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Intersectionality

Abstract

Intersectionality, one of the foundational concepts within the social sciences, complicates traditional approaches toward the study of race, gender, class, and sexuality by treating these factors as interconnected variables that shape an individual's overall life experiences, rather than as isolated variables. Power, privilege, and oppression are often much more complex than has been traditionally thought, as an individual may be relatively privileged in one or more aspects of their life, while simultaneously experiencing prejudice, discrimination, or oppression stemming from other aspects of their social background or identity. Intersectionality seeks to explain how these different variables come together to shape experience, identity, and society.

Overview

Intersectionality is one of the most important concepts in sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, and other social sciences pertaining to the study of social inequalities and the nature of life experiences among members of a particular society. Race, ethnicity, social class, and religion have been central topics of study within sociology and anthropology since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and gender and sexual orientation have become a major focus of social science research since the late 1960s. Historically, however, these various markers of identity were treated by researchers and social theorists as isolated variables, without consideration as to how these different factors interact (or intersect) with one another in shaping an individual's overall life experiences and circumstances. Prior to the mid-to-late 1970s, much scholarship within the social sciences spoke of various social groups (for example, African Americans, women, the working class, or LGBT people) as undifferentiated, monolithic entities. In other words, up until the 1970s, most social scientists categorized and identified individuals according to what they believed was their master status—that is, the marker of identity that was assumed to be the most important or fundamental in a person's life. This simplistic categorization then served as the basis for conducting research and speaking about various groups within American society.

Sociologists, anthropologists, and other scholars, however, have recognized the inherent flaws in such an approach; principally, the focus on assumed master statuses leads researchers to ignore important markers of variation within a racial, religious, gender, or sexual orientation group, thus providing a very limited understanding of the complexities and intricacies of social life within the United States or elsewhere. For example, consider the hypothetical example of three African American individuals. In the early years of the social sciences, the common approach would be to think of these three individuals as sharing a common identity, a common culture (stemming from their common racial and ethnic heritage, which would be assumed to be their common master status), and a common set of social experiences. Yet such a limited view obscures other possible important variables of difference. Suppose that these three individuals each was of a different religious heritage-such as a Roman Catholic, a Baptist, and a Muslim. These religious distinctions would consequently result in different social identities and distinct cultural experiences for these three individuals, despite their common ethnic background. These social differences would be further complicated if we also took the individuals' gender, social class, age, and other factors into consideration.

Further Insights

Although intersectionality has become a central principle in contemporary social science disciplines, it is oftentimes still overlooked or ignored in public conversations and media discourses about particular groups of people. The media still commonly speaks of individuals and groups in terms of master statuses, choosing to emphasize certain markers of identity while ignoring others. A prominent example of this occurred during the 2008 presidential campaign, which featured Arizona senator John McCain (a white male), Illinois senator Barack Obama (a biracial male of white and black parentage, but simply considered "black" under the "one-drop rule" of racial classification in the United States), New York senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (a white female), and Alaska governor Sarah Palin (also a white female). As sociologists Patricia Hill Collins and Margaret Andersen have pointed out, media coverage of these candidates identified and spoke of each candidate in terms of their master status. The media referred to Obama as the black or African American candidate, while Clinton and Palin were identified as the female candidates. The implication of such discourses was that Obama's race was visible, but not his gender, while the reverse was true for Clinton and Palin-their gender was visible, but not their race. On the other hand, the media did not highlight McCain's race or gender; if any attention was paid to McCain's identity, it was focused on his age (71 years old throughout most of the campaign).

Intersectionality is an important concept within the social sciences precisely because it challenges traditional, often taken-for-granted assumptions about privilege and oppression in American society. While it is true that, in the aggregate, African Americans and Latinos experience more societal discrimination and inequalities than white Americans, such a generalized statement overlooks the wide range of lived experience and social realities that structure the daily lives of millions of individuals within these broadly defined racial and ethnic categories. Working class, lower income, and impoverished whites have a vastly different set of social experiences in the United States than do middle- and upper-class whites, and economically disadvantaged whites do not experience the same degree of "white privilege" as more affluent whites, though this marker is often portrayed, uncritically, by the media as the experience shared by whites as a whole in American society. An upwardly mobile African American female who has earned a Master's Degree or a PhD and works as tenured college administrator or professor is obviously more socially privileged than a homeless white male, despite the fact that the former will likely encounter racism and/or sexism throughout her life. By the same token, middle-class African Americans who were born and raised in a suburban environment have a vastly different social reality and set of life experiences than do African Americans who were born and raised within a lower income, inner-city neighborhood.

Aside from experiences of privilege and oppression, intersectionality also highlights cultural variation within socially-defined groups. Since the publication of Edward Burnett Tylor's *Anthropology* (1881), culture has been defined as "the complex whole, which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, morals, customs, habits, and any other capabilities that an individual acquires as a member of his or her society." Culture is thus a worldview, a way in which an individual comes to understand the world, as well as their place within it; culture therefore enables individuals to make sense of their social realities. Historically, anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists perceived culture as a monolithic entity that unified an

entire nation or ethnic group and was shared equally and uniformly by the members of that group. This notion grew out of British structural-functionalist theorists, who emphasized social cohesion and unity within societies, and American "culture and personality" theorists, who sought to identify and describe the basic personality type among citizens of particular nations, from the 1920s through the 1940s. This logic, now understood to be excessively rigid and overly deterministic, was popularized by high-profile American anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead and was based on the simple, linear notion that an individual's national heritage or ethnic background determined their culture, which in turn shaped their personality type.

Psychological research has indicated that personality types differ among members of individual families, let alone entire ethnic groups or nations. Since the 1970s, social scientists, particularly cultural anthropologists, have shifted away from viewing "culture" as a static, timeless, and homogeneous feature of a racial, ethnic, or national group in favor of a much more modified and nuanced view of culture. This new understanding of culture recognizes that culture is highly fluid and dynamic (in other words, something that is subject to change over time). This new understanding of culture also recognizes that people are producers of culture through agency (that is, the actions that people take- both as individuals and as collective members of groups-to influence and change their lives and the society around them); this contrasts sharply with the older notion of culture that ignored agency altogether and viewed individuals as simply the products of culture. The basic view in cultural anthropology and other social sciences today is that socialization (the process by which a person acquires his or her cultural background) is an ongoing, lifelong process-not simply a phenomenon that occurs in childhood and then abruptly stops-and that people use agency to actively produce cultural change. Culture is contested and negotiated, rather than static, because different individuals and groups are positioned differently within society and therefore have different views as to what is considered most desirable for their society.

Another hallmark of contemporary understandings of human culture is that a tremendous amount of cultural variation also exists within socially defined groups, as opposed to traditional notions of culture that only understood cultural differences as existing between groups. For example, a Latino senior citizen and a Latino teenager will, in some important respects, have more commonalities with white and African American senior citizens and teenagers, respectively, than they will with one another, given their age/generational differences. Latinos are also highly culturally diverse among themselves in many other respects, in terms of specific ethnic-national heritage (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, etc.), citizenship or immigration status (U.S.-born citizen or immigrant), linguistic orientation (monolingual English speaker, monolingual Spanish speaker, or bilingual), social class, sexual orientation, region or geographic locale, religion, and other important variables. These variables shape an individual's overall culture, and these variables exist within all racial and ethnic groups.

Intersectionality thus has lead social scientists to understand oppression and culture in very different manners than was common in the early years of many academic disciplines. As such scholars no longer treat race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexual orientation as separate and isolated variables, but rather as an interconnected web that shapes cultural background and experiences with social privilege and/or oppression.

Discourse

Although intersectionality is a relatively new term within the social sciences, the concept that different factors or variables interact in shaping one's life experiences dates back much earlier. The German sociologist Max Weber, one of the pioneering figures of modern sociology in the early twentieth century, noted that social class was a much more complicated phenomenon than had traditionally been thought. According to Weber, social class consisted of three distinct, but interrelated elements-wealth prestige, and power. Whereas wealth refers to the amount of financial assets one possesses, prestige refers to the degree of social respect and admiration that one accrues from their society on the basis of their social standing. Power refers to one's ability to have their social, political, or financial interests promoted and defended within their society. While these three elements are interrelated in shaping one's social class background, they do not necessarily go hand in hand. For example, an experienced long-haul truck driver working for a unionized company may, in fact, earn higher wages than a college professor. However, the latter career has traditionally carried more social prestige than the former-particularly since professors have often come from middle- and upper-middle class family backgrounds (especially in past generations), while truck drivers often come from working class backgrounds.

Black legal theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who would go on to become a professor of law at the University of California, Los Angeles, coined the term "intersectionality" in a famous 1989 essay titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." Focusing on the experiences of black women in American society, Crenshaw pointed out that the unique lived experiences of this group had largely been marginalized and overlooked by scholars, since studies of feminism had tended to center on white women, while studies of racism centered largely on the experiences of black men. While being both female and black, the experiences of black women differ in important respects from others who share their sex or race.

Crenshaw argues that the prejudice and discrimination that black women experience in American society is not always easily and clearly identifiable as strictly an act of racism or sexism but, instead, could be a complex combination of both. Although Crenshaw was the first to use the term "intersectionality," criticisms of the mainstream feminist movement as reflecting the ideals, interests, and agenda of middle-class, heterosexual, white women were first raised as early as the 1970s by black, Chicana, and lesbian feminists who felt excluded from the women's movement in the United States. Women from such historically marginalized backgrounds raised objections that feminist activism essentialized (assuming homogeneity within a group) males and females while ignoring important social differences among males and among females-such as race, social class, religion, age, and so on. Growing attention to these matters led to the rise of Third Wave feminism in the 1980s and 1990s, which asserted the viewpoints that neither women nor men were homogeneous groups, and that experiences of femininity and masculinity co-exist alongside one another within society (based on the intersection of gender with other variables of identity, such as race and class). This produces a range of gendered experiences, just as there are a wide range of African American experiences, white experiences, and gay and lesbian experiences.

Sociologists Maxine Baca Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneau-Sotelo, and Michael Messner term this novel approach towards understanding the complexities of gender, race, class, and sexuality as the "prism of difference." Zinn, Hondagnaeu-Sotelo, and Messner contend, "Gender is no longer viewed simply as a matter of two opposing categories of people, male and female, but as a range of social relations among differently situated people." Different forms of masculinity and femininity are interconnected with other variables, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, age, etc. This reality accounts for "multiple masculinities" and "multiple femininities." A middle-age, middle-class, white, heterosexual female living as a single mother in suburban Long Island has a very different set of life experiences than a twenty-five year-old working-class lesbian Mexican immigrant female living in an inner-city Los Angeles neighborhood. By the same token, President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State Colin Powell articulate different versions of black masculinity than hip hop producer Sean "Puffy" Combs or rapper 50 Cent, despite all four men being black males in the United States.

These arguments notwithstanding, several cultural anthropologists have criticized multicultural programming and cultural diversity training, which have become quite common in schools and on college campuses, as well as part of employee orientations at many companies nationwide, for often neglecting intersectionality and instead presenting simplistic, essentialized depictions of various racial and ethnic groups. Judith Goode, a former professor of anthropology at Temple University, has been an outspoken critic of multiculturalism and cultural diversity programs for reinforcing the public's notion that each racial or ethnic group can be characterized by a singular, distinct culture and personality type. According to Goode, this approach inadvertently ends up promoting stereotypes of racial and ethnic groups. A much more accurate approach, according to anthropologists, would be to educate the public that a considerable degree of cultural variation also exists within groups-rather than simply focusing on cultural differences assumed to exist between groups.

Terms & Concepts

Culture: Broadly defined, the total accumulation of knowledge, beliefs, values, and information that an individual acquires as part of their life experiences

Discourse: The nature of a conversation about a particular subject; the way in which people commonly talk about, define, or label a particular social topic such as race, gender, sexuality orientation, or social class.

Essentialism: The simplistic assumption of homogeneity within a specific group of people

Ethnicity: A social identity based on a sense of common, shared ancestry with others-usually (but not always) connecting to an ancestral country of origin or common cultural characteristics (such as a linguistic or religious heritage)

Gender: The socially constructed differences between males and females within a society, consisting of the culturally defined roles and identities associated with each sex

Intersectionality: The complex ways in which social variables, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and other factors combine to shape a person's overall life experiences-particularly with respect to the prejudice and discrimination that one may face within society

Master status: The marker of identity that is usually assumed (perhaps incorrectly) by society to be the most important variable in a person's life; the variable that is assumed to be the core of one's identity

Race: A socially constructed category of classifying members of a society on the basis of a few arbitrarily selected physical or biological traits, such as skin color or eye shape

Sex: The biological distinction between male and female, based on chromosomal differences (XY for males; XY for males)

Social class: A segment of society characterized as having a relatively common economic and educational background, which is seen as a basis for similar social outlook and experiences that distinguish it from other classes. In the United States, social classes have traditionally been defined as upper class, middle class, working class, and impoverished.

Third Wave feminism: An approach toward feminist theory that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s that argued that neither males nor females were homogeneous and promoted taking intersectionality into account in studies of gender

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