

Games People Play

A Quick Guide to Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality Theory:

- a feminist framework for understanding and analyzing social issues
- focuses on how the intersections of socially constructed identities (characteristics) impact people's lives focuses on the power dynamics within social structures
- uses perspectives from multiple groups, especially groups that have been traditionally ignored in academic settings
- prompts action to right social injustices (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Andersen & Collins, 2010)



Socially Constructed Identities

People are NOT like a box of crayons that are all alike except for color. People are more like assorted writing instruments, such as crayons, pens, paint brushes, pencils, and markers. Some pens and markers are out of ink; some have a good supply of ink. Some crayons are broken, but still work. Some pencils are sharper than others. Some have erasers and some don't. Like these assorted writing instruments, people have socially constructed identities or characteristics such as race, gender, class, sexuality, geographic location, ability, ethnicity, age, and religion (among an infinite number of characteristics ascribed to individuals). The only reason these identities have meaning is because people give them meaning. Many people have notions that some types of characteristics are better than others. The notions of superior and inferior characteristics greatly impacts people's lives.



Matrix of Domination

Intersectionality theory focuses on how these notions of inferior and superior socially constructed identities intersect in people's lives to place them in positions of oppression or privilege in the social hierarchy or what is known as the "matrix of domination" (Andersen & Collins, 2010, p. 6). People's positions in this matrix impact their life experiences and opportunities and resources available to them. Like the Rubic's Cube, the matrix of



domination is multi-dimensional. Imagine the points on each tiny cube on the Rubic's Cube as a person's position in the social hierarchy. Some points are higher than others and some are side by side. Some points are behind others and some are in front. We can think of people who are white, male, upper class, Christian, and heterosexual as points that are higher up and in front because people with these traits enjoy positions of power and privilege. Because people of color, females, the working class, and people who practice religions other than

Christianity can suffer discrimination, we can think of them as occupying points beneath and behind the points of privilege. These people live in positions of oppression. As the Rubic's Cube demonstrates, people can be in positions of privilege and in positions of oppression at the same time. For instance a Hispanic man has privilege as a male, but is also oppressed because of his race. In addition, just as the points on the smaller cubes can move positions as sides turn, people can move in the matrix based on some modifiable social identities, such as class and education. However, other social identities, such as race and sexual orientation, cannot change, so people are forever impacted by these unalterable social identities.

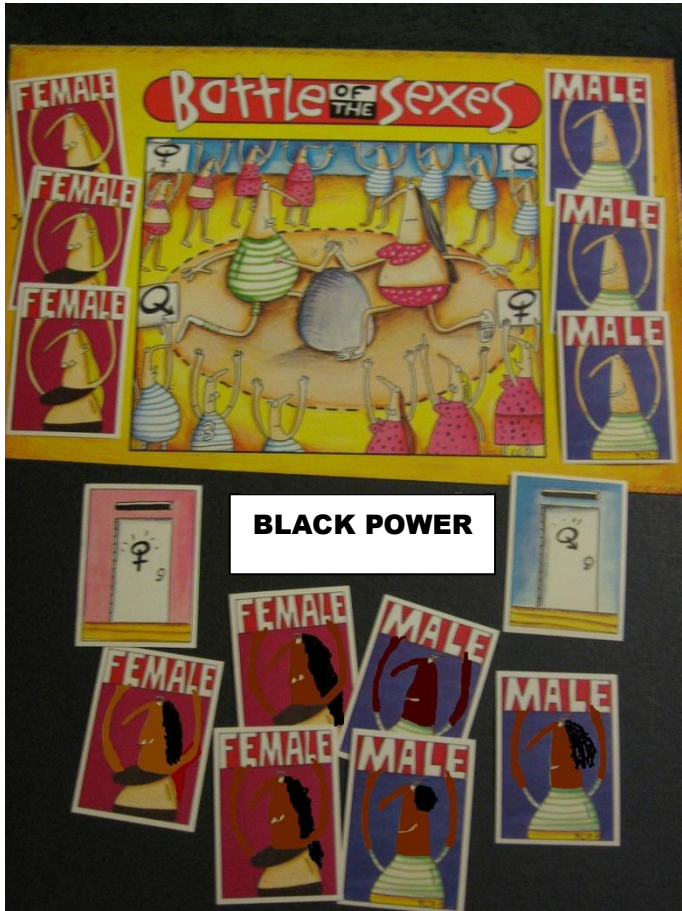


Comparing Frameworks for Examining Social Issues

Framework	How it Works	Promotes tolerance	Uses data from marginalized voices	Celebrates diversity	Examines power in social structures	Promotes action to correct social injustice
Comparative Difference Approach	Compares different groups' unique experiences	√	√			
Additive Approach	Examines oppressions separately by adding them up	√	√			
Diversity Approach	Focuses on cultural diversity	√	√	√		
Intersectionality Approach	Focuses on the combined effects of various social identities on people's lives	√	√	√	√	√

(Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Andersen & Collins, 2010)

What happens when you fail to look at all social identities?



One critique of the second wave feminist movement is that it largely revolved around white middle-class issues and ignored perspectives from women of color (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2007). Women of color became confused and even angry because they were not sure if they were supposed to march behind the white women protesting sexism or march behind their male counterparts protesting racism. The problem with the second wave women's movement, then, was leaders failed to look at race as well as gender. One of the goals of the third wave feminist movement is to include voices from marginalized groups, such as women of color, women with disabilities, and those in the **LGBT** (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) community.



Faces of Feminism:

Angela Davis
Wilma Mankiller
Gloria Steinem

Photo from
Newsok.com

Angela Miller (2010) University of Houston-Clear Lake

How can intersectionality theory be applied to real-world social issues?

Intersectionality can help answer complicated questions! For instance, it can help answer why people of color tend to be overrepresented in the lower classes? Many people believe people of color cause their own poverty because they do not work hard (Aguirre & Turner, 2007). But in reality, class and race combine to perpetuate poverty due to **redlining** (sectioning off neighborhoods to keep people of color from living in neighborhoods strictly for white people) (Williams, 2010). Because of **racism** (believing that one race is superior to another), **ethnic discrimination** (behavior that denies resources to a particular group based on race or ethnicity), and **prejudice** (judging a group of people based on stereotypes), people of color were not allowed to live in certain neighborhoods or given home loans (Aguirre & Turner, 2007).



The Monopoly board illustrates how redlining works. A piece of red yarn stretches across the board sectioning off the lower properties. Different colored “human beans” represent different races living on the various properties. Brown and black “human beans” are stuck below the red line in the lower priced rental properties. White “human beans” have opportunities to buy and live on the higher priced properties. There is one black “human bean” on the higher priced properties. That’s Oprah. She changed her class to become the wealthiest and most powerful African American woman in American history (Oprah Winfrey Biography). Some people like to say, “If Oprah can make it out of poverty, any person of color can. People need to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.” But Oprah does not represent most people of color who face barriers to success that white people do not ever have to face.



Life chances are dim for poor people of color. Because of redlining, many have not been able to accumulate wealth that often comes from home ownership. The poor also pay a much higher percent of their income to taxes. Also, people of color are overrepresented in the criminal justice system because of **racial profiling** (targeting people of color for criminal activity) (Aguirre & Turner, 2007). Jail time often makes it hard to get a job. The rich have much better life chances. They often get stock, can accumulate wealth in the form of home mortgages, pay less of a percentage of their income in taxes, and if they get in trouble, they can afford lawyers who will most likely save them a jail sentence. Also, the rich often inherit money, so they do not have to pull themselves up by their “bootstraps.”



How does racial segregation perpetuate poverty among people of color?



Racially segregated neighborhoods were due to both redlining and “white flight,” the practice of white people fleeing the inner cities to the suburbs once schools became desegregated (Merriam Webster, 2010). Segregated neighbors lead to unequal life chances because of the way the school systems are financed. School income is based on property taxes, so urban, rural, and small town public schools usually do not have computers, or if they do, they may be outdated. They tend to have crumbling facilities, overworked and underpaid teachers, and fewer field trips meaning fewer outside experiences for the students. In addition, the students tend to have less access to nutrition and healthcare and fewer college opportunities.

On the other hand, suburban, and some small town public and private schools usually have updated computers, newer textbooks, and newer facilities. They still have overworked teachers, but they are usually paid higher, so more qualified teachers tend to gravitate to these higher income schools. The schools can afford more field trips and the students have more access to healthcare. Ultimately, these students have more opportunities to go on to higher education.

College can mean a huge difference in the Game of Life. A higher percentage of white people than people of color go to college (Aguirre & Turner, 2007). There are more white “human beans” on the path to college in the Game of Life than “human beans” of color. Those who go to college are able to advance in class. Since more whites attend college than African Americans, Hispanics, and Native American, they tend to make higher incomes (Aguirre & Turner, 2007).



The job cards in the Game of Life mimic real world patterns. The job cards requiring degrees show only white people, while people of color are found only on the cards that do not require degrees. Skipping college rarely leads to a higher income, unless you become an

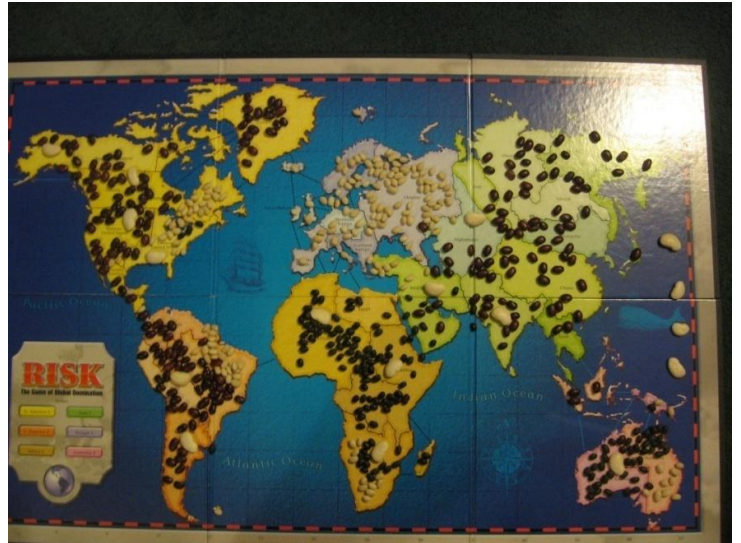
entertainer or sports star. Unfortunately, many boys of color, especially, grow up thinking their ticket out of poverty lies in becoming sports stars (Messner, 2010). They do not see the improbability of becoming a successful athlete. If these young children of color only concentrate on playing sports and not their education, they will more than likely be destined to remain in poverty.



How can intersectionality theory be applied to the global scale?

Intersectionality theory, when applied on the global scale, sheds light on the power structures between nations. For instance, the theory can be used to study **colonization** (the act of “stripping a people of their culture, language, land, family structure, who they are as person and a people”) (Hernandez & Rehman, 2002, p. xxii) and **slavery** (an institution that uses forced labor to make profits) (Aguirre & Turner, 2007).

The Risk game board shows how white “human beans” encroached on the lands of “human beans” of color. The big white lima beans on the continents and the Pacific Ocean represent white conquest around the globe. Africans were also kidnapped by white slave traders and sent to America. White people said indigenous peoples whose skin color happened to be



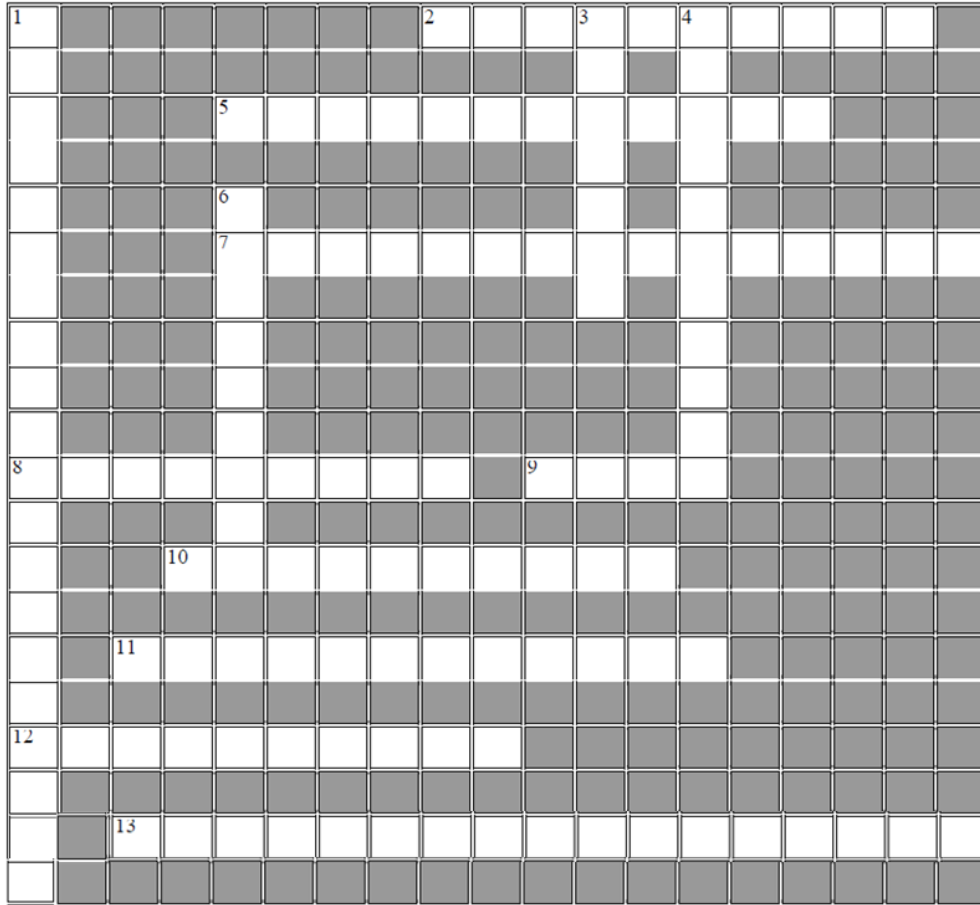
darker were less civilized because they were pagans. Therefore, it was the white man’s duty and even his “burden” to take over these lands and the rich resources the lands provided (Adelman & Cheng, 2003). White people created the idea of inferior races to justify taking these lands. Losing control of their own countries then became further evidence people of color were inferior. In reality, whites were simply bullies and took colonies because they could due to white military might! An intersectionality perspective on colonization shows that race, nationality, and religion combine to justify white European and American conquests of indigenous peoples around the globe.

Ehrenreich & Hochschild (2002) show intersectionality theory can explain the importation of domestic labor, such as maids and nannies, and women who work in the sex trade from the “third world” (p. 3). Some may consider the terms, “first,” “second,” and “third world” (which developed out of Cold War economics) pejorative today, but perhaps because people may be more familiar with the terms, Ehrenreich & Hochschild (2002) use them to explain that some white families in rich countries exploit the economic situation of women of color from poor countries. They state that globalization has resulted in middle and upper class white families from the “**First World**” pulling female migrant workers from the “**Third World**” to take care of **domestic work** (housework or taking care of children and elderly parents), so white women who traditionally do that work can work outside the home (p. 3). **First World** countries are rich, developed, or what C. Wright Mills (1959) called “overdeveloped” countries (p. 197). **Third World** countries are poor, developing, or what Mills (1959) referred to as “underdeveloped” countries (p. 196).

Ehrenreich & Hochschild (2002) also explain husbands, as a general rule, do not do domestic work because they see it as “women’s work” (p. 9). The families hire female maids and nannies of color because they believe these women possess special qualities that make them perfect for servitude. Ironically, to support their families in a poor country, the migrant women of color are pushed from their homelands to work in first world countries and must leave their own children in the care of relatives so they can care for white children in first world countries. More often than not, employers justify paying the migrants lower wages by believing they pay the migrants what they are worth, since the migrants tend to have skills not conducive to other kinds of work or cannot get other kinds of work due to racism. Also, these jobs pay less because women’s work is not valued.

In addition, the authors talk about women of color who work as **sex workers**, many times kidnapped as sex slaves or sold into prostitution at a very young age. The white men who use these young girls and women of color justify the sexual abuse they suffer because these men see them as inferior and not worthy of respect. In addition, white men often see women of color as exotic. By using intersectionality theory, we can see that gender, race, and ethnicity come together to facilitate global female exploitation and suffering.

Intersectionality Crossword Puzzle



ACROSS

2. Rich, developed, or overdeveloped countries
5. The act of “stripping a people of their culture, language, land, family structure, who they are as person and a people
7. Targeting people of color for criminal activity
8. Sectioning off neighborhoods to keep people of color from living in neighborhoods strictly for white people
9. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
10. Sex slaves and prostitutes
11. Housework or taking care of children and elderly parents; women's work
12. Poor, developing, or underdeveloped countries
13. Framework that looks at how combined social identities work to place people in a social hierarchy

DOWN

1. Behavior that denies resources to a particular group based on race or ethnicity
3. An institution that uses forced labor to make profits
4. The practice of white people fleeing the inner cities to the suburbs
6. Judging a group of people based on stereotypes
- (See text for citing information.)

Intersectionality Word Search

W R S C E N W K N E F E K V W U L C
 R W K I R A Y S Y N O I T A C U D E
 V R O P I N T E R S E C T I O N S E
 J A X L H B O D Y S H A P E V S U I
 X F Y T R E D N E G J U A B P O Q W
 X Y T I L I B A B B R E L I G I O N
 E T H N I C I T Y A E I C J D E J W
 C Y S M Z R S H Q R Z Q I O F F R Y
 A K E G A N S K I N T O N E A L H B
 R K T E P U E Q K S R S R G N G O D
 Y T I L A U X E S Y U O P P P O X J
 Y U R S A M P P X R Q C P H A Z H J
 G E O G R A P H I C L O C A T I O N
 S W Q C L A S S G M D H Z Y S O D U
 B Q E E B G F M K F G I J W A G O L
 H C Q E J K A J P G R J W C T J H X
 L U N X U Q B Z T S S K I H J N V A
 V N A T I O N A L I T Y N M R C Q U

ability
 age
 body shape
 class

education
 ethnicity
 gender
 geographic location

intersections
 nationality
 race
 religion

sexuality
 skin tone

How many different combinations of social identities can you imagine to make up an individual?

Angela Miller (2010) University of Houston-Clear Lake

References

- Adelman, L. (Executive producer), & Cheng, J. (Producer). (2003). *Race: The power of an illusion (Episode 2)* [Motion picture]. San Francisco: California Newsreel.
- Aguirre, A. & Turner, J. H. (2007). *American ethnicity: The dynamics and consequence of discrimination*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Andersen, M. L., & Hill Collins, P. (2010). Why race, class, and gender still matter. In M. L. Andersen and P. Hill Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* (7th ed., pp. 1-16). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Dill, B. T., & Zambrana, R. E. (2009). Critical thinking about inequality: An emerging lens. In B. T. Dill & R. E. Zambrana (Eds.), *Emerging intersections: Race, class, and gender in theory, policy, and practice* (pp. 1-21). New Brunswick: Rutgers.
- Ehrenreich, B. & Hochschild, A. R. (2002). Introduction. In Ehrenreich, B. and Hochschild, A. R. (Eds.), *Global woman: nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy*. (pp. 1-13). New York: Holt Paperbacks.
- Hernandez, D. & Rehman, B. (2002). Introduction. In Hernandez, D. & Rehman, B. (Eds.), *Colonize this!: Young women of color on today's feminism* (pp. xvii-xxviii). New York: Seal Press.
- Kirk, G. & Okazawa-Rey, M. (2007). *Women's lives: multicultural perspectives*, Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Messner, M. (2010). Masculinities and athletic careers. In M. L. Andersen & P. Hill Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* (7th ed., pp. 176-186). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). Culture and politics: The fourth epoch. In J. Summers (Ed.), *The politics of truth: The selected writings of C. Wright Mills* (pp. 193-202).
- Oprah Winfrey biography. (2010). *Bio True Story.com*, Retrieved from <http://www.biography.com/articles/Oprah-Winfrey-9534419?part=0>
- Stogsdill, S. (2010, April 8). Gloria Steinem reflects on friendship with Wilma Mankiller. *Newsok.com.*, Retrieved from <http://newsok.com/gloria-steinem-reflects-on-friendship-with-wilma-mankiller/article/3452255#ixzz15V9ghRPr>
- White flight. (2010). *Merriam-webster.com*, Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white+flight>
- Williams, P. J. (2010). Of race and risk. In M. L. Andersen & P. Hill Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* (7th ed., pp. 93-95). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.