

What is Just?

Intersectionality

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Intersectionality sounds like a fancy word, but it is really just a framework through which to understand and address discrimination and oppression on the basis of race, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender, class, and other characteristics and social categories. This framework understands human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social identities and experiences. The interaction of these identities occurs within a system of intertwined and overlapping power structures such as laws, policies, governmental, political, and religious organizations, and the media (Hankivsky, 2014, p. 2). It was coined by legal scholar Kimberle Williams Crenshaw in 1989, but the ideas that inform this framework can be traced back to many figures in race, queer, and feminist theory. For example, César Chávez recognized that both ethnicity and socio-economic class could be sites of oppression, while Angela Davis often pointed out that racial justice will never be realized for the masses unless we also address sexism and income inequality.

The intersectional framework is based in part upon the idea that power is relational. This idea comes from the French philosopher, psychologist, and historian Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Foucault's entire philosophical system is centered around his notion of power and its affects on institutional structures, epistemology, and thinking. There are two kinds of power for Foucault. Productive power generates and creates the very concepts that are then enforced by juridical power controls. Social identities like sex and sexuality are the result of productive power rather than a biological essence or a simple social construction. For example, the idea that heterosexuality is the norm is the result of productive power. This concept is then regulated and maintained by juridical power structures, such as laws permitting discrimination on the basis of sexual identity. Foucault's archaeological approach to history reveals that history is not linear or progressive but rather discontinuous, broken up into distinct epochs. According to Foucault, concepts that we take to be facts are actually epoch-specific. Thus, for Foucault power is not wielded by individuals or even institutions but is rather an assembling of forces that underlie the relationships between individuals and institutions. In other words, power is not a possession but exists only insofar as it is exercised; it is not something an individual or entity has but something wielded. In fact, for Foucault, power produces institutions, belief systems, individuals, and concepts, including the social concepts that are contemplated by the intersectional framework.

These social identities are also shaped, reproduced, and transformed by our communities, culture, and discourses. Yet they are not simply social categories. While distinctions between races, ethnicities, genders, and socio-economic classes are informed and reinforced by social aims and prejudices such as homophobia and racism, these concepts nevertheless play into the negotiation of self-identity. Each of us is a radically particular individual whose thoughts, feelings, actions, goals, and experiences nevertheless reflect and enact the personal gender, class, racial, sexual, and ethnic categories with which we identify. However, we do not all negotiate our racial, ethnic, gender, and class identities in the same way. For example, one can experience both privilege and oppression at the same time. As Audre Lorde notes, this means recognizing and appreciating not only the differences between individuals but, also, the different identities and communities we each hold within ourselves. Dominant discourses about gender, race, ethnicity, class, and other social categories determine identity, but we are also each a particular individual with a unique history. If we negate any aspect of our self (for example, if we only think about gender but not our racial identity), we become fragmented. To think philosophically about social identity, we must be prepared not only to reflect upon gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class but, also, to consider narratives and theoretical perspectives that might challenge some of our most cherished beliefs about identity and culture. As Cornell West notes in *Race Matters*, being oppressed or privileged does not in and of itself amount to an understanding of oppression and privilege, any more than occupying a position of privilege blinds one to discrimination (p. 96).

References

Hankivsky, O. (2014). *Intersectionality 101*. Canada: The Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, SFU. Retrieved from http://www.sfu.ca/iirp/documents/resources/101_Final.pdf.

West, C. (1993). *Race matters*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.