state laws that excluded both groups from suffrage. Black women had been disadvantaged by the fifteenth amendment's construction of suffrage as a male privilege and had been subsequently excluded by state interpretations of the nineteenth amendment as a white privilege.

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### 3 Divergent Paths: Intersectionality and Gender Theory in the Women's Movement

The suffrage battle fought but not won for all women, black women, in clubs and churches, continued to organize for the franchise for all black people, fighting local and state apparatuses by challenging unfair restrictions designed to prevent black people from voting (Higginbotham, 1993). Yet, the violent oppression that accompanied the reification of racial boundaries in the interwar U.S. had a decidedly gendered edge. Black men and women were subjected to lynching, the former moreso than the latter, as mobs took souvenirs of genitals and other body parts to mark black masculinity as aberrant, toxic, and something to be possessed. Black women were perpetually subjected to rape and

other forms of sexual assault by white men, their status as women still not imbued with the advantages that white women enjoyed. Black women fiercely resisted this violence through judicial means, seeking redress for violations as both citizens and women. Like Jacobs, they recognized their unequal gender status as black women and claimed and demanded the protections of their gender.

This physical violence was coupled with the economic violence of unequal wages and labor market constraints. Black men were paid dramatically less for their labor than white men and enjoyed few of the workplace protections and federal benefits, like unemployment insurance and the GI bill, afforded to white men. Hence, black women needed to work outside of the home to support families, making them vulnerable to white sexual violence. Their wages, too, were suppressed and often withheld. In the postwar period, a generation of white women who had not previously been able to afford domestic labor, enriched by racialized federal benefits to their veteran husbands, demanded black women's labor in order to signify and raise their own class status as well as to maintain a gender hierarchy in which black men and women were below white men and women (Sharpless, 2010).

Black women intensified their critiques of capitalism, racism, and sexism, aligning questions of women's unequal status with those of black people's unequal status, but also pushing beyond arguments that would situate the two issues as uniformly equal. Nearly 60 years after the scholar Anna Julia Cooper had written that "only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me," (1892) communist scholar and activist Jones (1949) wrote of black women's distinct ability to push for militant resistance to inequality and black liberation. Describing black women's multiple, intersecting, and simultaneous roles as mothers, protectors, wives, and laborers, she contended that, "... it is not accidental that the American bourgeoisie has

intensified its oppression, not only of the Negro people in general, but of Negro women in particular. Nothing so exposes the drive to fascization in the nation as the callous attitude which the bourgeoisie displays and cultivates toward Negro women" (110). Despite her tensions with the communist party's inability to fully grasp the importance of the intersectional platform and analysis she was forwarding, Jones nonetheless laid the groundwork for a robust Marxist feminist analysis—one that did not see gender oppression as a byproduct of capitalism but as an essential element of capitalist oppression. Ironically, it was this analysis of gender and labor oppression that in part inspired white women gender theorists to understand domestic labor as constraining and devalued in the home relative to men's remunerative labor outside of the home. In some ways, however, they still did not understand how the devaluation of domestic labor contributed to the racialized gender oppression of black women, who had largely been consigned to domestic labor since legal emancipation. Moreover, these theorists were unable to clearly articulate how black women's oppression enabled their own relative privilege. There was a gender theory without intersectionality, and the absence of an intersectional lens complicated movement organizing in the civil rights era.

Black women were also working within their own racial communities in order to demonstrate how they, too, were experiencing the effects of racial violence. To highlight the gender dimensions of racial violence and its effects on wages, safety, and health, lawyer Pauli Murray dubbed the system of domination black women experienced "Jane Crow." In her 1964 speech, "Jim Crow and Jane Crow," Murray outlined a critique of the intersection of racism and sexism as well as discussed the similarities and differences in the lived experiences of black men and black women (Murray, 1970). For Murray, racism and sexism were twin and interlocking evils that enabled capitalist oppression and thus should be challenged simultaneously.

Although women like Murray built multiracial consciousness-raising and resistance coalitions in the 1960s, unaddressed questions about the

fundamental inequities between women across race and class sowed tensions that were reflected in emergent Women's Studies spaces, women's organizations, activist concerns, and policy prescriptions. White middle class women had not had to actively think about masculinity as an ongoing process that enabled patriarchy, whereas black women had been thinking about how the negative construction of black masculinity enabled white racist and patriarchal violence since enslavement (Haney, 1996). The widespread unrest in the predominantly black sections of cities from New York and Detroit to Memphis and Los Angeles was illegible to most Americans, including white feminists, as a women's issue. That is, the inability to care for children and families in a safe environment with access to good educational resources and without state violence was an issue of gender equity that disproportionately affected black and Latinx communities. Similarly, while controlling reproduction was a shared aim of all women, women of color and poor women across racial groups had been long subjected to sterilization campaigns that took away their reproductive control, often without their knowledge (Roberts, 1997). In other cases, prohibitively high costs of birth control and safe abortion procedures disproportionately affected women of color who were, in a racist labor market and carceral state, struggling to take care of themselves, their children, and their extended kin. If they were not evident before, the differential effects of the intersection of patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and sexism were made painfully clear in the women's equality movement of the 1960s.

Unsurprisingly, then, it is during and out of the activism of the 1960s that black feminist theories of gender, race, and class, proliferated in the black public sphere. Black and Latinx women gender theorists and activists challenged theories of racial capitalism that did not include analyses of gender and theories of gendered capitalism that did not include analyses of race (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). Moreover, black lesbian gender theorists and activists compelled attention to how structures of sexuality, operating in concert with patriarchy and sexism, affected black lesbian,

gay, and gender non-conforming people (Combahee River Collective, 1983). Black and Latinx transwomen, and work on black and Latinx transwomen, pushed black feminist theorists to include black transwomen activists and an analysis of the experiences of transwomen. For black women across a range of statuses, intersectionality was a lived experience, a necessary theory of oppression, and an action that was constantly being refined in activist communities and movement contexts.

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#### 4 Difference, Power, and the Always Already

Black women's theorizing and activism in the 1960s and 1970s led in part to an increase in their numbers in academia. Black women's entry into formal canons of academic theorizing about gender occurred, however, at a time when post-modernist and poststructuralist theories of gender, the body, race, and difference had shifted discussions of inequality away from power and towards representation, simulacra, and performance. Black feminist theorist Barbara Christian writes about this phenomenon in a 1987 essay titled "The Race for Theory," where she chronicles this critical theory turn in literature and its elevation of particular kinds of theorizing as prime. That is, just as bodies of color and people of color enter into the canon, questions arise about the reality of race or gender, or their continued usefulness as categories.

Sociologists of gender and race drew on new theoretical emphases on deconstruction and combined them with existing sociological paradigms, including social constructionism, to talk about gender as a social construct. Yet, instead of dismissing these categories as not "real" because they were not rooted in certain biological facts, sociologists highlighted how social constructs were far from apolitical illusions. Gender may be socially constructed, sociologists argued, but its construction has real effects on individuals.

Yet, tensions between constructionist approaches and approaches that highlighted systems of power and oppression yielded a dividing line in

sociological theorizing about gender, race, and class inequality in the 1980s and 1990s. A 1995 symposium on West and Fenstermaker (1995) “Doing Difference” threw these tensions into sharp relief. Building on West and Zimmerman (1987) “Doing Gender,” which had argued for a performative understanding of gender as an ongoing process made in and through our everyday micropolitical actions, West and Fenstermaker had pushed for a new understanding of how gender, race, and class are all performed and reinforced through these same micropolitics. Yet, as Collins (1995) points out in her review of the work, West and Fenstermaker posit this new understanding by disappearing categories of difference under layers of performance, similar to how some postmodern theories had excised lived experience altogether from their analyses. Collins contended that in West and Fenstermaker’s work, “race and class [had] appeared as gender in drag” (491), underscoring an enduring if implicit idea about gender theory and gender oppression that has long haunted sociologies of gender as well as the interdisciplinary fields of Women’s Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies. That is the idea that gender oppression, in its global ubiquity, is an essential form of oppression that persists in the absence of other forms of oppression. In a racially homogeneous society or in one with relative economic parity, gender inequity continues. Thus, to understand racial inequality or economic oppression, we must understand how gender oppression works.

Intersectionality theorists and sociologists who work in the field of race, class, and gender patently reject this logic about the primacy of gender oppression in the same way that they dismissed rigid Marxian focus on the dismantling of capitalism. The questions were not about difference, as it were, but about power, which was embedded in interlocking systems of oppression. Resisting oppression required theorizing on these multiple fronts, both examining the discrete “race” and “gender” effects, but also uncovering the concerted interaction of systems of power.

This is not to say that understanding the everyday cultural phenomena that reinforce gendered and racialized structures of power is not important. On the contrary, highlighting how

individuals are performatively and representationally complicit in and resistant to oppression tells us a great deal about how people theorize the workings of power in their lives vis-à-vis their social positions. However, questions of power require attention to systems, structures, and institutions, and they also necessitate a rigorous and ongoing engagement with the interlocking nature of those systems. In the wake of the postmodern turn in sociological theorizing, sociologists became disconnected in some ways from the activism against oppression that practitioners of race, class, and gender organizing—intersectional organizing—had long drawn on to build theory. Sociologists of gender were then in some ways unprepared for the postfeminist theoretical turn that would soon follow, even as they worked diligently to highlight the continuing significance of gender inequity, with attention to the power and income differentials between men and women in the workplace and the home.

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## 5 Postfeminist Theory, Intersectionality, and the Internet

Despite tensions in theorizations of difference versus those of power, by the 1990s, intersectionality as a theoretical term had gained some prominence in sociological work, and certainly the research disposition towards examining race, class, and gender simultaneously was gaining institutional ground. Yet, postmodern theories did continue to shape ideas about gender, especially in the public sphere. With power sublimated into difference, third and fourth wave feminisms seemed to remake their relationship to questions of equity that animated the 1960s women’s movement, even as women like Anita Hill and Lilly Ledbetter highlighted and challenged ongoing patriarchy, harassment, and wage inequities in the workplace. The proliferation of ideas about women’s individual power, often devoid of structural analyses, from the Spice Girls’ “girl power” to Sheryl Sandberg’s “lean in,” presented a challenge for both gender theory and intersectionality. Simultaneously, men re-asserted and re-articulated various forms of

patriarchal masculinity in the public sphere, from Comedy Central's satirical but serious "The Man Show," to the erotic reality series "Girls Gone Wild," to any number of reality television shows where women vie for a heteronormatively happy ending with a proverbial Prince Charming (Ponzer, 2010). The erroneous notion that feminism had completed its goals—equal pay, bodily autonomy, and access to previously closed portions of the labor market being chief among them—was widespread. Beyond its fundamental unsoundness, what was most egregious about this idea was the underlying assumption that parity had been achieved for all, or perhaps any, women.

The emergence of social media in the mid-2000s and its quick situation as a relatively democratic extension of the public sphere enabled people to express criticisms of this apparent shift in feminist and gender ideologies. Black women brought theories of intersectionality into this social media space as well (Jarmon, 2013), re-asserting intersectionality's roots in black women's lived experiences, organizing, and resistance to oppression. Not only did intersectional theorizing on the Internet provide important grounding for movements against rape culture and the movement for black lives, it also provided an important check on organizing and theorizing that did not include black and Latinx women, that glossed over or appropriated indigenous women's experiences, that excluded transwomen and lesbian women, and that emphasized carceral solutions to gender violence.

The popularity of intersectionality in the public sphere often underscored how black women's research has been excluded from canonical treatments of power, particularly ones in which race and gender are treated as categorical offsets of class oppression or ones in which gender or race are primary. Intersectionality theorists, lay and academic, are still teaching the fundamental lesson that racial and ethnic minorities can simultaneously be women, gay, disabled, or trans and that their lived experiences and oppression intersect across systems of racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, and cissexism. This work has had an important

impact on movement organizing, including: organizing for and making visible trans women of color, who are uniquely vulnerable to sexual and physical violence; organizing against rape culture with the knowledge that girls of color, and black girls in particular, are more likely to experience sexual violence; and organizing against police brutality, recognizing that all people of color (not just men) are affected and that police behavior towards them is shaped by the intersection of class, gender, sexuality, and gender identity oppression. Crenshaw (2015) #SayHerName campaign, launched in 2015, is just one example of intersectional collaboration between the academy and community organizations that highlights how black women and girls' experiences with police brutality, including rape, are absent from the broader discourse on addressing police brutality. In a 2016 plenary at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Seattle, Crenshaw, along with organizers Charlene Carruthers and Mariame Kaba, brought intersectional theories of resistance against racism to the forefront of sociological understandings of the movement for black lives. This was an important step in helping sociologists of gender to connect intersectionality with the organizing practices that helped refine it from abolition, to suffrage, to anti-rape activism, to the women's movement, to Black Lives Matter.

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## 6 Current Approaches to Studying Gender Through an Intersectional Lens

Intersectionality was gradually integrated into the discipline of sociology in the 1990s, beginning with theoretical work that sought to make the relationships between race, class, and gender clear as well as substantive work that took intersections seriously using quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Wallace, 2005). However, the inability of existing and moreover accepted sociological methods to adequately account for intersectionality soon became a critical issue to the theory's further development



within the field (Bowleg, 2008; Choo & Feree, 2010; MacKinnon, 2013). McCall (2005) categorized the methodological approaches to studying intersectionality that had emerged after two decades of the institutionalization of race, class, and gender studies as the “anticategorical” approach (one that rejects categories because of their inherent fluidity and impermanence), the “intracategorical” approach (one that sheds lights on previously neglected groups within a category, e.g., Latina women and income inequality, while recognizing the socially constructed nature of categories), and the “intercategorical” approach (one that accepts categories but only to generally demonstrate, typically quantitatively, the relationships of power between groups). These categories remain useful for understanding the current state of the academic field, but lack the important tensions between movement activism and academic theorization that help drive intersectionality forward.

The ethnomethodological lens proposed by West and Zimmerman (1987) and West and Fenstermaker (1995) is perhaps most reflective of the anticategorical approach, which situates categories as “simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences” (McCall, 2005, 1773). This line of thinking continues to shape how sociologists approach studies of gender, although today this work endeavors to make more explicitly visible how structural systems of oppression influence microprocesses. Most work now implicitly assumes that gender is constructed in an ongoing process, that it is challenged and reified through individual interactions and social exchanges, that it is not made within a vacuum, and that gender inequities proliferate through all social institutions, including the criminal justice system, housing, healthcare, the family, and the labor market. This work understands and acknowledges the fluidity of categorical boundaries, sometimes studying how and in what contexts these boundaries are made and transgressed, but still resists quantitative categorization.

There is still a striving in sociology to use the methodological tools at our disposal to measure inequity and power, which requires some degree of categorization. This intercategorical approach highlights the “complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories” rather than on difference and stratification “within single social groups, single categories, or both” (McCall, 2005, 1786). These simultaneous comparisons of multiple categories—men and women, black and white, college-educated and high school educated—sacrifice intracategorical complexity to capture the broad shape of inequality as a set of oppressive relationships. This kind of work is essential to understanding the changing, or unchanging, nature of inequality in terms of wealth, income, employment, and health outcomes over time.

Sociologists researching and theorizing through an intersectional lens work to understand how race, gender, class, and sexuality are made in concert with one another and in relationship to institutions. Research on the family, the labor market, and housing that uses a race, class, and gender lens highlights how the enduring structure-culture dualism in inequality—structural oppression is reproduced on the micro-level as parents discipline their children according to intersecting race, class, and gender mores (Dillaway & Broman, 2001); power relationships in black lesbian household are shaped by structures of race, gender, and parentage (Moore, 2008); black and Latinx women experience significant disadvantage in the labor market (Bertrand & Mullanaithan, 2004; Cotter et al., 2003; Reid et al., 2007); men navigate gender and masculinity in “women’s” work fields (Wingfield, 2009); and poor black women are most likely to experience housing discrimination (Fischer & Massey, 2004). This work is the intercategorical work that endeavors to measure oppression as a relative phenomenon that differentially affects groups based on their position in the matrix of domination. While this work might not explicitly situate itself as intersectional, because it examines

inequity across multiple groups, it meets McCall's definition for intercategory work, as it seeks to understand the changing nature of inequality across groups.

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## 7 Future Directions in Intersectionality and Gender Theory

As an expansive and expanding concept, intersectionality is often challenged as too complex or not complex enough, spurring calls to move "beyond" the theory into some as yet uncharted theoretical territory. Queer theory, for instance, has in some cases situated itself as the next step for intersectionality theory, challenging how intersectionality has often been deployed towards heteronormative ends (Gamson & Moon, 2004; Johnson, 2005). However, forward theoretical and conceptual movement, if there is such a thing, will not be possible until intersectionality is thoroughly integrated into existing analyses of gender, race, and class oppression. There are several substantive questions remaining for sociologists to address through an intersectional lens.

First, we know little about the accumulation of intergenerational disadvantage from an intersectional perspective. Despite a significant amount of research of black women's experiences of inequality, from housing to the economy, there is little stratification research on intergenerational disadvantage as it accumulates to black women and their families. Research on the children of single mothers has often focused on a deficit explanatory model, but an intersectionality perspective would examine how oppression is compounded across generations. An analysis of how oppression is intersectionally cumulative is essential to how disadvantage flows across generations.

Second, intersectionality calls for a broader approach to labor market analysis, compelling us to think about the multiple ways disadvantaged individuals make labor choices in the wake of discrimination. For instance, though sex work activists have made inroads into multiple spaces, gender theories of labor should more explicitly

center sex work and its decriminalization as a central form of gender equity. Women of color and economically disadvantaged women are disproportionately affected by versions of feminism, dubbed "carceral feminisms" that encourage criminal punishments for sex work. There has not yet been enough mainstream work in the field of sociology and in sociologies of gender to account for this labor and to understand how decriminalization as a policy prescription would challenge systemic inequities.

Finally, theories of the middle class and the elite often focus on white people, with a few important exceptions (e.g., Pattillo, 1999; Lacy, 2007). However, quantitative and in-depth qualitative analyses of intersectionality among economically elite racial and ethnic minorities will reveal a great deal about how interlocking systems of oppression work across groups. "Studying up" has long been a focus in sociological research, but racial and ethnic minorities have not been universally included in this work. We know that middle class and elite racial and ethnic minorities are more economically disadvantaged than their white counterparts for a multiplicity of reasons related to familial disadvantage; a concerted effort to intersectionally engage intracategorical inequality amongst black people and other groups of color across class will further improve our understanding the nature of how interlocking systems of oppression operate and mete out disadvantage.

Sociologists will need to rigorously engage with the work of activists who are building and testing theory through ongoing engagement with the state and social institutions. Moreover, researchers must take seriously black women's everyday theorization and the work of black women intellectuals who work outside of the discipline and beyond the academy. A broad cross-section of women of color across gender and class identities are working to refine and articulate intersectional frameworks in the context of movement organizing. As it has in previous generations, this work, on the ground and on the Internet, will push intersectionality and gender theorizing forward in the academy and beyond.

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