



QUICK GUIDE: INTERSECTIONALITY

PROBLEM: The aim of intersectionality is to draw attention to the diversity of individual experiences of discrimination that result from the simultaneous interaction of various identity characteristics. A one-sided analysis of experiences of discrimination that only considers certain characteristics such as gender or origin in isolation fails to recognize experiences of discrimination that result from the interaction of several categories and go beyond the sum of the individual categories (e.g., in the case of Black women).

This quick guide is intended to provide a brief introduction to intersectionality and help you learn to think about experiences of discrimination in a multifaceted way.

1 KEY ASPECTS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

GOAL OF INTERSECTIONALITY. In addition to gender and origin, other categories that can lead to marginalization of a person—such as class, sexuality, religion, or disability—are also important for analyzing and describing personal experiences of discrimination. The aim of intersectionality is to avoid one-sided analyses of discrimination, as this leads to the marginalization of those group members who experience multiple or intersectional discrimination. Despite her chosen focus on gender and race, Crenshaw points out the need to include other categories (see Crenshaw 1991). In terms of analyzing individual experiences of discrimination, this means not understanding them as the sum of many different experiences based on many different categories, but rather incorporating all possible categories into our thinking from the outset (see Crenshaw 1989).

A WIN FOR FEMINISM. The theory not only shows that feminism that addresses the problems of “women” or the oppression of ‘women’ by “men” is insufficient, but also offers important criticism of the exclusivity of white feminism. In its pursuit of universal sisterhood, white feminism failed to recognize these individual differences, especially the realities of life for BIPoC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color). This, in turn, resulted in the invisibility of a multitude of feminist voices. Placing these experiences on the feminist agenda not only ensures the visibility of marginalized individuals. Furthermore, the theory provides scholars and individuals with a voice and the appropriate tools to articulate these forms of oppression (see Cho, Crenshaw & McCall 2013; McCall 2005; Nash 2008).

2 HISTORISCHER URSPRUNG DER INTERSEKTIONALITÄT

ORIGIN OF THE TERM. The concept of intersectionality was developed by US lawyer Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. She first used the term in her 1989 article “Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique” to describe the experiences of discrimination faced by Black women. She refers in particular to the discriminatory employment situation that arises for Black women from the inadequacy of anti-discrimination laws. According to Crenshaw, Black women are protected neither by feminist efforts nor by anti-racism laws. Both types of legislation refer to only one category, namely gender or race. However, the experience of discrimination faced by Black women is shaped by the intersection of these two categories: they are not “simply” women or “simply” Black, but Black women. This places them at the extreme margins of both groups:

“The court’s refusal in *DeGraffenreid* to acknowledge that Black women encounter combined race and sex discrimination implies that the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by *white women’s and Black men’s experiences*.” (Crenshaw 1989: 143, emphasis added)



INTERSECTIONALITY BEFORE CRENSHAW. It is important to emphasize here that black feminists before Crenshaw had already attempted to address the intersectional discrimination faced by black women in theory (Springer 2001: 156). This can be seen, for example, in black feminist manifestos from the second wave of feminism and in some earlier works by black feminists. For example, Sojourner Truth asked the important question “Ain't I a woman?” in a speech as early as 1851, and Angela Davis discusses the problem of “triple jeopardy” in her 1981 work *Women, Race and Class* (Davis 1981: 96).

German scholar Natasha A. Kelly has compiled translations of these seminal texts in the volume *Black Feminism* (2019).

3 CRITICISMS

- In her work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler criticizes the inadequacy of intersectionality in describing complex identities. She writes:

“The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed “etc.” at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete.” (Butler 1990: 182)

- Furthermore, intersectionality tools are often criticized as being “unspecific.” This is evident in debates about the nature of intersectionality (approach/theory, research paradigm, social education, idea, or field of research?) (see Hancock 2016) and the lack of methodological clarity (see McCall 2005). Furthermore, this uncertainty leads to a popular scientific application of the theory and, in this case, possibly to the (unintended) reproduction of hegemonic power structures (see Hancock 2016).

“The ramifications of using a reductive version of intersectionality to criticize a celebrity, or the 566,000 hits a recent Google keyword “intersectionality” search generated, however, produce a third set of questions regarding the aspects and ambivalences of intersectionality’s current institutionalization that are vitally relevant to this book. Is intersectionality simply the latest feminist buzzword, destined to go the way of “No Means No[”,] ubiquitous in its familiarity but devoid of tangible political impact?” (Hancock 2016: 7).

- Intersectionality is also criticized for portraying Black women as the prototypical intersectional subjects, as the theory is unable to explain the coexistence of privilege and oppression at the individual level: „In painting black women [...] as wholly oppressed and marginalized, intersectional theory can not attend to variations within black women's experiences that afford some black women greater privilege, autonomy, and freedom“ (Nash 2008: 12).

Intersectional analyses and ways of thinking fundamentally allow for the inclusion of all experiences of discrimination (including those not previously represented) (see Hancock 2016). As the points of criticism show, this theoretical and methodological openness gives rise to new challenges. Nevertheless, intersectionality has continued to develop steadily over the years and has found answers to some of these questions (see Cho, Crenshaw & McCall 2013; Hancock 2016; Nash 2008).



REFERENCE LIST

- BUTLER, JUDITH (1999).** Gender Trouble. New York, Routledge, 2. Auflage.
- CRENSHAW, KIMBERLÉ (1989).** „Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”. In: *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, No. 1, p. 139-167.
- CRENSHAW, KIMBERLÉ (1991).** „Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”. In: *Stanford Law Review*, Heft 43, No. 6, p. 1241-1299. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.
- CHO, SUMI/CRENSHAW, KIMBERLÉ & MCCALL, LESLIE (2013).** „Towards a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis”. In: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Heft 38, No. 4, p. 785-810. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>.
- HANCOCK, ANGE-MARIE (2016).** Intersectionality: An Intersectional History. New York, Oxford University Press.
- KELLY, NATASHA A. (2019).** Schwarzer Feminismus. Grundlagentexte. Münster, Unrast Verlag.
- MCCALL, LESLIE (2005).** „The Complexity of Intersectionality”. In: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Heft 30, No. 3, p. 1772-1800. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/426800>.
- NASH, JENNIFER C. (2008).** “Re-Thinking Intersectionality”. In: *Feminist Review*, Heft 89, p. 1-15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.4>.
- SPRINGER, KIMBERLY (2001).** „The Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations”. In: *Meridians*, Heft 1, No. 2, p. 155-191.