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Am I a Black Woman or a Woman Who Is Black? A Few Thoughts on the Meaning of Intersectionality

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Introduction

On a hot 90-degree day during the summer of 2006, my six-year-old daughter looked at me and asked, "Why can boys run around without a shirt and I can't?" After I explained, or at least attempted to, society's rules and regulations, she quietly looked at me and said, "Oh! It's because I have a vagina. Well, that's not fair." About a year earlier, as she was watching a popular children's show she asked me, "Why are there no little girls that look like me on the 'WXY' show?" I am still unsure as to how to answer her on her question on the omission of race. What my daughter is questioning is how does her gender and race, and their intersection, influence how she is treated in society. It is difficult to tell an impressionable child that because of factors beyond her control, her gender and her race, she will be treated differently than little boys — black or white and little girls — particularly white. My daughter is like so many other women of color and other marginalized groups who confront this issue of their omission from so many practices, structures, and institutions of society. Many theorists not only have sought ways of discussing the issues raised by my daughter but also have articulated strategies useful in addressing these "unfair" practices. Much of this theorizing has been given the name "intersectionality."

In this essay, I try to grapple with some of the issues of intersectionality — its meaning, its value as an analytical and political tool, and its use in future research. This essay is not designed to provide answers to questions such as what intersectionality is and how we do it; as you can see, I still have not

adequately answered my daughter's questions. Instead, it should be read more as an exercise to provoke our thinking on the future of intersectionality. I start by tackling the issue of what is intersectionality and its importance as an analytical concept.

On the Meaning and Importance of Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality as an analytical tool has been recognized as valuable in the analyses of differences. Over time, the definitions of intersectionality and its use as an analytical tool have expanded. While the growing use of intersectionality is exciting and should be encouraged as part of our larger efforts aimed at decentering "normativity," we should be careful in our use of the concept. Researchers employ the term in myriad ways and oftentimes inconsistently and ambiguously. Before I delve into how I employ the term and concept, intersectionality, I first want to briefly discuss its various "meanings."

While the term *intersectionality* was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the concept has been around for some time. On September 21, 1832, Maria Stewart, a contemporary of David Walker, declared, "Methinks I heard a spiritual interrogation — 'Who shall go forward, and take of the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?' And my heart made this reply — 'If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!'" (quoted in Richardson 1987, 45). Stewart, like many of her black female contemporaries, articulated a critique of difference and challenged the functioning of race and gender, what we now call intersectionality.

In 1989, Crenshaw introduced the term to avoid the pitfalls inherent to identity politics. As argued, intersectionality "denote[s] the various way[s] in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences" (Crenshaw 1989, 139). As "originally" used, intersectionality as articulated by Stewart and Crenshaw focused on the relationship among *race, gender, and class* (for a history, see Brah and Phoenix 2004).

Both Stewart and Crenshaw, though separated by the passage of time, offer the beginnings of an analytical framework within which to understand the lives of black women. Additionally, these women propose a political framework that could prove useful for challenging many of the oppressive structures confronted by black women. It seems to me that intersectionality was used not only to discuss and understand the

positioning of black women but also as a means of liberating these women and their communities. In essence, intersectionality articulates a politics of survival for black women. In this vein, Stewart articulated a liberatory theology. Crenshaw's contribution distinguishes between what she terms structural and political intersectionality. Structural inequality focuses on the direct impact of inequalities and their intersections as experienced by individuals in society. Political intersectionality focuses on the relevance of the impact of inequalities and their intersections to political strategies. As the concept of intersectionality has advanced, at times it appears that the second component — a liberation framework — has been lost (this is discussed later).

Over time, researchers have used intersectionality to encompass “the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall 2005, 1771). The work of such researchers as Floya Anthias (2001); Avtar Brah (2002), Mary Maynard (1994), and Nira Yuval-Davis (1997), among others, has also constructed intersectionality in more general terms, thereby allowing it to be more applicable to various groups of individuals. Additionally, research has brought to the forefront various distinctions, such as systemic and constructionist interpretations of intersectionality (Prins 2006) and strategic intersectionality (Ramirez, et al. 2006).

As the definitions of intersectionality have advanced, so too have the challenges levied against the concept. For example, in her discussion of how to study the complexity of intersectionality, Leslie McCall (2005, 1779) offers what she terms an “anti-categorical critique of categorization.” In essence, she suggests that there is an artificiality of social categories, race and gender for example, and as such their intersections are indeed artificial. This seems theoretically and conceptually different from the concept as articulated by Stewart, Crenshaw, the Combahee River Collective, and other critical race and gender theorists. Critical race and gender theorists have recognized that, indeed, symbols and imagery used in the marginalization of black women are “artificial.” However, they have also recognized that the political usage of such symbols and imagery is real in the lives of women and as such have real consequences. These new insights into the conceptualization and definition of intersectionality trouble its initial conceptualization and, I believe, help us to advance the concept in ways probably not envisioned by Maria Stewart.

As an alternative to identity politics, intersectionality helps us to understand both the differences between and within groups (Crenshaw

1991). As such, intersectionality has allowed us to stop essentializing differences. Therein, in my estimation, is the value of the concept. While I am very impressed and encouraged by the development of the theorizing of intersectionality, I tend to employ intersectionality as conceptualized by Stewart and Crenshaw, among others. In my research, I aim at understanding not only the lived experiences of black women but also how they can be liberated. In “A Declaration of War: An Analysis of How the Invisibility of Black Women Makes Them Targets of the War on Drugs,” I use the concept of intersectionality to help explain the targeting of black women in the war on drugs. I look at how the social construction of poor black women makes them simultaneously invisible and hypervisible to members within their own community and to those outside of their community. By considering the social construction of these women, and its usage both within and outside of their communities, I believe that I am better able to understand and explain why there is little to minimum resistance against these policies that tend to treat black, substance-abusing, pregnant, and parenting women substantially different from white women who are also engaging in similar “illegal” behavior.

In most of my research efforts, I strive to address the impact of intersectionality on the lives of black women not only in relation to the dominant society but also in relation to their own community. Additionally, I strive to offer a political framework within which to challenge the oppressive structures of race, gender, and class in the lives of these women. In the manuscript *Telling Tales: Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy*, I analyze the policy elite’s use of negative images of black womanhood, and I also offer four strategies that could prove useful in challenging the role of raced and gendered images in the policymaking process.

On Doing Intersectionality

While intersectionality has proven to be a useful concept in my understanding of difference, I confront many challenges, covering a wide spectrum, in my attempts to use it as an analytical tool. They include a) the challenge of compartmentalizing the personal, the political, and my intellectual curiosity; and b) the challenge of telling the story of a marginalized community — in my research this is primarily

black women — in terms of what method and methodological approach would be useful.

Compartmentalizing the Personal, the Political, and My Intellectual Curiosity

I was drawn to the concept of intersectionality before I even knew what it was. Without knowing anything about intersectionality (forgive me, I was an economics major), I tackled this issue back in 1989 when I wrote a paper on the lives of three black women and their experiences with poverty. The catalyst for this research project was the seeming comfort level among some of my professors in their use of rather disparaging images of black womanhood. My intellectual curiosity, combined with my sociopolitical location as a black woman, led me to question a) the prevalence and the level of comfort of the use of negative views of (poor) black women and b) what I could do to challenge these negative views. As I developed as a scholar, I was both elated and frustrated to be able to grapple with these types of questions. The elation came as I was able to access theories on the functioning of the intersection of race and gender. My frustrations result from the fact that intersectionality is something I live every day. As I confront many of the challenges faced by black women and other women of color, it is not an academic exercise that I can simply leave behind when I turn off my computer. Intersectionality is not another analytical tool for me to pull out of my methods bag of tricks. For example, my current research on AIDS and Africana women has been painfully difficult. What makes it so is that I am talking about real women, some of whom I know, who are dying. I also recognize that had it not been for my access to certain resources, I too could easily have been one of these women I try so hard to write about and to serve as a champion for their cause. Thus, the lines between the personal and the intellectual pursuits are often blurred.

Beyond the struggles of confronting difficulties when the personal becomes your research, I also confront the challenge of doing intersectionality. Particularly, I am challenged by how to honestly tell the story of marginalized black women.

Telling the Story of Black Women

How do we do intersectionality so that we are able to show how the different systems of oppression converge? This question is one that plagues me. One recurrent criticism of intersectionality is that it lacks any associated

methods. Researchers have employed various approaches in their attempts to challenge the multiple forms of oppressions experienced by some marginalized groups. They have employed both quantitative and qualitative methods in hopes of better understanding the experiences of the various groups that they study. I am not interested in having a discussion as to whether quantitative or qualitative methods are better suited for intersectionality research. My concern is in whether or not we are adequately measuring what we claim to be measuring.

How can we “measure” experiences of intersectionality? There is a plurality of ways in which intersectionality is employed in research. Some researchers have relied on survey data (Ramirez, et al., 2006; Simien 2006) and some have used content analysis (Hancock 2004), while others have employed an autobiographical/biographical approach (Brah and Phoenix 2004; hooks 1994; Lewis 1985). In-depth interviews have also been relied upon in explorations on intersectionality (Simpson 2002; Smooth 2001), while others have employed the use of narratives (Arendt [1958] 1998), or even discourse analysis (Jordan-Zachery n.d.).

According to Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, 205), “the point of intersectional analysis is not to find ‘several identities under one.’ ... This would reinscribe the fragmented, additive model of oppression and essentialize specific social identities.” This is what concerns me with some of the current research on intersectionality. Although we have tried to stay away from the “additive” approach to an understanding of intersectionality, our methods and methodologies sometimes bring us right back to this approach. Thus, we have research conclusions that suggest that “race trumps gender.” Andrea Simpson (2007, 152) cautions us on our reliance on certain types of methodologies in her assertion that

[i]n our efforts to understand gendered perspectives on political agendas and strategies, many social science researchers have relied on survey data, much of which is inadequate for answering these questions. We know that it is inadequate because issue cleavages among Black Americans are difficult to locate using surveys. Gender differences also elude us in most studies.

Part of the limitations of employing the more commonly used methodologies is that they fail to provide any contextual background, which sometimes results in the essentialization of differences. We have to be careful in our analyses so that we do not make abstract decisions as to what is the “proper” behavior of a group member.

Patricia Hill Collins (2001, 206–19) suggests that there are four criteria that appear to characterize an alternative epistemology employed by

African Americans: 1) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, 2) the centrality of personal expressiveness, 3) the ethic of personal accountability; and 4) concrete experiences as criteria of meaning. I attempt to employ these four elements in my research on intersectionality. Recently, I have relied on discourse analysis. Again, this is not to suggest that discourse analysis is superior to any other method. In my estimation, it provides me with an adequate means of engaging the four criteria referenced by Collins. In *Telling Tales*, I employ a discursive approach to the analysis of the functioning of images of black womanhood in the policymaking process. A discursive policy approach, while recognizing the role of interests and institutions, for example, takes a more fundamental view of language and discourse in structuring social action. According to Frank Fischer (2003, 41):

The approach sees language and discourses as having a more underlying role in structuring social action. In this view, the very terrain of social and political action is constructed and understood in terms of the languages used to portray and talk about political phenomenon. Discourse here is grounded in the awareness that language does not simply offer a mirror or picture of the world, but instead, profoundly shapes our view of it in the first place.

Discourse analysis allows me to challenge the “truth” as accepted by many concerning what it means to be a black woman.

Looking to the Future

Others have made a number of more than useful suggestions on “how to do intersectionality.” I offer my humble suggestions to this discussion. As we design our research projects, we need to make very clear our definitions and conceptualizations as there are implications for how we “do” intersectionality.

On the Meaning of “Interlocking”

Consider the term *interlocking*. Crenshaw (1991, 1245) employed “interlocking” or “intersection” to highlight how different forms of oppression, race and gender “converge.” This was an alternative to the view that looks at how multiple forms of oppression modify one another. I find the notion of interlocking systems of oppression somewhat troubling. When a system interlocks, it suggests that the various systems can eventually be separated. During my presentation at the American

Political Science Association 2006 meeting, I started the presentation by asking, “When you look at me, what do you see: a woman who is black or a black woman?” In my eyes, this is a moot question since my blackness cannot be separated from my womaness. In fact, I am not sure if I want them to be separated. What I want is for individuals not to use my social location to justify punishing me or omitting me from the structures and practices of society. Sometimes my identity is like a “marble” cake, in that my blackness is mixed intricately with my womaness and therefore cannot be separated or unlocked. In some of our analyses, we try to isolate and desegregate race and gender. How can we isolate and desegregate elements that are so intricately mixed? Who gets to define how these multiple identities should be “isolated”? These are the types of questions I believe we have to address as we continue to make advancements in our understanding of intersectionality.

Methodological Concerns

Not only must we be clear about our concepts, but we also have to pay attention to how we attempt to measure intersectionality. I suggest that analyses should indeed be contextual. The context of the lived experience of black women, or any other marginalized group, provides us with a deeper understanding of both structural and political intersectionality. It allows us to better understand how these individuals experience intersectionality. Collins suggests that we employ dialogue as a means of assessing knowledge, and that we use concrete experiences as criteria of meaning. We have to stretch our imaginations and be creative in our approaches to understanding intersectionality — this could involve field research, in-depth interviews, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis, among other approaches. I also encourage us to be interdisciplinary in our study of intersectionality (see Alexander-Floyd 2004; Smooth 2006).

Doing Intersectionality for What Purpose?

In some of our current work, intersectionality is employed more as a descriptive analytical tool that talks about how black women, women of color, or other marginalized groups tend to behave. While indeed this is an important element of intersectionality, focusing only on the descriptive analysis ignores the liberation/political framework of intersectionality. In its earlier conceptualizations, intersectionality was also about the issue of liberation. As we employ intersectionality as an analytical tool, we have to be very specific in articulating for what

purposes(s) we are using it. On the surface, it would appear that any work involving intersectionality, since it is a challenge to existing power structures, is inherently an act of liberation. Research that simply describes how marginalized groups operate or function in the face of their oppression can be helpful in the formulation of a political framework of liberation. However, when such research stands alone, it is not designed to liberate marginalized groups.

Conclusion

A number of researchers are engaged in some exciting new works (this is not a list of all of these works, but simply an example of such works) that address many of the challenges/issues I raised in this essay. Rita Dhamoon (2006), using a theory of discursive accountability, provides us with an approach for challenging “Othering” (a result of intersectionality), not only as it relates to the dominant groups but also as it relates to behavior within groups. Work by Nikol Alexander-Floyd, Wendy Smooth, and this author provide possible methodologies useful in our analyses of intersectionality. The APSA 2006 panel, “Doing Intersectionality Research: Conceptual and Practical Issues,” exposed us to a number of researchers who are engaged in some cutting-edge research on intersectionality. Maria Stewart posed the question on the functioning of intersectionality some centuries ago; I believe that she would be excited, but probably a tad dismayed because her question has not been fully answered, by the amount of research dedicated to this issue. I am hopeful that with the intense interest in intersectionality, someone will help me to provide an answer to my daughter’s questions in the not-so-distant future.

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