

## Introduction to intersectionality

My name is Elizabeth Wynn, I'm the Equality and Diversity Manager at the Babraham Institute, and today I'm going to be giving you an introduction to intersectionality. I'm going to cover the origin and development of this term and idea as well as explain how it can be used to better understand and challenge inequality.

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. She first used it in a paper she published in 1989: "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."

So you'll notice that this was published in a legal journal and Crenshaw was, and still is, a legal scholar, so she was talking about discrimination in the legal context in the United States. She had come across a lot of cases in the 70s and 80s where black women were bringing discrimination cases that the courts were unable or unwilling to prosecute.

(Sorry, we've got the cat joining us now.)

So I'm not, she references three specific cases in this paper, and I'm not going to go into them in any detail, but just to give a summary of the type of thing that she was observing. At in this time in the States, there were a lot of automotive plants, manufacturing plants that would have jobs for women, so secretarial and admin jobs, but they would only hire white women in them, and they'd have jobs for Black people that were manufacturing, floor work jobs, but they would only hire Black men.

So this left black women who wanted to work there in a very difficult position because they found it very difficult to get jobs and if they did get jobs at these types of factories then it would be difficult for them to get promotions. But when they brought discrimination cases against their employers, the courts would say, well, this isn't an issue of gender discrimination because women as a whole aren't affected, and it's not an issue of race discrimination because Black people as a whole aren't discriminated against. So Crenshaw felt that there was clearly a gap in the legal system that meant that these cases of discrimination weren't being understood and therefore they weren't able to be prosecuted. And that was where she came up with the term intersectionality.

So to use her words from this paper: "Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women."

So I think the easiest way to think about this is as a Venn diagram. So they are experiencing the blue experiences and the yellow experiences, but where they overlap it's not just a combination. It's creating something new, in this case green experiences.

So as I said Crenshaw was a legal scholar. She was developing this as a legal framework to understand discrimination, but as the title of her paper indicated she also thought this framework of understanding would be useful for feminist and anti racist theory and practice.

This wasn't actually a new idea. In this time and place, there was a lot of ideas being developed in this area around black feminism. So, for example, Audre Lorde, saying "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

The Combahee River Collective Statement which was published in 1977, I'm just going to read this highlighted part here. "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."

Both of these groups, they're not using the word intersectionality but they're clearly talking about the same issues: the fact that there's no way to combat discrimination by focusing on individual categories, because that's not the reality of people's lived experiences.

And the reason that a lot of people were thinking about this at this time, Black women in America in the 70s and 80s, is because this was a development of Black women's experiences in the 60s with the civil rights and women's liberation. So when black women were involved in the civil rights movement, they found that they experienced sexism. When they were involved in women's liberation movements, they found they experienced racism. And they also found that in both cases, the issues that those movements were focusing on weren't necessarily the ones that were most important and relevant to them.

So this is the context in which Kimberlé Crenshaw developed her theory of intersectionality. As I said it wasn't a new thing, a new idea. She just came up with this word which described the phenomenon quite well. And as I said she came up with this word in 1989, over 30 years ago now, and it was quickly picked up in academic legal circles and related fields like sociology. But you probably feel like this word started coming around like five years ago, not 30, and that's when it made the jump to the mainstream. Out of academia into the mainstream. And I suggest the reason for this is because in that time period, around five to 10 years ago, different social justice movements started becoming much more prominent.

For example, Black Lives Matter, we're all familiar with now. It originated in 2013. I've taken this statement from their 'about us' section of the website: "We affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. Our network centers those who've been marginalized within Black liberation movements." This doesn't use the word intersectionality but it's very clearly espousing intersectional ideas.

Another social justice movement, which became very mainstream not that long ago is the Women's March. The first one was in 2017 and they've been held annually since then. And from their guiding vision they say: "Recognizing that women have intersecting identities and are therefore impacted by a multitude of social justice and human rights issues, we have outlined a representative vision for our government that is based on the principles of liberty and justice for all." So they do use the word intersecting there.

Another high profile use of intersectionality was at the Oscars in 2018 which was at the height of the #MeToo movement.

So these three different movements, Black Lives Matter, Women's March, #MeToo, all became very high profile and mainstream within the last five to 10 years. And because they're all founded on intersectional principles, they also brought that idea and that term to mainstream prominence. And that's why we're all hearing it now.

I think it's important to also note that all three of these movements are led by Black women and women of colour. Black women and women of colour have absolutely been leading the way on this, on this issue.

So Crenshaw did not give a single definition of intersectionality in her paper. One milestone, I guess, in intersectionality becoming more mainstream was it being added to dictionaries. It was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015 and they define it as: "The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage."

So this is the definition. I think it's quite dense and I also don't know how good of an explanation it is so I'm going to try to give more of an explanation, and I hope that, I hope that you find it useful. So in defining what intersectionality is:

It's acknowledging the fact that people experience the world differently based on their combination of characteristics. So that's our Venn diagram. Intersectionality is also a lens for understanding the ways different forms of inequality work together. And in fact, they can often make each other worse. It's also a framework for challenging discrimination and inequality.

So it is a very complex idea and the fact that it has these different facets, it can be quite confusing if someone doesn't specify when they're talking about intersectionality how they mean it. So I don't think it's strange that there is a lot of confusion around what exactly intersectionality means.

I'm going to move on now to talking about intersectionality as a lens and a framework, but before I do I want to quickly talk about what intersectionality isn't because intersectionality is often misunderstood and mischaracterised. So intersectionality is not about a "new hierarchy of victimhood", "identity politics on steroids", or "oppression Olympics". There's sometimes this misconception around intersectionality that it's about, 'Oh, that person has six marginalised identities and you only have two so they are more important and worthy person than you,' or something. That the more marginalised identities you have the more worthy you are or something. That's not what intersectionality is about. Intersectionality is a way of understanding the world and hopefully a way of changing it as well. And the change that intersectionality should be used for is not to create any new hierarchies, but by removing discrimination and inequality, getting rid of hierarchies altogether.

So now moving on to intersectionality as a lens for understanding. I have a few examples of data where, by examining it in an intersection way, asking not just how do these things differ between categories, but between multiple categories and at the overlap of those, we gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the inequality there.

So I have two examples from academia to start with.

(Excuse me, I'm just going to grab a bit of water.)

Gender pay gaps are something that's talked about pretty frequently. It's the average difference in salary between men and women. This graph is showing average salaries of Russell Group academic staff and as well as being broken down by gender, it's also broken down by ethnicity. So ethnicity pay gaps is also something people talk about. But by breaking it down both ways we can see that, for example, white women, even though they earn less than their white male counterparts, are still earning more on average than Black and Arab men. So talking about a gender pay gap by itself might not be a sufficiently nuanced way to talk about the inequality that's happening in this area.

Another thing is that we can notice is that within ethnic groups, the average difference between men and women's salaries also varies. So, for example, for white and Black people, the gender pay gap is more pronounced than it is for Chinese and East Asian or Arab people.

I have another example, and this one's from America so the ethnic categories used here are different than the ones we use in the UK. And this is about reasons women with STEM degrees take jobs outside of their field. This is something that EDI work in STEM focuses on quite often. Women tend to leave STEM and leave academia at higher rates than men and figuring out why and how we can bring those rates more in line is a major focus of a lot of EDI work in STEM. But this data shows that the reasons women leave them can vary a lot depending on their ethnicity.

Native Hawai'ian Pacific Islanders overwhelmingly leave because of family reasons, whereas Black women are primarily leaving STEM because they can't find jobs and Hispanic women cite working conditions far more than any other ethnic group. This shows us that when we are thinking about, how can we design strategies to prevent women leaving STEM, we can't do it as if women are entirely a monolith, because there are a lot of different reasons and there's evidently a lot of different variation by race.

Both of these examples look at the intersection between race and gender and that was what Kimberlé Crenshaw talked about originally as well. However, that's not the only intersection that intersectionality can be concerned with. When you're talking about intersectionality, it can be between any characteristics. It depends on what's relevant to the question you're asking, to what you're looking at.

So I just have two more examples to look at other intersectional categories. This one is about continuation rates a full time students by ethnicity and looking at the intersection that has with reported mental health condition. So we can see that across all ethnicities, having a reported mental health condition decreases the likelihood of continuing on with your degree. But for Asian, mixed, other and white ethnicities, it decreases the rates of continuation by between 2 and 4% whereas for Black students, it decreases it by 8%. So I think this is a good example of that sort of Venn diagram, that intersection. It doesn't seem that for Black students with mental health conditions, it's just the sum of being Black and having a mental illness. There's clearly something happening there that makes that combination have more effect.

Another example is looking at sexual orientation and gender and how that affects experiencing intimate partner violence. So women as a group are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than men, and bisexual people as a group more likely than gay or heterosexual people, but bisexual women are more likely than you would think and again, it's that intersection. Clearly something about belonging to both of those categories is causing a change.

So those were just some examples of how looking at data in an intersectional way, using intersectionality as a lens to view inequality, gives us a more nuanced understanding of inequality.

The final thing I wanted to talk about is using intersectionality as a framework for change.

I'm assuming that everyone who is here is interested in helping make a fair and more equal society, even though everyone here isn't necessarily an academic. I'm sorry, isn't necessarily an activist. So I've tried to come up with a few suggestions I think anyone can do in whatever way they are trying to make the world a fair place.

First thing is recognise differences exist. There isn't a singular female experience or LGBT experience, just as there isn't a singular postdoc experience or student experience. So when you're thinking,

what could make this situation better, what would make this situation or process that I'm going through more fair, remember that your experience might not be universal and see if you can seek other views.

Leading on from that: use specific language. I think as scientists we've all seen how this can go wrong, you know, a news headline where it says 'wonder drug slows aging' and you look at the actual paper and it's 'this drug in this specific cell line results in reduced expression of this specific marker of aging'. It's a different thing. And so by that same sort of token, be specific with the language you're using when you're talking about equality issues. If you say 'this is a women's issue', is it actually or is it an issue for people with children or people with caring responsibilities more generally? So think about what exactly you're implying with the language you use. And again, is it, are you making assumptions about what is or isn't a universal experience for a specific group.

Show solidarity with other movements. So if something isn't, you know, 'your' issue. If you are cisgender, for example, but you support women and support women's rights, you need to show up for trans women as well. Because, again, of these things intersecting, if you support women you support all women, as an example.

Finally, fill out your demographic data. In order to look at the intersections of different categories, we need to have the data to do that. For example, there was that graph with the Russell Group universities' salary and it was broken down by gender and ethnicity. We wouldn't actually be able to produce information like that at BI, because only about 50% of our staff disclose their ethnicity. There's too much missing data there for us to draw any conclusions.

So of course, do you know, think about who you're giving your data to, what they're going to use it for, privacy concerns all of that. But as someone who does analyse this type of data, I would say that it's incredibly useful for us to be able to have that information.

That was everything I wanted to cover on this. Thank you very much for attending this talk.