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# The Metaphysics of Intersectionality Revisited*

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LESLIE McCall wrote in the journal *Signs* in 2015, 'intersectionality is the most important contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with other fields, has made so far'.[1] There's a whole journal dedicated to intersectional thought: *The Journal of Intersectionality*. Kimberlé Crenshaw, the black feminist legal theorist credited with coining the term, has a 2016 TED talk titled 'The Urgency of Intersectionality'. The agreed conclusions of the United Nations 61st Commission on the Status of Women included the phrase 'multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination' four times.[2] It is common for university campuses to be plastered with posters reading 'if your feminism isn't intersectional, it's bullshit'. Popular pieces on the topic have appeared in *The Conversation*,[3] *The Guardian*,[4] *Vox*,[5] and even *Time*.[6] It's absolutely clear, to anyone who has any contact with feminism at all—activist or academic—that their feminism had better be intersectional.

Less clear is exactly what that means. Here's one gloss: features of identity intersect to create a subject of new forms of oppression. For example, sex and class intersect to produce the subject of working-class women's oppression; race and sex intersect to produce the subject of black women's oppression. Many people who advocate intersectionality would probably agree with this gloss. But if we were to take the observation at face value, it wouldn't be obvious why it's

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[1]McCall 2005, p. 1771.
[2]UN Women 2017, pp. 5, 8, 9, 13.
[3]D'Cruz 2019.
[4]Hamad and Liddle 2017.
[5]Coaston 2019.
[6]Coleman 2019.


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a specifically *feminist* claim. At face value, it simply suggests that there's more oppression than single-identity-feature movements or theories have accounted for. So the idea of 'intersections' would be a recognition that the anti-racism movement, feminist movement, and anti-class-stratification movement, taken together, were missing something: falling through the cracks would be the way they overlap, the way that people can be caught between them, or doubly, even triply oppressed by combinations of them. It might suggest that we need a new intersectional justice movement, or perhaps many new movements—one for race-and-sex, one for sex-and-class, one for race-and-class, and one for race-and-sex-and-class. (And more, if more things are oppressions).

But that is *not* the way the observation has been incorporated. McCall's claim was that this is the most important contribution of *women's studies*. It is presented as a specifically feminist claim, about what feminism must be like. And its uptake within feminism seems to have had some peculiar effects. For example, the @UN_Women Twitter account (the account of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, or UN Women for short) has tweeted a definition of feminist as 'a person who believes in & stands up for the political, economic, and social equality of human beings'. *Human beings*. Not 'women'. Or to give another example, one International Women's Day Collective's list of demands issued in advance of the IWD 2019 March had only 3 out of 20 that were straightforwardly about women. The remaining 17 covered such diverse topics as 'an end to all imperialist wars', 'free and accessible healthcare for all', 'access to permanent residence and citizenship rights for all refugees and migrant workers', and 'an end to environmental destruction, and compensation for all victims worldwide'. Feminism, in virtue of being directed to pay attention to the ways that various features of identity can overlap, has somehow become a movement for all social justice issues.

The insights of early black feminists on this topic were original, imaginative, and important, and they pointed to an urgent gap in social justice-oriented theory and politics. Here we are not questioning their significance, but rather the way the concept of intersectionality has been taken up in contemporary mainstream feminism, both inside and outside the academy. The idea of 'intersectionality' has assumed enormous cultural importance, but is variously deployed in ways that seem far from what its originators had in mind.[7] As a contribution to adding clarity to this sometimes confused and confusing situation, we aim to do two things in this article.[8] First, we undertake a conceptual analysis of the claim that feminism must be intersectional. We focus on the original work done by black feminists, mostly during the second wave of feminism, resulting in a typology of six possible interpretations (Section II). Second, we dig further into the most philosophically complicated of those interpretations, in particular the metaphysical and explanatory (Section III). In that section we disagree with a recent proposal

[7]See e.g. discussion in Crenshaw 2019.

[8]For other discussions that critique and challenge intersectionality, see Nash 2008, 2019. See also the two objections mentioned in Bottici 2017 pp. 94–5.

made by Sara Bernstein.[9] Our conclusion is that it is false that feminism had better be intersectional *instead of* single-axis focused; and at best true that feminism had better *also* be intersectional (in addition to its single-axis focus).

## I. DISAMBIGUATING INTERSECTIONALITY

Across the early literature on intersectionality, it's possible to distinguish at least six distinct types of claim. These are routinely conflated (in the sense that they are never distinguished, and so it is never made clear which is being invoked) despite being very different, and giving very different meaning to what it would be for feminism to be intersectional in that particular sense. They are:

1. Experiential/phenomenological
2. Doxastic/epistemic
3. Legal
4. Explanatory
5. Applied ethical/political
6. Metaphysical

### A. Experiential/Phenomenological

'What is it like to be oppressed in more than one way?' is an interesting question, one whose answer might underwrite a particular type of belief or knowledge transmittable through testimony (and therefore vulnerable to testimonial injustice).[10] The documentary *On The Record* contains interviews with black women raped or sexually assaulted by Russell Simmons, several talking about how they were reluctant to come forward because this would feed into negative stereotypes about black men, and so further harm the black community.[11] This is experiential: *what it is like* to be a black woman who has been sexually assaulted by a black man is to be conflicted about whether to report or speak out in ways that are not part of the considerations of other women.

### B. Doxastic/Epistemic

bell hooks says in *Feminist Theory*[12] that black women have a unique perspective in being oppressed without also being an oppressor.[13] White women are both (oppressed as women, but oppressor as white); black men are both (oppressed as black, but oppressor as men). Black women, however, have 'no institutionalized

[9]Bernstein 2020.
[10]As discussed in Fricker 2007, ch. 1.
[11]Dick and Ziering 2020.
[12]hooks [1984] 2000.
[13]She's only talking about race and sex in the book, which makes this claim more comprehensible. If she'd included class, she wouldn't be able to make this claim; she'd have to say that only *working-class* black women were oppressed without being also oppressors. The more categories we add, the smaller the group of those who are only oppressed.

"other" that we may discriminate against, exploit, or oppress'.[14] She says 'this lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege'.[15] She goes on to suggest that this is a reason for black women to make use of their perspective in order to criticize the status quo and create a vision of something better.[16] This is a claim about intersectionality in beliefs or knowledge, coming from a particular perspective that a person has upon the world in light of her experiences (and therefore it is closely related to intersectionality as experiential/phenomenological, as discussed above).[17]

In principle, a woman who is oppressed in more than one way might have an experience that is clearly recognizable to her as relating to one system of oppression (for example, a black woman being subject to sexual harassment); that *in fact* relates to one system of oppression, but where it is not detectable to her which system (for example, a white male hiring committee is clearly unimpressed with a black woman applicant—it turns out this was because they are sexists, but she herself could not tell whether it was sexism, racism, both, or something else entirely); that is clearly recognizable to her as relating to multiple systems of oppression (for example, a black woman being subject to racialized sexual harassment, perhaps something that fetishizes racial features or applies familiar racial stereotypes in a sexualized way); or that *in fact* relates to multiple systems of oppression, but where this is not detectable to her (for example, the lecturer consistently fails to call on her in discussion, because she has prejudices against black *and* women students). So how her experience feeds into her belief/knowledge depends on the transparency of the oppressive behaviour.

### C. Legal

Kimberlé Crenshaw showed that there are gaps in the law which mean that some people have no recourse against discrimination, because of the way multiple features of their identities intersect.[18] She gave three legal cases to make this point. In the first, a company hired black men and white women, and so could not be prosecuted for discrimination in hiring on the grounds of either race or sex, even though they had laid off all their black women employees. The court said it was reluctant to 'creat[e] … new classes of protected minorities … by … combination'.[19] In the second, the female employees of a company attempted to

[14]hooks [1984] 2000, p. 16.
[15]Ibid.
[16]Ibid.
[17]Patricia Hill Collins (1986) argues that black women's position as 'outsiders within'—people whose domestic work in white families has allowed them, outsiders, into the white world—affords them a unique perspective. First, it allows them to be objective, in the sense of both near and far; second, others are more likely to confide in them; and third, they are able to see patterns that those immersed in the situation cannot.
[18]Crenshaw 1989.
[19]Ibid., p. 142; case in n. 8.

bring a case for discrimination on the grounds of sex, but the court refused to certify their representative, a black woman, saying there were 'serious doubts as to [her] ability to adequately represent the white female employees'.[20] This was ostensibly because it wasn't clear whether she was discriminated against on the grounds of her sex or her race. In the third case, the court accepted two black women as representatives in a race-based discrimination case against their company, but denied that they could represent *all* black employees, accepting them as representing black *women* only. This was ostensibly because it expected sex to make a difference to race-based discrimination.

Employment discrimination and lack of protection against discrimination under the law are both serious structural obstacles. An intersectional approach to the law helps to guard against people having to face these obstacles. But note that this is an argument for intersectional approaches to *supplement* existing approaches, not for intersectional approaches to *replace* existing approaches. If there were *only* intersectional approaches, then there would be no anti-discrimination protection for, for example, middle-class white women, middle-class black men, or working-class white men (all of whom are oppressed by a single aspect of identity rather than multiple aspects). So this couldn't yet make sense of the claim that feminism had better be intersectional, only the weaker claim that feminism had better be intersectional *too* (as well as in addition to).

### D. Explanatory

This version of the claim is most vivid in the chapter 'Feminist Movement to End Violence', in bell hooks's *Feminist Theory*.[21] hooks explains male violence as the product of both worker exploitation (class) and male domination (sex):

> As workers, most men in our culture (like working women) are controlled, dominated. Unlike working women, working men are fed daily a fantasy diet of male supremacy and power. In actuality, they have very little power, and they know it. Yet they do not rebel against the economic order or make revolution. They are socialized by ruling powers to accept their dehumanization and exploitation in the public world of work, and they are taught to expect that the private world, the world of home and intimate relationships, will restore them their sense of power, which they equate with masculinity.[22]

The male worker is subject to the authority of another in the workplace in a way that he experiences as humiliating or degrading. Because he cannot express his frustration in that context without risking reprisal (loss of job or imprisonment), he expresses it in a context where there is not the same risk, namely at home. This will often mean violence against a female partner.[23] It is sex/gender that explains

[20]Ibid., p. 144; case in n. 17.
[21]hooks [1984] 2000.
[22]Ibid., p. 121.
[23]Ibid., p. 122.

why negative emotions often end up expressed as violence rather than in more healthy or constructive ways, but it is class that explains why those negative emotions are so frequently provoked. An intersectional approach to understanding male violence gives us a *better explanation* of the phenomenon of male violence than we would have had if we'd looked only at male domination or only at class exploitation.

### E. Applied Ethical/Political

The Combahee River Collective, whose best-known member from today's perspective was Audre Lorde, wrote in 1977 that black feminism evolved out of black women's disillusionment with both black liberation and feminism. They wrote about 'the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men'.[24] And they gave an early statement of what is now called 'identity politics', when they said 'we realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us', and 'the most profound and potentially radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression'.[25] This is a *political* claim: people who face multiple sources of oppression *care more*, and will produce *more profound and radical politics* than someone not situated in the same way.[26]

hooks also seems to be making an applied ethical/political claim when she says that feminists should be working against all violence and domination, not just against male violence and male domination. One reason she gives for this is that if we don't do this, we won't be able to solve the problem (the reasoning is something like: you can't end a single symptom; you have to go the root cause and end that, which will in turn end *all* the symptoms). She denies that male domination is one of the *fundamental* contributing elements when it comes to male violence. Rather, she thinks Western philosophy brought ideas about hierarchy and authority into the culture, and these are the common base of *all* forms of domination, of 'violence against women, of adult violence against children, of all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated'.[27] The feminist concern with male violence against women and girls is, on this view, concern with a single symptom. If we actually want to get rid of that violence, we'd better focus on getting rid of Western ideas about authority and hierarchy, particularly the idea that the superior have a natural right to rule the inferior. If we can do that, we'll get rid of male violence *and* other kinds of

[24]Combahee River Collective [1977] 1982, pp. 14–15.

[25]Ibid., p. 16.

[26]We are not endorsing this claim here; people like Bill Baird in the 1960s, jailed on multiple occasions for abortion and contraception activism, demonstrate that it is at least not universally true.

[27]hooks [1984] 2000, pp. 36–8, 40, 118–20; see also Hodge 1975. Cf. Firestone (1970), p. 3, who says 'The division yin and yang pervades all culture, history, economics, nature itself; modern Western versions of sex discrimination are only the most recent layer'; and Lerner (1986), who argues on the basis of archaeological evidence that sex was the basis of the first class/caste division.

violence too. An intersectional approach to desired applied ethical or political outcomes is more likely to be efficacious.

### F. Metaphysical

Anna Julia Cooper, as early as 1892, talked about race, class, gender, and 'region' being interdependent and so not able to be examined in isolation.[28] The Combahee River Collective in 1977 talked about their struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, stating that 'the major systems of oppression are interlocking'.[29] Both Frances Beal in 1969 and Deborah King in 1988 talked about the categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality as being mutually constitutive—Beal in a way that could be read as 'additive',[30] King arguing for something like 'multiplicative'.[31] Beal uses the phrase 'double jeopardy', describing the dual burdens of racism and sexism faced by black women in the early 1970s,[32] while King uses the phrase 'multiple jeopardy' to signal that 'the relationships among the various discriminations are [not] merely additive'.[33] All of these are metaphysical claims—that whatever there is in the world that produces oppression or domination is mixed/interdependent/mutually constitutive, and so on. Let's gloss this as the idea that intersectional oppression is more than the sum of its parts. Crenshaw uses this locution explicitly: 'the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism'.[34]

In what seems to be the first article to fully take up the question of the metaphysics of the claim from an analytic philosophical perspective, Sara Bernstein focuses on the metaphysics of intersectional identity categories like sex and race, defending the idea that 'intersectionality is best understood as metaphysical and explanatory priority of the intersectional category over its constituents, on par with grounding claims in contemporary analytic metaphysics'.[35] She makes use of the metaphysical concepts of 'determinables' (like colour and shape) and 'determinates' (like being red, or being circular). Race, gender, and class are 'social determinables': everyone has them, and you can't have one without the rest. But features like being black, being female, or being working-class are 'social determinates', you can have one and not others.

Thinking about it in this way, intersectionality is the claim that social determinates are *inseparable*. It is not just that you are black and female, it is that blackness and femaleness are inseparable. This fits with Elizabeth Spelman's analysis when she writes 'some women may be told by white feminists that they aren't properly distinguishing their voices as "women" from their voices as

[28]Cooper 1892.
[29]Combahee River Collective [1977] 1982.
[30]Beal 1969.
[31]King 1988. See also discussion in Nash 2019.
[32]Beal 1969, discussed in King 1988, p. 46.
[33]King 1988, p. 47.
[34]Crenshaw 1989, p. 140.
[35]Bernstein 2020, p. 322.

"Afro-Americans" or "Jews" or members of the "working class"'.[36] She thinks this doesn't make sense: 'nothing I might point to would meet the requirements of being a "part" of me that was a "woman part" that was not also a "white part". Any part of my body is part of a body that is, by prevailing criteria, female and white'.[37]

But this still leaves us with a question of how to understand inseparability. Bernstein proposes a stronger and a weaker understanding. On the weaker, inseparability just means interaction: blackness and femaleness interact in the experience of black women. But she offers a stronger understanding, too, in order to accommodate accounts of intersectionality on which the different identity categories constitute or construct each other.[38] The stronger understanding is 'explanatory unity', which justifies giving priority to the intersectional category (for example, race/sex) rather than its elements (race, sex). Bernstein says, 'in understanding black womanhood, we thereby understand blackness and womanhood. *Being a black woman* explains being black and being a woman; features of blackness and womanhood are at least partially explained by black womanhood'.[39] This fits well with Spelman's view that there is no unified category 'woman', only categories like 'black lesbian woman' and 'working-class disabled woman'; although Bernstein's view allows that both categories exist, and just gives priority to one, whereas Spelman's eliminates the larger category.[40]

Bernstein classifies her own interpretation of intersectionality as 'metaphysical', but the weaker understanding is experiential (our Type 1) and the stronger understanding is explanatory (our Type 4).[41] We might want to argue for a merging of the explanatory and the metaphysical, but that would require the bridging assumption that the best explanation (where 'best' is granted by a set of criteria, of which one is explanatory unity) is the *true* explanation, and therefore a reflection of the way the world is—so, a metaphysical claim. But not all best explanations are true, most obviously where we use abstractions or idealizations for simplicity and explanatory power. For all that Bernstein says, this is simply the best way to make sense of what intersectionality is, given what the theorists of intersectionality that she focuses on have to say. So there's no claim yet to intersectionality-as-explanatory-unity being true.

[36]Spelman 1990, p. 151.
[37]Ibid., p. 134.
[38]Garry 2011; Bernstein 2020, pp. 329–30.
[39]Bernstein 2020, p. 331.
[40]Spelman 1990.
[41]Bernstein interchanges 'experience' and 'oppression' throughout her article. An experience of oppression is not, though it may track, the fact of oppression. It may be that intersectional categories of women have 'specific experiences' ( Bernstein 2020, p. 332) in virtue of the fact that it is phenomenologically difficult to isolate aspects of one's identity. But this does not equate to there being 'specific … forms of oppression' (ibid.). Conversely, there may be no experience as a woman unqualified, but this does not equate to there being no fact of oppression as a woman unqualified. Bernstein's interpretation may therefore be true with respect to the experience of oppression, but it is not clear that it is true with respect to the fact of oppression, and it is with that fact that feminism is ultimately concerned.

We've mostly been using the example of a person's being both black and a woman, following black feminists (although sometimes, like the Combahee River Collective, they added in further sources of discrimination, like being working class or same-sex attracted). We take it that it would be possible to give a generalized version of the claim, which would not take any particular identity feature as necessary. But because we're specifically interested in the claim that *feminism* must be intersectional, we'll assume that being a woman is necessary, and so refer to being oppressed by sex *plus* at least one other feature.

Here's the list of disambiguated claims again, with a summary of what they each mean:

1. *Experiential/phenomenological*. Feminism must pay attention to what it's like to be oppressed by sex plus at least one other identity feature.
2. *Doxastic/epistemic*. Feminism must make use of the unique perspective (beliefs or knowledge of particular people gained through their particular 'lived experience') of women oppressed by sex plus at least one other identity feature.
3. *Legal*. Feminism must work for legal protection against discrimination for sex plus at least one other identity feature in combination (rather than for sex alone).
4. *Explanatory*. Feminism must seek explanations of women's oppression that draw on more than sex alone.
5. *Applied ethical/political*. Feminist activism must be focused on the intersectional categories at the root of all oppression, rather than on the single category of sex.
6. *Metaphysical*. Feminism must focus on the mitigation of novel forms of intersectional oppression (always including sex, but never only sex), which are more than the sums of their parts.[42]

6*. *Bernstein–metaphysical*. Feminism must always give explanatory priority to the intersectional categories.

Thus spelled out, none of these is obviously true. It's not obvious, when we are implored to be intersectional, which of these we're supposed to be paying the most attention to; and even if it were clear that one in particular of these were usually the one being referred to, none of them is obviously superior to a feminism focused on the single axis of sex. We do not claim to have established that all of these understandings of the claim fail. We claim only that there is enough doubt about them that we should be cautious about replacing single-axis feminism on their basis. We will outline our reasons for doubt about the intersectionality claims in the first five senses in the remainder of this section. In the next section, we will argue in substantially more detail that there is reason for caution about the metaphysical claim.

[42]We use this locution for convenience, but it's worth noting that it's not exactly right: 'black woman' is exactly the sum of its parts—'black' and 'woman'—but we're not talking merely about combinations of identities at this point; we're talking about the social impacts—especially oppression—that result from combinations of identities in particular contexts. We're asking whether the *oppression of black women* is the sum of its 'parts' in a more metaphorical sense: namely, whether it is the sum of black people's oppression qua black (race) and women's oppression qua woman (sex).

We note that while Crenshaw is the most invoked theorist in association with intersectionality, most of those who invoke her are not advancing a specifically legal claim, and we've already noted that the claim is implausibly strong if it requires *replacing* single-axis anti-discrimination protections. The experiential/phenomenological and doxastic/epistemic claims can only be true if feminism is a project 'revealed' through these mechanisms. The consciousness-raising groups popular during the second wave took this to be the case, but these 'individual rap groups' also 'exhausted the virtues of consciousness-raising and decided they wanted to do something more specific'.[43] Feminism is not *only* about consciousness-raising, and when it isn't, it's not clear how important those two claims are—intersectional or not.

The explanatory claim would go through *only* if the explanation of women's oppression is in fact 'more than sex alone': for example, a complicated merging of the systems of racism and sexism, or sexism and classism. There are multiple accounts arguing that it isn't.[44] The same can be said for the ethical/political claim that there are intersectional categories at the root of all oppression. But even if there were, it's not clear whether conceptualizing a mega-global-justice movement as 'about' all oppression would actually rule out the permissibility of single-axis feminism. Why call the mega-movement feminism? And wouldn't the mega-movement be unwieldy—all the progressives in the world trying to fight for all the causes at once—so that for efficacy, it would need to be broken down into cells? Wouldn't one of those cells, at some level, be focused on sex? And if so, isn't that just a roundabout way of saying that single-axis feminism is perfectly fine? No feminist we know denies that feminist work feeds into more general social justice projects.

In the next section, we'll focus on the two versions of the metaphysical claim.

## II. MORE ON THE METAPHYSICS

The metaphysical claim is arguably the most philosophically complicated, so whether or not it's the best candidate for what most theorists mean when they advocate for intersectionality in feminism, it's the one we'll give some more attention to. It is:

> *Metaphysical intersectional claim*. Feminism must focus on the mitigation of novel forms of intersectional oppression (always including sex but never only sex), which are more than the sum of their parts.

First we'll unpack the claim about intersectional oppression being more than the sum of its parts, and then we'll ask about the implications whether it is or whether it isn't.

[43]Freeman 1970.
[44]E.g. Firestone 1970; MacKinnon 1982; Lerner 1986.

If intersectional oppression is *more* than the sum of its parts, is the claim that it *always* is, or *necessarily* is, or only that it *can be*, or *sometimes*, is? Does *being the sum of its parts* make it non-intersectional, or are all combinations intersectional regardless of the interactions? Can intersectional oppression be *less than* the sum of its parts? Ultimately, the metaphysical intersectional claim is an empirical claim. Few offer empirical evidence to support it, but Crenshaw and Angela Davis are exceptions.[45] We'll discuss both. We've already considered one example: in Section I we talked about the black women testifying to sexual assault and rape in *On The Record,* and the way that those women were more conflicted about reporting these offences because of the implications for the black male perpetrators in light of existing racism. (Phyllis Chesler talks in her memoir about a number of feminists refusing to confront her rapist for similar reasons.)[46]

Davis wrote about the myth of the black slave woman as 'matriarch', and the way this later functioned to attempt to undermine equality between black men and black women by suggesting that black women were 'castrators' of black men, denying them their rightful place as the heads of families.[47] Black women experienced the horrors of slavery alongside black men and, partly for that reason, black women feel more equality with black men in black liberation struggle. Because of that long-established equality, black women feel threatened by the 'matriarch' myth, which taps into patriarchal ideology in an effort to disrupt their equality with black men. *Black woman as matriarch* is arguably one example of oppression that is more than the sum of its parts, racism and sexism; it would be hard to 'predict' such a stereotype or mythological construction from merely putting what we know generally about racism together with what we know generally about sexism.

Crenshaw also offers a number of examples, which she takes to show that black women experience discrimination that 'is not the sum of race and sex discrimination'.[48] In one example, Crenshaw suggests that white men have often raped black women not as women generally, but as black women specifically:[49]

> When Black women were raped by white males, they were being raped not as women generally, but as Black women specifically: [t]heir femaleness made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination, while their Blackness effectively denied them any protection. This white male power was reinforced by a judicial system in which the successful conviction of a white man for raping a Black woman was virtually unthinkable.[50]

While she attributes this as discrimination against black women specifically, the example itself has two components: rape on the basis of femaleness, and failure of legal protection on the basis of blackness. When she says, 'their femaleness

[45]Davis 1972; Crenshaw 1989.
[46]Chesler 2018, pp. 197–286.
[47]Davis 1972.
[48]Crenshaw 1989, p. 149.
[49]Ibid., p. 158.
[50]Ibid., pp. 158–9.

made them sexually vulnerable to racist domination', she seems to mean that the rape itself is about blackness.

MacKinnon's discussion of rape in genocide supports Crenshaw's suggestion that rape is sometimes about race or ethnicity.[51] She says,

> Many of these acts [rape in war] make women's bodies into a medium of men's expression, the means through which one group of men says what it wants to say to another. Apart from affirming manhood, which rape always does, rape in war thus serves as specific psychological warfare and a method of communication, providing symbolic as well as actual reward and symbolic as well as actual revenge. It means supremacy: we are better than you. And possession: we own you.[52]

Here, rape is deployed for the purpose of racial conquest, and in that sense is done to women on the basis of race. But it achieves this purpose only because it is done to women specifically. That is, rape means 'we are better than you' and 'we own you' only in a context in which men are defined by their sexual ownership of women, such that to rape *their* women is to claim ownership of what is theirs, to unman them. Here, one group racially discriminates against another by making use of sexual discrimination. This is discrimination that is the sum of its parts: racial discrimination plus sexual discrimination.

In another example, Crenshaw explains how the circumstances of black women's lives have compelled them to work outside the home in much greater numbers than white women, thus preventing them from adhering to norms of femininity such as being physically delicate.[53] Again, the oppression she describes seems to be *the sum* of racism and sexism. Racism is the cause of the poverty that has compelled them to work outside the home, and this interacts with sexism, which imposes norms of femininity on women. This does not appear to be a unique form of oppression; it is precisely the sum of its parts.

There are three conceptual categories here: oppression can be one part (for example, sex), it can be the sum of its parts (for example, race and sex) and it can be more than the sum of its parts (for example, a novel race/sex intersection). Crenshaw's examples are arguably of the second category. It's not entirely clear what it would take to demonstrate the difference between the second category and the third. Advocates of intersectionality, at least if understood as we've characterized the metaphysical and explanatory (/explanatory priority) types, owe us a theory of the third category. What they can't do is simply insist upon it, without a theory[54] and without examples that can't be adequately explained by

[51]MacKinnon 2006.
[52]Ibid., p. 223.
[53]Crenshaw 1989, p. 156.
[54]One way to argue that a particular example involves race/sex oppression rather than race, sex oppression would be to argue against the existence of single-axis oppression, which is indeed what some advocates of intersectionality do. But we don't think Bernstein can be understood as doing this, for the reasons we give below.

one of the other two categories. And what they shouldn't do is pretend to already have that theory and insist that single-axis feminist theory concede to it. When feminists began arguing with Marxists for the inclusion of feminist issues within Marxism, they eventually discovered that this wouldn't work and they began to build an independent theory.[55] It's puzzling why this hasn't happened with intersectionality—instead of ending up with two strong independent theories, one single-axis and one multi-axis, 'feminism' has become synonymous with 'intersectionality' *without* a theory.

While Crenshaw's examples may not have fully demonstrated that intersectional oppression is more than the sum of its parts, Davis's and the *On the Record* examples suffice to that. So we can accept that some oppression is more than the sum of its parts, and some oppression is just its parts. What would the ratio of this 'more than the sum of its parts' oppression relative to ordinary single-axis oppression have to be in order for it to be justified to insist upon *an intersectional approach to feminism*? If it's usually that only one axis is in operation, or that when multiple axes are in operation their effects are additive, then it would seem strange to demand that feminism take an intersectional approach. That would mean to miss out on the overwhelming proportion of female oppression that is not intersectional, simply because of the tiny proportion that is. (That is to say, women everywhere are oppressed on the basis of sex, whether or not they are *also* oppressed on the basis of other social categories, and/or also multiply oppressed in a way that is 'more than the sum of its parts'). That might be a reason to *add* intersectional oppression into the feminist project, but it's no reason at all to displace the one with the other. Both Spelman and hooks, however, seem to be advocating displacement.[56]

At this point, we can track the implications of two different answers to the question of whether intersectional oppression is more than the sum of its parts. It will be useful to consider Figure 1 as 'levels' of combination, with single-axis categories at the lowest level and categories with the greatest number of intersections at the highest level (assuming, for simplicity, there are just three).

Suppose that intersectional oppression is more than the sum of its parts. (Or suppose, of all the intersectional oppression that there is, that at least some is more than the sum of its parts, and that's the oppression we're talking about). In this case, it is not reducible to its parts. That means we cannot work out the higher-level category (race/sex/class) just by working out the lower-level categories (race, sex, class). This might seem to vindicate the intersectional claim. But note that, similarly, we cannot work out any lower-level category (for example, sex) just by working out the higher-level category (race/sex/class).

At first glance, then, Bernstein is wrong to say that the higher-level categories explain the lower-level categories, that being a black woman explains being black

[55]See e.g. Hartmann 1979; Young 1980; MacKinnon 1989.
[56]hooks [1984] 2000; Spelman 1990.

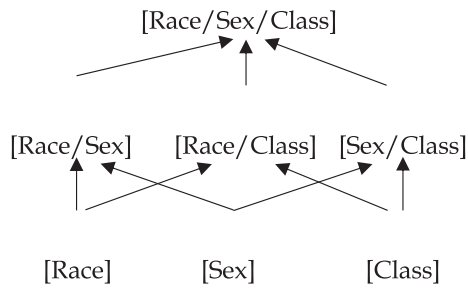


*Figure 1. Single-axis categories as fundamental*

and being a woman.[57] Because the intersectional category is *more* than its parts, it cannot be reduced or separated out into its parts. There's no reverse engineering from the intersectional category back to the parts. If intersectional oppression is more than the sum of its parts, then we need *all* the levels. Some might be more relevant for our particular purposes, but noticing that there is intersectional oppression is no argument at all for giving priority to the intersectional category over the single-axis categories. It's at best an argument for including intersectional categories alongside the single-axis categories.

Bernstein need not be read as suggesting that we can reverse engineer. She might say the higher-level categories explain the lower-level ones, not because they can be disaggregated into them, but because they are the sources of information for them. This inverts our diagram: the intersectional category is now the lower-level category and the individual-identity constituent the higher-level one (Figure 2). We work out the content of the individual-identity constituent by feeding information from the intersectional category up into it. For example, we work out the content of 'sex' by feeding all of the information from 'sex/race/class' up into 'sex'. This avoids the reverse-engineering problem.

The higher-level categories now contain nothing more than the summed content of the lower-level ones. But this has a troubling implication. Women's oppression qua women is no longer one particular way in which all women are oppressed, but the sum of the ways in which all of the intersectional categories of women (as people) are oppressed, and it is difficult to see how any significant number of women could be thus oppressed (and certainly, could thus be oppressed qua women). Accepting Bernstein's interpretation, then, means relinquishing the idea that women are oppressed qua women. Crenshaw did not intend this. She believed that all women were oppressed as women, but that black women were *also* oppressed as black women. Nor, we think, does Bernstein intend this. She says, for example, 'A central tenet of intersectional theorizing is that blackness and womanhood mix and interact in such a way that one or the other or both

[57]Bernstein 2020, p. 331.

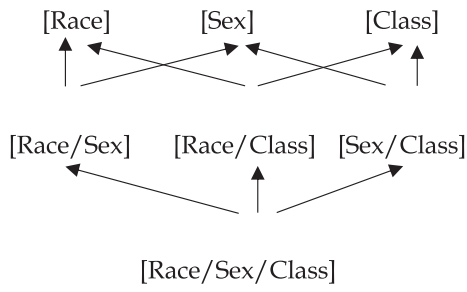


*Figure 2. Intersectional categories as fundamental*

separately do not exhaust the explanatory space of black womanhood'.[58] The key term here is 'exhaust'. This allows that blackness, womanhood, and their interaction partially occupy the explanatory space of black womanhood. Bernstein's interpretation may give us the resources to cover the remaining explanatory space, but it deprives us of those to cover the space occupied by both womanhood and the interaction of blackness and womanhood.

This inversion of our diagram (Figure 2) also has the effect of introducing substantial overlap between the higher-level single-axis categories. Most of 'sex' is the same as most of 'race', because we fed up information about each from the race/sex/class intersections, and this meant feeding in a lot of information that is not 'about' sex and not 'about' race on the old understandings of 'single-axis' categories. It is an empirical question exactly how much overlap there would be and whether the differences between the categories (where they do not overlap) would be useful and illuminating. We suspect that these revised categories would be a lot *less* useful and illuminating than they are on the original version of the diagram (Figure 1).

Can this problem be patched? Perhaps we work out the content of the individual identity constituent by feeding only certain information from the intersectional category up into it—say, the 'woman' part of the information. But to do that, we'd have to have a separate understanding of what it is to be oppressed as a woman, making the intersectional category parasitic on a prior conceptual understanding of the single-axis categories. Which poses the question: if we *can* extract that information from the intersectional category, why think we *must* begin with the intersectional category?

But then there's an open question about how to best accommodate intersectional categories. It's not clear why it's feminism's job rather than the job of any other single-axis movement. Perhaps the anti-racist movement should absorb the intersectional categories, and feminism should remain single-axis, for example. If

[58]Ibid., p. 332.

every single-axis theory and movement incorporates the intersectional categories, there'll be a lot of doubling-up. It might be most efficient for a new, intersectional justice movement to develop, taking care of the intersectional categories. The point is that none of this is settled simply by noticing that there are intersectional categories whose oppression is more than the sum of its parts.

Let us address two objections at this point. First, if we assume 'identity politics', in the sense the Combahee River Collective had in mind, *and* we defend single-axis feminism (as focused on sex) and new movements for either each distinct intersection (as black feminism was the intersection of race and sex oppression) or the plurality of intersections (which becomes a generalized global-justice movement focused on all oppressions, as the UN now characterizes feminism), then it might seem that 'feminism' is left to the most privileged women. Identity politics tells us that everyone oppressed by more than just sex should leave to fight their own more complex battles. But if that would be the outcome, wouldn't it be better to just *accept* intersectional feminism, rather than end up with a feminism by and for the most privileged women?

We certainly don't want to be arguing for the transformation of feminism into the familiar caricature of second-wave feminism. There are two responses we can give, however. The first is that *even if it were* the most privileged women left behind doing feminism, the feminist agenda itself would not be in the interests of the most privileged women.[59] The (single-axis) feminist agenda is women's oppression qua women, and this means advancing the interests of some of the worst-off women in the world. It is likely to include issues like female genital mutilation, child brides, child abuse, sex trafficking, military prostitution, rape, sexual harassment, and more. Even if it focused on sex-based issues affecting a majority of women rather than the worst-off women, that would still mean a focus on issues that affected women oppressed by more than just sex. For example, it would be likely to include abortion and reproductive rights, maternal health, welfare services, women's health research, the gathering of sex data (to combat the data gap and improve women's safety and women's services), women's legal services, and more.

The second response is that it is *highly unlikely* to be just the most privileged women left behind doing feminism. It is just not the case that people care equally about all aspects of their identities. Some people don't care, or positively disdain, some such aspects (for example, there are LGB people who are utterly uninterested

[59]Perhaps, for some feminist groups, feminism is conceptualized less as a collective political movement and more as a club or association. If it is the latter, then it makes sense that the women involved would pursue whatever projects most interested them, rather than paying any attention to which issues were the most important, or the closest to being universal, when it came to sex caste. Still, given that it's permissible to have such clubs and associations, we're not sure there's any real problem with this. Others are free to argue when these women describe their projects as 'feminism'.

in LGB politics). Others care more about *others'* oppression.[60] Yet others identify a 'state of primary emergency',[61] which is the aspect of their identity that they think has the greatest negative impact on their lives, and want to work against that. In a volume on lesbian identities, Baba Copper identified ageism as her primary state of emergency, connecting it with 'righteous rejections, trashings, and betrayals'.[62] There may be many women who are multiply oppressed and yet either care the most—or care exclusively—about feminism, or who see their womanhood as their primary state of emergency.

Second, a defender of intersectionality might argue that it is a *method* rather than a metaphysical thesis. The method acts as a remedy to past mistakes. It is not that there's anything wrong with single-axis feminism, it's that there's something wrong with a feminism that universalizes the oppression of a specific group of women to the exclusion of other women—especially when that specific group is privileged women. It is common for critics of single-axis feminism to conflate 'single-axis' with 'white feminism', as for example Nora Berenstain does when she says 'White feminism takes only a single-axis approach to gender-based oppression', describing it as a feminism that applies only to 'white, nondisabled, class-privileged, straight, cisgender citizens of "Western" colonial and settler colonial nation-states' while it 'masquerades as universal'.[63] Intersectionality as method might be little more than a reminder that, even when concerned with women qua women, we must be careful to consider the oppression of *all* women, or a representative sample of women, to make sure that we don't mistakenly generalize from some women to all in ways that are not applicable to all. We have no objection to this understanding of intersectionality, but we think it is less substantive than most advocates of intersectionality have in mind. (And it is certainly not what Berenstain is arguing for.)

We were supposing above that intersectional oppression was more than the sum of its parts. Now suppose, conversely, that intersectional oppression turns out to be just the sum of its parts. (Or suppose, of all the intersectional oppression that there is, that at least some is just the sum of its parts, and that's the oppression we're talking about). One question we might ask in that case is about the relations between the lower and higher levels. Perhaps single-axis oppression *composes* intersectional oppression, or *constitutes* it, or is *identical* to it, or *grounds* it, or is a *part* of it. Bernstein takes grounding to be the best candidate for the relation

[60]In 1987, Australian footballer Phil Cleary's sister Vicky was stabbed to death by her ex-boyfriend outside the kindergarten where she worked. He was convicted not of murder, but of manslaughter, on the grounds that she had provoked him. Cleary then became a committed feminist ally and, among other things, campaigned for 15 years for the abolition of the provocation defence (which was eventually abandoned in 2005); Cleary 2019.

[61]Dworkin 1974, p. 186.

[62]Copper 1990, p. 237.

[63]Berenstain 2020, p. 736.

between the lower-level categories and the higher in giving a metaphysics of intersectionality.[64] But notice that *any* of these—except identity—could be the correct description of the relation between the different levels, and it still be preferable to focus on the lower level (the composers, the constituters, the grounds, the parts). Traditional metaphysicians generally prefer to focus on the lower level (although with the exception of the metaphysical holists), and social metaphysicians generally prefer to focus on the higher level (although with the exception of the metaphysical reductionists). So a second, and better, question we might ask is whether, when it comes to intersectional oppression, we should be more like the traditional metaphysicians or more like the social metaphysicians.

There are several reasons that explain *why* the social metaphysicians generally prefer to focus on the higher-level phenomena, so we should figure out whether—as feminists—we share those reasons. As Christian List and Kai Spiekermann explain,[65] full and satisfying explanations of things often require the higher level and not just the lower level, and sometimes it's the higher level that's salient because the same outcome could have been achieved in many different lower-level ways.

Our favourite example of the former comes from the evolutionary biologists' concept of group selection. Take the group to be the 'higher level', corresponding to the intersectional category, and the individual to be the 'lower level', corresponding to the single-axis category. A simplified version of group selection goes like this: each of the individuals in a group performs actions that benefit one another in terms of their chances of survival and reproduction, even though not all of these actions are such that they would be justified by the survival and reproduction interests of the individual alone. A group whose individual members are acting like this *outperforms* another group whose individual members are not acting like this, in terms of survival and reproduction (that is, more of its members survive and reproduce). If we only looked at the 'lower level' of individuals, all we would see is some people acting for their own survival and reproduction interests and some not, and some of those who were not surprisingly doing rather well anyway. We need to look at the 'higher level' of the group, and what is going on between groups, to understand what sorts of reciprocity are in play and between whom, and how they benefit the group. ('Group selection' as a name suggests that selection is literally operating at the level of the group, but you don't have to believe that to think a full explanation of the selection *effects* in such a case requires knowing what's going on at the level of groups.)

[64]Bernstein 2020.

[65]List and Spiekermann 2013. List and Spiekermann are concerned with individualism vs holism in political science, where 'individualism' focuses on human individuals and the interactions between them, and 'holism' focuses on social or collective entities like states, institutions, or cultures. This is a more specific version of the general relation between individual elements of a thing and the thing they make up. And we are applying their discussion to something more general ourselves: namely, the general relation between the individual elements of intersectional oppression and intersectional oppression itself.

List and Spiekermann say there are three jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for requiring a focus on the higher level for explanation. These are: there are properties that correspond to different levels (for example, soccer players kick the ball, but soccer teams win matches); many different constellations of lower-level properties counterfactually determine the same higher-level properties (for example, the team wins the match because of the moves made by the players on the day, but different players could have made the same moves, or the same players could have made different moves, and the team could still have won); and the higher-level properties can be causes regardless of the specific constellation of the lower-level properties (for example, because the team wins the match, the country wins the world cup, even though what we said to explain the last point is still true).[66]

Although this justification is given in terms of explanation (like Bernstein's), there's a stronger link to the metaphysical in virtue of the fact that it would be surprising if our best social sciences quantified over particular entities, which meet the three conditions List and Spiekermann gave, and yet which don't actually exist. If there are properties at the level of the team, and many different ways the players could have been determine the same way the team could have been, and teams can be causes of the same things regardless of the different ways the players might have been, then there are most likely teams. This disambiguation of the intersectional imperative has a stronger claim to being genuinely metaphysical.

All this being said, it's worth bearing in mind that 'holists' in political science, and anti-reductionists (collectivists) more generally across the social sciences and humanities, are not fighting to *displace* individualistic/lower-level explanations, but simply to have a seat at the table with them. Theorists argue that these higher-level explanations are *also* interesting and important. No one thinks there aren't really any players that make up a team, or any atoms that make up a table. They just want to be able to talk about teams and tables. The intersectional approach is not so ecumenical, or at least not in some of its formulations. In Spelman's formulation, it displaces; there is no category 'women' (and generalizing her reasoning, there would be no category 'black' or 'working class').[67] There are only intersectional categories like 'black lesbian woman' or 'working-class disabled woman'. In hooks's formulation, too, it displaces; there is a category 'women', but our attention should be on sex *and* race *and* class (or on sex/race/class).

We asked above: do feminists share these reasons? We are not so sure that they do, given these dissimilarities in goals. We surely do not want to lose the ability to talk about *just* sex-based oppression, even if we also want the ability to talk about sex/race oppression and sex/class oppression, and sex/race/class oppression. Crenshaw appears to agree with this, writing 'To bring this back to

[66]Ibid., p. 639.
[67]Spelman 1990.

a non-metaphorical level, I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men …'.[68] If black women experience some discrimination on the basis of *only* sex, similar to some white women, then black women, too, have an interest in 'non-intersectional' feminism, a form of feminism concerned with sex alone. Racism, sexism, and classism are, after all, systems of oppression that arose out of different historical events and have had lasting effects through different sorts of political and institutional structures and which affect people's beliefs and attitudes (and, in turn, biases and stereotypes) in different ways. We have good reason to retain the ability to distinguish them, whether or not we choose to make use of it. None of the reasons identified by List and Spiekermann clearly and straightforwardly applies.[69]

## III. SO, SHOULD FEMINISM BE 'INTERSECTIONAL'?

We draw five lessons from the preceding discussion. First, there are at least six different things that might be meant by the claim that feminism had better be intersectional. These are seldom, if ever, distinguished. Which of them is meant affects whether the claim is true, and once disambiguated, none makes it obviously true.

Second, even if feminism should be intersectional on one of the interpretations, it should clearly not be only intersectional on most of them. The law should protect against single-axis-oppression. Some good explanations are single-axis. This means the intersectionality claim is often over-stated—in particular where it seems to displace, rather than supplement/complement existing single-axis approaches to feminism.

Third, many theorists of intersectionality seem to be making a metaphysical claim, but seldom offer any empirical evidence to support it. More research is needed in order to ascertain the extent to which intersectional oppression is more (or less) than the sum of its parts, and, in particular, whether what oppresses (for example, racism and sexism) is more (or less) than the sum of its parts, rather than whether what it is like to be oppressed *feels like* more (or less) than the sum of its parts.

Fourth, if the relation between elements of intersectional oppression is additive after all, then there is no reason for feminism to take up oppression on the basis of other features of identity as its cause. It would be perfectly consistent for feminism to be about sex and sex-related oppression, and other theories and movements to be about the intersectional categories. (Although in order for

[68]Crenshaw 1989, p. 149.
[69]List and Spiekermann 2013.

feminism to do its single-axis job well, it may need to take up oppression on the basis of other features of identity as an interpersonal matter.)[70]

Fifth (and finally), there's nothing about the general observation that multiple identity features can intersect that is naturally limited to feminism. If this is a good observation, it's relevant to all justice movements, and because uptake by each would mean significant overlap, it's not obvious that uptake by each is a better answer than uptake by a new, dedicated 'intersectional justice' movement.

Had feminism better be intersectional? Not if this means intersectional *instead of* single-axis. At best, feminism should be *also* intersectional, on one of its possible disambiguations.

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[70]Marilyn Frye, in a chapter 'On Being White', talks about the way that white feminists need to work to confront internalized racism (she draws a helpful parallel with the way feminists expect men to deal with internalized sexism); Frye 1983, pp. 110–27. Feminist theory and movement will generally want to be able to do the work it sets out to do, and to include women in all their diversity. It will struggle to do this if the way it operates, or its individual members, perpetrate oppression along axes other than sex (e.g. if women in the feminist movement are racist, classist, ableist, and so on). But note that this is not yet a vindication of the claim that feminism must be intersectional. Saying that a person must not be classist is not the same thing as saying that a movement must take up class-related issues as its causes. We can perfectly well imagine a non-classist feminist movement whose energies are poured into the mitigation of sex oppression (and not, e.g., to the improvement of the economic situation of the working class).

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