



Introduction

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One could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far.

—LESLIE MCCALL

Race, class, and gender were once seen as separate issues for members of both dominant and subordinate groups. Now, scholars generally agree that these issues (as well as ethnicity, nation, age, and sexuality)—and how they intersect—are integral to individuals' positions in the social world (Andersen and Collins 2006; Arrighi 2001; Collins 1993; Cyrus 1999; Ore 2000; Rothman 2005; Weber 2004). These intersections are referred to as the race-class-gender matrix, the intersectional paradigm, interlocking systems of oppression, multiple axes of inequality, the intersection, and intersectionality; like most authors, we use the term “intersectional approach” to refer to the research application of these concepts. Scholars using the intersectional approach will *socially locate* individuals in the context of their “real lives” (Weber 2004, 123). They also examine how both formal and informal systems of power are deployed, maintained, and reinforced through axes of race, class, and gender (Collins 1998; Weber 2006). Research using the intersectional approach broadly extends across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that wherever one looks in women's and gender studies and across much of the academy, intersectionality is being theorized, applied, or debated (see Anthias 2002; Avtar and Phoenix 2004; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Fine et al. 2004; Hancock 2007; Landry 2007; Mann and Grimes 2001; McCall 2005; Schultz and Mullings 2004; Simien 2006; Weber 2004; Yuval-Davis 2006).

We are feminist scholars whose teaching and research within women's and gender studies has been significantly influenced by the last two decades of scholarship on race, class, gender, and sexuality. Our interest in exploring

the complexity of women's lives spurred each of us to pursue intersectionality through our respective disciplines (Michele in political science and Kathleen in sociology) and through our interdisciplinary training in women's studies. Once we reached the dissertation stage of graduate school, we each sought to develop intersectional approaches in our work.

During the early 1990s, political science as a discipline was just beginning to acknowledge the importance of gender and race as separate categories (or important variables) to include in understanding political life. Few studies attended to the political experiences of women of color in the United States; there were even fewer that attempted intersectional analyses on any level. I (Michele) built on the insights of intersectionality to look at how stigmatized women of color (former sex workers and substance users) empowered themselves as political agents after contracting HIV (Berger 2004). In this applied work, I analyzed the various ways the women demonstrate intersectionality by focusing on how they acquired the disease, why and how their political participation was different than other stigmatized groups with HIV/AIDS, and the nature of their participation. Acknowledging and working through the complex social locations that these women experienced helped me build a richer conceptual picture of them as political actors in *Workable Sisterhood*.

My (Kathleen's) interest in intersectionality blossomed in graduate courses in both sociology and women's studies. I was particularly struck by the insights of Deborah King's article on double consciousness (King 1988) and Patricia Hill Collins's pivotal *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). As I developed my research interests most centrally in gender and work, I utilized the work of Teresa L. Amott and Julie A. Matthaei's *Race, Gender, and Work* (1991) to examine pay inequities and comparable-worth initiatives in light of intersectionality. Their early conceptual framework on intersectionality as "interconnected historical processes" (11) later informed my dissertation field research, which focused on the nexus of gender, sexuality, and labor in the sex industry. My qualitative study examined the "everyday (work) experiences" (D. Smith 1989) of women engaging in escort and telephone sex work. I also explore these issues in "Commercial Telephone Sex: Fantasy and Reality" (with Grant Rich), a chapter in Ronald Weitzer's *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry* (second edition forthcoming, 2009).

Intersectionality and the intersectional approach are strong components of our research endeavors, and they play prominent roles in our teaching, as they do with many of our peers. In fact, the teaching of intersectionality and an intersectional approach dominates the undergraduate curricula of the

majority of women's studies units. Despite this, we have struggled to find materials for our classes that both help students comprehend intersectionality and also deepen their understanding of its applied uses. Although the field has benefited from the proliferation of several important anthologies over the last two decades, these have not investigated the role of intersectionality in shaping women's studies (and, to a lesser extent, gender studies; see Andersen and Collins 2006; Chow, Wilkerson, and Zinn 1996; Kesselman, McNair, and Schniedewind 2008; Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2007; Rosenblum and Travis 1996; Rothenberg 2007; Segal and Martinez 2007).

Our book takes stock of, celebrates, and documents the "coming of age" of this transformative paradigm. *The Intersectional Approach* guides both new and established researchers to a critical reflection about the broad adoption of intersectionality in women's studies and the academy more broadly. We offer this book in hopes of deepening the discussion among professors and students about what intersectionality and the intersectional approach offer us in scholarship, teaching, and activism. This is an opportune time for reflection on the intersectional approach as we believe that it increasingly constitutes a new "social literacy" for scholars in women's and gender studies for both teaching and knowledge production (Berger 2002). Pausing to take the time to reflect on how one deploys intersectional research is useful and necessary, as Lynn Weber (2004) suggests when she laments that researchers "are given little guidance about what constitutes a race, class, gender, and sexuality analysis of social reality" (122). Scholars must continually grapple with the research implications of intersectionality and the intersectional approach (see Howard and Allen 2000; McCall 2005; Weber 2004, 2006). We hope this book begins to answer the questions raised by Weber (2004) and Leslie McCall (2005) about the *how* of intersectional research and facilitates the next generation of scholarly work on and conversations about this innovative site of inquiry.

EVOLUTION OF THE INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH IN WOMEN'S AND GENDER STUDIES

Women's studies is an interdisciplinary site of inquiry that has become well institutionalized in academe over the past thirty years, challenging traditional disciplines' understanding of women from a critical perspective. Gender studies takes up the project of looking at sex, gender, and sexuality as its overarching concerns (Auslander 1997). In just two decades, intersectionality has widely transformed notions of both theory and research (McCall 2005; Schultz and Mullings 2004; Weber 2000, 2004; Yuval-Davis 2006).

As previously noted, in women's studies, intersectionality is a defining theoretical rubric, as evidenced through scholarship production and curriculum development at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Howard and Allen 2000; McCall 2005; Weber 2004). As Weber (2004) notes, it is women's studies that has made a persuasive argument about the significance of race, class, gender, and (more recently) sexuality to the academy. Women's studies was one of the primary disciplines that encouraged thinking through the salience of these issues, as reflected in the publication of anthologies and journals from the 1970s to the 1990s (Weber 2004). Indeed, for the past thirty years, women's studies has been in a uniquely strategic position to utilize the importance of intersectionality. Because of its "critical stance toward knowledge in the traditional disciplines, its interdisciplinary approach, and its orientation toward social change and social betterment, women's studies has been most open to self-critique for its exclusion of multiply oppressed groups, such as women of color, working-class women, and lesbians" (Weber 2004, 121).

Intersectionality of experience in society has been a driving theoretical focus, beginning specifically with women-of-color-theorists trying to create relevant theory about the concept of multiple oppressions (see Davis 1981, 1989; Dill 1979, 1983; Giddings 1984; hooks 1981, 1984, 1989; King 1988; Lorde 1984; Mohanty 1988; B. Smith 1983). We can trace the salience of looking at more than gender as an organizing principle for understanding the social world by the explosion of writing and activism that placed black women and women of color at the center of feminist theory and research inquiry clustered in anthologies and some single-authored texts (Weber 2004, 2006).

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal theorist, wrote two groundbreaking articles that sought to provide a place to theorize about the law's inability to make visible black women's experience of discrimination, which was intersectional (1989, 1991). Although Crenshaw is most often identified as the person who coined the term "intersectionality," there are other scholars who, along with Crenshaw, contributed to and advocated for thinking critically about race, class, and gender.

Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Spelman's pivotal book *Inessential Woman* (1988) provides another nuanced and important voice to the debates about mainstream feminist theory's inability (and often unwillingness) to grapple with the complexity of multiple identity categories. Taking on prominent feminist thinkers by carefully examining the tendency to parcel out race and class in order to talk about a "universal woman," Spelman exposes the

sophisticated contortions that had come to define much of contemporary feminist theory and activism:

Thus the phrase “as a woman” is the Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism. Whatever else one does, or tries to do, when one is thinking of a woman “as a woman,” one is performing a feat of abstraction as sophisticated as the one Plato asks us to perform in thinking of a person not as her body but as her soul. What is it to think of a woman “as a woman”? Is it really possible for us to think of a woman’s “womanness” in abstraction from the fact that she is a particular woman, whether she is a middle-class black woman living in North America in the twentieth century or a poor white woman living in France in the seventeenth century? (13)

She also highlights the limitations of additive analyses of situating racism and sexism. She argues,

If sexism and racism must be seen as interlocking, and not as piled upon each other, serious problems arise for the claim that one of them is more fundamental than the other. . . . One meaning of the claim that sexism is more fundamental than racism is that sexism causes racism: racism would not exist if sexism did not, while sexism could and would continue to exist in the absence of racism. In this connection, racism is sometimes seen as something that is both derivative from sexism and in the service of it: racism keeps women from uniting in alliance against sexism. (123)

According to Spelman,

In an additive analysis of sexism and racism, all women are oppressed by sexism; some women are further oppressed by racism. Such an analysis distorts black women’s experiences of oppression by failing to note important differences between the contexts in which black women and white women experience sexism. The additive analysis also suggests that a woman’s racial identity can be “subtracted” from her combined sexual and racial identity: “We are all women.” But this does not leave room for the fact that different women may look to different forms of liberation just because they are white or black women, rich or poor women, Catholic or Jewish women. (125)

Dispelling the mantra of “unified womanhood” or “sexism” as the primary

explanatory force and arguing against additive analyses of race and class, Spelman enlarged the scope of interdisciplinary feminist inquiry.

We hope that those new to the field also consider the rich insights of Glenn (1985, 1992), Chow (1987), Boris (1994), and others who helped advance nuanced arguments throughout the terrain of feminist theorizing. The newly coined term “intersectionality” proliferated widely in women’s studies and merged with the work on “race, class, and gender” in women’s studies and increasingly in other disciplines. Thus, scholars who are interested in these issues will often find two strands of work that overlap and use similar terms.

Throughout the 1990s, researchers began to build on the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality were dominant factors that shape people’s experiences and complex social relations (Zinn and Dill 1994, 1996). Scholars suggested that these intersections are hierarchical, mutually reinforcing, and simultaneous (Collins 2000). The “outsider” experience as a place to theorize and make meaning as a scholar and subject became highly valued (Weber 2004).

Through the prism of intersectional analyses, scholars over the past two decades have reexamined central tenets in feminist theory, including experiences of HIV/AIDS (Berger 2004), labor (Glenn 2002; Higginbotham and Romero 1997), class identity (Bettie 2000), rape (V. Smith 1997), adolescent female identity (Bettie 2002), race, age, and education (Weis and Fine 2000), domestic violence (Richie 1996; Yoshihama 1999), work and organizations (Acker 2006), colonialism (McClintock 1995), and community organizing (Naples 1998). Accordingly, a fledgling theory of intersectionality has developed and continues to influence feminist thinking in particular (see Andersen 2008; McCall 2005; Weber 2004). Feminist and critical gender scholars are utilizing intersectionality to foster new forms of inquiry that challenge disciplinary boundaries (for philosophy, see Zack, Shrager, and Sartwell 1998; for political science, see Bedolla 2007; Cohen 1999, 2001; Hancock 2007a, 2007b; Jordan-Zachery 2007; Simien 2006, 2007; Smooth 2006; Weldon 2006; and White 2007; for psychology, see Bowleg 2008 and Cole 2008; for sociology, see Brewer 1994 and McCall 2001; for public health, see Weber 2006; for sociolegal studies, see Grabham et al. 2008; for geography, see Valentine 2007). We assert that feminist intersectional theories that have steadily evolved are *applied* (and operationalized) through an intersectional approach. The breadth of this continued interest suggests robust inquiry and research, and guarantees at least another decade of intersectional research in both feminist and critical gender scholarship in traditional disciplines and

in women's studies. We hope that *The Intersectional Approach* will encourage and support more work in several disciplines and fields not well represented in this volume.

SOCIAL LITERACY

Women's studies occupies a paradoxical position as a discipline. It is increasingly a highly institutionalized enterprise while simultaneously sustaining an intensely critical period, being evaluated by insiders for its efforts, achievements, and failures as a critical sphere of knowledge production, and even with some critics calling for its demise (see Brown 1997; Scott 2008; Weigman 2002). While the intersectional approach does not encompass all areas of research or teaching in women's studies, it is an important and recognizable conceptual apparatus that bonds together many different endeavors in the field. We suggest that the diverse theories (and methodological approaches) that contribute to the intersectional approach represent a new social literacy for scholars in women's and gender studies (Berger 2002). Thus, to be an informed social theorist or methodologist in many fields of scholarly inquiry, but most especially in women's studies, one must grapple with the implications of intersectionality. Intersectionality as social literacy is evident through many aspects of the field: its rigorous emphasis in curriculum formation (undergraduate and graduate), the growing numbers of journals that pursue special topics devoted to intersectionality or some disciplinary manifestation of it (e.g., *Gender and Society* 2008; *Sex Roles* 2008), and specialized conferences (see McCall 2005).

Allen and Kitch (1998) identified the need for an interdisciplinary research mission in women's studies that would provide collaborative opportunities for scholars and move the field from a multidisciplinary perspective (where several disciplines overlap) to the synthesis of work of interdisciplinary ideas (that translate into new epistemologies). They note several examples of "scholarly breakthroughs" that have traveled from scholarship in women's studies and from feminist scholars working in traditional disciplines to many disciplinary fields, including Gayle Rubin's "traffic in women," Carole Pateman's "sexual contract," and Patricia Hill Collins's "outsider within" (Allen and Kitch 1998, 285). We argue that the intersectional approach (as evolving from intersectionality) is a disciplinary "border-crossing" concept produced through feminist theorizing and activism about the social relations of power. Conceptualizing the intersectional approach as a border-crossing concept suggests an interdisciplinary rigor that helps challenge traditional ways of framing research inquiries, questions, and methods.