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Intersectionality as a Normative and Empirical Paradigm

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In the 10 years that I have conducted intersectional research, my views have changed significantly in terms of how I conceptualize the subspecialization. Originally I thought of intersectionality as a content-based specialization that emphasized the subjectivity of women who reside at the intersections of race-, gender-, class-, and sexual orientation–based marginalizations (and other categories of difference). Thinking of it in this way, with a focus on content, follows the logic of much groundbreaking work in women's studies and women and politics scholarship. The primary pursuit of this focus is inclusion – incorporating previously ignored and excluded populations into preexisting frameworks to broaden our knowledge base regarding traditional questions of political science. For example, examining gender differences in voting behavior, party identification, candidate recruitment, and social movements has contributed critical knowledge to the discipline of political science.

In a very similar way, questions about black women's feminist opinions (Simien 2004), Latinas' participation in social movements (Montoya, Hardy Fanta, and Garcia 2000), and Native American women's struggle for equal rights in tribal politics (Prindeville 2004) are all contributing valuable knowledge to political science and other disciplines. Such work on specific populations moves beyond a singular emphasis on race-based OR gender-based OR sexual orientation–based stratification. Intersectional research has long focused on expanding what is considered relevant to women as a group facing diversity within and significant political challenges without.

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As these citations suggest, this kind of work has taken place in multiple locations simultaneously, often unbeknownst to intersectional scholars immersed in their study of a specific intersectional group. This immersion explains why some scholars claim an exclusive origin for intersectionality in the specific intersectional group they study. Similar to the political subjectivity of the women they study, the origins of intersectionality are multiple and intersecting. A comprehensive intellectual history of intersectionality research has yet to be published, with two significant ramifications that affect scholars seeking to conduct intersectional research and those seeking to understand the intellectual contributions of intersectionality.

First, there is a significant amount of semantic slippage — Chicana studies, black feminist studies, and Asian American women's studies are often all assumed to fall entirely within the rubric of intersectionality research, when in fact intersectionality research and feminism (of any variant) in particular are not synonymous terms. The two approaches have numerous sympathies, of course, but the process of claiming intersectionality in the name of black women writers, Asian American female elected officials, or Latin American women's movements obscures the very richness of the content – the multivocality for which intersectionality is known. Moreover, it ignores the ways in which intersectionality has evolved beyond a content specialization.

Second, inattention to a comprehensive intellectual history of intersectionality research masks the ways in which intersectionality 1) can answer new questions as yet unanswerable with traditional models and 2) can generate strategies for political change that incorporate all of us as political beings, not simply a subset of the population discussed in a single comparative case study. I have therefore recently gravitated toward a position claiming that intersectionality is a normative and empirical research paradigm (Hancock 2007; see also McCall 2005), rather than a content specialization.

My point with this claim is not to discredit or ignore the 20+ years of intersectional work that continues to produce a wealth of rich, deeply nuanced examinations of groups and populations living at the marginalized crossroads of various categories of difference. I think we are now in a position to start moving toward conversations at a broader level of analysis, not because we have said everything there is to say about these groups and populations — which have been primarily but not exclusively women of color — but because intersectionality can also more comprehensively answer questions of distributive justice, power,

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and government function that are central to the discipline of political science and central to our world. This capability is not limited to the inclusion-oriented content specialization for which intersectional scholarship is well known. In fact, the prospects are far brighter.

Intersectionality also addresses contemporary questions that increasingly demonstrate the flaws of a race-only or gender-only approach. In the American political context, given the approach of a 2008 Democratic presidential primary season that features similarly viable white female and black male candidates, it is important to ask how we can avoid the kinds of divisive battles that occurred during the nineteenth-century quest for the vote. At that time, prominent women's rights supporter Frederick Douglass broke from white female suffragettes as each side attempted to lobby the white male Congress to choose either blacks (meaning men) or women (meaning white women) for an expansion of suffrage.

Already, political scientists are being called upon to answer such journalistic inquiries as "Is America more racist or sexist in the twenty-first century?" following the entry of Senators Barack Obama (D-IL) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY) into the 2008 presidential race. This kind of unitary question invites what Elizabeth Martinez (1993) terms the "Oppression Olympics," where groups compete, rather than cooperate, in a struggle to obtain access to the fringes of opportunities and resources.

Yet Obama and Clinton are both "mainstream" candidates in the sense that they are well funded and supported by major players in one of the two major political parties. Sliding into the Oppression Olympics would not only divide the party during primary season but also hurt either of them in a general election, for painting either as solely "black" or "female" limits their perceived substantive representational power, a critical intangible quality for election to national office. If we think of intersectionality as a normative and empirical research paradigm, we can develop both an analysis of the American political context and electoral strategies that avoid getting mired in competitions for the mantle of "most oppressed." Without such a paradigm, effective building of egalitarian coalitions and social movements toward systemic change are stunted.

My comments are thus focused first on conceptual clarity and then on the primary bang we get for our buck with intersectionality. As I noted, there is a great deal of slippage in the use of the terms "intersectionality," "feminism," "multiplicative identities," and what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) calls a "matrix of domination." I define intersectionality as a body

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of normative theory and empirical research that proceeds under six key assumptions:

1. More than one category of difference (e.g., race, gender, class) plays a role in examinations of complex political problems and processes such as persistent poverty, civil war, human rights abuses and democratic transitions.
2. While these various categories of difference should be equally attended to in research, the relationship among the categories is an open empirical question. For example, while race and gender are commonly analyzed together, to assume that race and gender play equal roles in all political contexts, or to assume that they are mutually independent variables that can be added together to comprehensively analyze a research question, violates the normative claim of intersectionality that intersections of these categories are more than the sum of their parts.
3. Categories of difference are conceptualized as dynamic productions of individual and institutional factors. Such categories are simultaneously contested and enforced at the individual and institutional levels of analysis. Intersectionality research demands attentiveness to these facts.
4. Each category of difference has within-group diversity that sheds light on the way we think of groups as actors in politics and on the potential outcomes of any particular political intervention.
5. An intersectional research project examines categories at multiple levels of analyses — not simply by adding together mutually exclusive analyses of the individual and institutional levels but by means of an integrative analysis of the interaction between the individual and institutional levels of the research question.
6. Intersectionality's existence as a normative and empirical paradigm requires attention to both empirical and theoretical aspects of the research question. The conventional wisdom among intersectionality scholars considers multiple methods necessary and sufficient.

By articulating these six underlying assumptions of intersectionality research, I do not mean to imply that other paradigms do not embrace one or more of these principles. However, intersectionality is unique in its focus on all six and its roots in women of color as a content specialization.

What if, as noble a pursuit as it is, I do not wish to study women of color? What can I gain from intersectionality? I think intersectionality can help us better conceive research designs and data collection through its attentiveness to causal complexity. In particular, I think that this has enormous ramifications for public policy, my own specialization. Intersectionality offers two ways of thinking about causal complexity.

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I use the example of welfare reform (Hancock 2004) to highlight how intersectionality and causal complexity research point us in a direction that attends to the past richness of the content specialization we have come to know and moves to a broader application for political change.

If we take causal complexity in the way it is defined by methodologist Charles Ragin (2000), we focus on the multiple paths humans may take to the same political outcome. The stated goal of welfare reform at the federal, state, and local levels in the United States is to move families into financial self-sufficiency and off of poverty rolls. Quite logically, there are multiple paths families may take to move into financial self-sufficiency. To take an intersectional approach to welfare reform requires much more than the shibboleth of "work, not welfare" or cracking down on deadbeat dads. It requires attentiveness to aspects of the problem that cannot be assumed to be mutually independent.

For a select group of mothers forced onto welfare following divorce or separation from a middle- or upper-class man, garnishment to enforce legally obtained child support orders may lift the household income out of poverty. But there are at least two groups of welfare recipients for whom this sufficient (but not necessary) path out of poverty does not hold: women recipients whose children's fathers are poor or unemployed and those who are lesbians without such legally obligated partners. Both groups are nontrivial percentages of the welfare population. Attention to complex causality here would require recognition of categories that are multiple but not mutually independent — gender, class, and sexual orientation. Further, these categories are mutually constitutive at both the individual and institutional levels. While intersectionality as a content-specialization would emphasize the subjectivity of women residing at categorical intersections, intersectionality as a research paradigm does not end there. Specifically, institutional restrictions regarding the legal status of same-sex partnerships and structural unemployment among the biological fathers, where applicable, play a role in shaping the ability of welfare recipients to comply with the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act's child support component.

Incorporating a fully developed institutional analysis also provides another direct benefit regarding another kind of complex causality. These mutually constitutive relationships among various categories of difference at the institutional level point us in the causal direction of what theorist Lucius Outlaw calls internal and external responsibility for political outcomes. A recent National Public Radio series on black

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leadership repeatedly asked the question: Is it the government's responsibility OR blacks' responsibility to improve the status of the black community in the twenty-first century? Intersectional theorists would turn this long-standing question of American individualism versus institutional oppression on its head to assert that the degree to which any group occupies a particular location in a socially stratified political system is a product of the dynamic interaction between individuals and institutions. This seems such an obvious claim, yet the social policy literature and political science as a discipline both facilitate interrogation of either aggregated individuals OR institutions. Yet this key aspect of causal complexity shapes the degree to which welfare reform can be successful. If, as Democrats and Republicans alike asserted in 1994, the welfare system failed welfare recipients, socializing them into habits that violate core American principles, then why do so many Americans blame welfare recipients themselves for their collective predicament? Neither political elites nor the American public is completely correct. Intersectionality allows us to interrogate this "black box" of interaction between the analytical poles of individuals and institutions.

These two types of complex causality can only be addressed by intersectionality when we conceive of it as a body of research — a paradigm — rather than as a content specialization. I am convinced that this broader conception need not eradicate the political claims from which intersectionality originated. The keys to intersectionality in the future involve an emphasis on research design and enhanced data collection. Scholars need more and better standards of assessment to 1) distinguish among intersectional research and women of color studies and 2) to adjudicate among the contributions in order to refine and sharpen intersectionality's contribution to the discipline.

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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

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