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Intersectionality

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Abstract and Keywords

This article focuses on the idea of intersectionality, which has been accepted in a variety of disciplines such as psychology and political science. However, the definition of intersectionality has also been a source of inconsistency and ambiguity. The discussion presents a working definition of intersectionality and references Bonnie Thornton Dill's insight on the multidimensionality of human experience. It presents several themes that can help in understanding intersectionality, its core ideas, and some of its contributions within a sociology of knowledge framework. Finally, the article discusses the two areas that have been affected by the path of intersectionality: the American political arena and women's studies and gender scholarship.

Keywords: intersectionality, Bonnie Thornton Dill, multidimensionality, human experience, sociology of knowledge, American political arena, gender scholarship, women's studies

Introduction

The idea of intersectionality has gained considerable visibility within the early twenty-first century academy. Currently housed within a broad and interdisciplinary body of scholarship, the idea of intersectionality weaves across multiple disciplines, garnering increasing acceptance within social science fields as diverse as sociology (Collins 2007), psychology (Mahalingam, Balan, and Haritatos 2008; Warner 2008), economics (Ruwanpura 2008), and political science (Hancock 2007a; Simien 2007; Ackerly and True 2008; Weldon 2008). Fields that have been oriented to public practice have shown a special affinity for intersectionality. For example, intersectionality's close affinity with legal scholarship, specifically critical race theory and LatCrit theory, highlights the ways

intersectional insights have been cultivated in an intellectual context explicitly devoted to social action and change (Matua 2010). Similarly, public policy finds utility in intersectional analyses for understanding how intersectional social locations impact life choices (Manuel 2006). Intersectionality has also made significant contributions to the field of public health, where social determinants of health disparities are increasingly approached from intersectional perspectives (Dworkin 2005; Schulz and Mullings 2006; Weber and Fore 2007).¹

Given intersectionality's growing acceptance, remarkably little consensus exists on its definition. Inconsistency and ambiguity surround the term (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Davis 2008), hallmarks of an emerging construct. Intersectionality has been described as a theory (Manuel 2006; Steinbugler, Press, and Dias 2006; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Hancock 2007b; Bowleg 2008; Nash 2008, 2009), a theory of identity (Nash 2008), a theoretical contribution (McCall 2005), and a theoretical paradigm (Hancock 2007b). Intersectionality has also been approached conceptually, as a perspective (Browne and Misra 2003; Steinbugler et al. 2006), a concept (Knapp 2005), and a type of analysis (Yuval-Davis 2006; Nash 2009). Other scholars seem more focused on intersectionality's placement in the research process, with some approaching intersectionality as a methodological approach (Yuval-Davis 2006; Steinbugler et al. 2006), an analytic perspective (Steinbugler et al. 2006), a research paradigm (Hancock 2007b; Bowleg 2008), a measurable variable (Bowleg 2008), and a type of data (Bowleg 2008). Finally, there is a category of intersectionality as something we personally "experience" (Bowleg 2008), opening the door to the many narrative works such as autobiographies, autoethnographies, and ethnographies that are inspired in some fashion by intersectionality. While this ambiguity and inconsistency likely result from a well-intentioned effort on the part of scholars to advance the promise of intersectionality,² the slippage in terminology can feel imprecise and foster uneven outcomes.

One way of approaching this ambiguity lies in examining how practitioners in the field of race, class, and gender studies, a field that catalyzed current expressions of intersectionality, describe its distinguishing features. In 2001, sociologist Bonnie Thornton Dill surveyed seventy faculty members from seventeen colleges and universities in the United States, many of whom had helped launch race, class, and gender studies itself, on their perceptions of the core features and status of the field. Dill's study provides an important starting point for examining how practitioners of race, class, and gender studies understand intersectionality. As Dill points out, "What I take from these interviews is that work 'at the intersections' is an analytical strategy, an approach to understanding human life and behavior rooted in the experiences and struggles of marginalized people. It is also an important tool linking theory with practice that can aid

in the empowerment of communities and individuals. Finally, it is a theoretical perspective that insists on examining the multi-dimensionality of human experience” (2002, 6).

In this chapter, we engage one core question: how do we make sense of intersectionality as a construct that is so widespread and visible yet simultaneously loosely defined and paradoxical? For the purposes of this volume’s focus on intersectionality, gender, and politics, we build on Dill’s (2002) insight that “working at the intersections” (or intersectionality) encompasses an analytical strategy that insists on examining the multidimensionality of human experience that might aid in the empowerment of individuals and communities. As a working definition, we suggest that intersectionality consists of an assemblage of ideas and practices that maintain that gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability, and similar phenomena cannot be analytically understood in isolation from one another; instead, these constructs signal an intersecting constellation of power relationships that produce unequal material realities (p. 59) and distinctive social experiences for individuals and groups positioned within them. This insight creates analytic space for a more robust understanding of the privileges and penalties associated with intersecting systems of oppression as well as a multifaceted conception of standpoint epistemologies and knowledges.³ Yet because a comprehensive response to this question merits a deeper analysis than this working definition, this essay will sketch out some of the broad contours of the kinds of themes that might be considered in making sense of intersectionality.

We approach our overarching question through a chapter in two parts. The first half presents an overview of some of the main ideas of intersectionality by summarizing its core ideas and examining selected specific contributions of the field thus far. We place this overview within a sociology of knowledge framework, conceptualizing intersectionality as a *knowledge project* whose umbrella is broad enough to encompass the ambiguities, contradictions, and questions discussed in the introduction. In the second half, we examine two contemporary sites that have been differentially affected by the trajectory of intersectionality: (1) the close ties that intersectionality has with women’s studies and gender scholarship; and (2) the wider American political arena, with special attention to the implications of intersectionality for democracy.

Intersectionality: A Conceptual Framework

Intersectionality is a term that has been increasingly applied to knowledge projects whose purpose is to understand all dimensions of power relations, including race, class,

gender, and sexuality. Intersectional knowledge projects have reconceptualized these phenomena as mutually constructing systems of power. Yet a sociology of knowledge framework suggests that knowledge—including knowledge aimed at better understanding intersectionality—is socially constructed and transmitted, legitimated, and reproduced by social mechanisms deeply intertwined with (intersecting) social systems of power.⁴ As such, we do not view intersectionality as a finished construct (i.e., as a theory of power relations), as a methodology to be used in studying social phenomena, or as a construct that can be examined. Many current debates about intersectionality lie in this space of defining what kind of knowledge or political project it is and might be (see, e.g., Walby 2007; Nash 2008). Given these debates, here we use the term intersectionality to refer to a dynamic constellation of ideas and practices that are sensitive to and compatible with insights gleaned from the sociology of knowledge. Stated differently, we approach intersectionality as a knowledge project or, more accurately, as a constellation of knowledge projects.

(p. 60) This understanding of intersectionality through the framework of knowledge projects enables us to identify several important, emerging core themes of intersectional analyses that collectively constitute distinguishing features of intersectional scholarship. These themes are not all present in a given work, and each theme is not unique to intersectionality. Rather, the varying combinations of these themes can be seen as distinguishing features of a range of intersectional knowledge projects, all of which are positioned in some direct relation to these themes.

The first core idea of intersectional knowledge projects stresses that systems of power (e.g., race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age, country of origin, citizenship status) cannot be understood in isolation from one another; instead, systems of power intersect and coproduce one another to result in unequal material realities and the distinctive social experiences that characterize them. Stated differently, racism, sexism, class exploitation, and similar oppressions mutually construct one another, drawing upon similar practices and forms of organization (Acker 1999). Intersectional knowledge projects acknowledge the ways political and economic structural arrangements such as modernity, patriarchal rule, and capitalism operate in constellation with one another (Knapp 2005). For any given social context, collectively, these social domains constitute a specific matrix of domination that reflects the particularities of a given time and place (Collins 2000).⁵

Second, intersectional knowledge projects acknowledge that the distinctive social locations of individuals and groups within intersecting power relations have important epistemological implications. This insight suggests that knowledge cannot be separated from the power relations in which it participates and which shape it (Foucault 1980;

Collins 1986). All knowledge is constructed within and helps to construct intersecting power relations; notably, this includes the construct of intersectionality itself. Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis (2002, 316) discuss the situated imagination as a crucial component of feminist standpoint theory, pointing to the ways social positioning shapes knowledge as well as the imagination. This approach yields two unique insights: (1) individuals and groups are differently positioned in a distinctive matrix of domination, which has implications for how we experience society including *what we know and can imagine*, and the material realities that accompany this experience; and (2) individuals and groups can *simultaneously* experience privilege and disadvantage (Crenshaw 1991).

A third core idea that characterizes many intersectional knowledge projects is an attention to relationality and relational processes (Collins 2000; Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, 187). This emphasis on relationality highlights the ways race, gender, class, and other systems of power are constituted and maintained through relational processes (Anderson 1996; Glenn 1998; Acker 1999; Yuval-Davis 2006).⁶ The analytic importance of relationality in intersectional scholarship demonstrates how various social positions (occupied by actors, systems, and political and economic structural arrangements) (p. 61) necessarily acquire meaning and power (or a lack thereof) in relationship to other social positions. This highlights the intersecting and coconstructing nature of social systems and structures organized around power and inequality. For example, Collins (2010) addresses the political implications of intersectionality's conceptualization of social groups as fundamentally characterized by interrelationships across power differences. Indeed, the very prefix given to the term intersectionality marks an important departure away from binary Western thinking that classifies idea systems and eras according to pre- and post- (e.g., premodern, poststructuralism); instead, prefixes such as inter- and trans- reflect the interrelated nature of social power relations that are increasingly recognized in social and political theory as well as in intersectionality (Emirbayer 1997; Collins 2010, 28, fn. 13).

A fourth and related core idea of intersectional knowledge projects concerns the contours of the different standpoints, epistemologies, and knowledges that accompany multiple social locations. Not only are actual social relations relational, but also the worldviews that they catalyze are necessarily relational. Epistemologically, intersectionality highlights the various standpoints that intersocial (i.e., not dichotomous) locations occupy; these alternative standpoints challenge Enlightenment understandings of truth that are often purported by those in the center. Intersectionality's ability to draw attention to and account for intersocial locations—including those on the margins (Crenshaw 1991)—challenges binary thinking, shifting the analytic focus on the fluidity among, interrelationships between, and coproduction of various categories and systems of power (Collins 1993). While the second core theme described demonstrates that power

shapes knowledge and different social locations result in different epistemological worldviews, this fourth core theme recognizes that standpoints—and not just social relations—are relational (and thus coconstructing). This core insight of intersectional knowledge projects destabilizes claims to truth, thereby acknowledging the presence of alternative truths in intersocial locations (Collins 2000).

This attention to material, social, and epistemological relationality leads to a fifth prominent theme emerging out of the literature on intersectionality, namely, the significance of boundaries. An awareness of the analytic significance of boundaries underscores intersectional knowledge projects' claims about the multifaceted nature of intersecting social phenomena, for example, individual and group identities, and social issues as constructed at the intersection of multiple agendas. This attention to boundaries within intersectional scholarship can be understood as part of a larger tradition and recent trend within humanities and social scientific scholarship that uses the concept of boundaries to make sense of various relational processes (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Within this context, a simplified or one-dimensional understanding of identity politics fails to account for those social locations on the margins, borders, and boundaries of identity categories (Anzaldúa 1987; Crenshaw 1991). This attention to boundaries has also included a recognition of the ability for (p. 62) intersectional knowledge projects to transcend boundaries, particularly the disciplinary boundaries endemic to the academy (Nash 2009).

A final dimension of intersectional knowledge projects involves a concern with complexity (Dhamoon 2011). For example, scholars suggest that using intersectionality as an analytical strategy compels us to grapple with the complexity of the world (Davis 2008, 79). In her efforts to highlight social class as an important feature of intersectional knowledge projects, Acker (1999, 52) argues that systems of power are “complexly interrelated at a multiplicity of sites within particular historical developments.” McCall (2005) explores the relationship between complexity and intersectionality in her article “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” in which she describes three methodological approaches scholars of intersectionality use when making sense of analytic categories (e.g., race, class, gender); each approach treats the complexity of such categories differently. While *anticategorical* analyses deconstruct categorical boundaries by exposing their socially constructed nature, *intercategorical* complexity strategically assumes the reality of such categories in an effort to document social inequalities between different categorical groups. The third approach, *intracategorical* complexity, adopts analytic features of anti- and intercategorical complexity by deconstructing categories while strategically accepting their existence in an effort to document social inequalities within a master category. McCall points to the work of Crenshaw (1991) and other feminists of color as working within this intracategorical register of analysis

(1779).⁷ Walby (2007) also recognizes the connection between complexity and intersectionality, applying complexity theory to intersecting systems of social inequality in an effort to theoretically link a structural analysis to an analysis of social relations and change, demonstrating how these two sets of overlapping (not nested) social systems work together.⁸

These distinguishing features of intersectional knowledge projects have had several noteworthy influences on contemporary scholarship across a range of disciplines as well as within interdisciplinary initiatives. For one, take, for example, how ideas emerging from intersectional knowledge projects significantly contribute to our understanding of culture. By introducing ideas about the intersecting nature of racial, gender, class, and other systems of power in various cultural meaning-making processes, intersectional knowledge projects bring additional levels of sophistication to emerging models of cultural theory (see, e.g., Lamont 2000). Intersectionality's contribution to theories of culture spotlights the ways cultural fields are heterogeneous and incoherent (Smelser 1992), necessarily characterized by multiple systems of intersecting and coconstitutive power relationships that fundamentally gain meaning through complex relational processes. Indeed, cultural theories seek to highlight the fluidity and subjective nature of previously assumed fixed dichotomies, demonstrating how these dualities coproduce one another by relying on binary thinking for meaning (Bourdieu 1990). (Thus, for example, there is no understanding of man without a parallel yet "opposite" understanding of woman.) As such, (p. 63) intersectional knowledge projects not only call into question single sets of dichotomous concepts but also offer an analysis for how all these sets or systems of dichotomous thinking intersect to produce a culturally specific context of meaning making characterized by unique social phenomena and unequal material circumstances. Take, for instance, the case of eugenics. Intersectional knowledge projects help to make sense of this cultural phenomenon by showing how the intersections of different constructs, such as race, rationality, and disability, might result in a social movement that seeks to "purify" the human race through a meaning-making process of eugenics. Intersectional knowledge projects illustrate how the dichotomies of white-nonwhite, rational-irrational (or feeble-minded), and able-bodied-disable-bodied intersect to produce a circumstance where nonwhite, irrational or feeble-minded, and disabled all become meaningfully coherent targets of a eugenics movement (Galton 1904; Roberts 1997; Carey 2003).

Moreover, intersectional knowledge projects have the potential to shape existing theoretical understandings of culture as well. Take, for example, how intersectionality affects understandings of Pierre Bourdieu's classic concept of *cultural fields*. Bourdieu (1984, 1990) theorizes fields as particular social spaces governed by an internal logic, composed of individuals positioned within a set of social relations with varying amounts

and types of capital, each of whom are vying for social power, status, and wealth. While the boundaries of a field are always imprecise and changing (definable only by empirical research), examples of social fields can include politics, education, employment, land, lifestyle—basically any social arena where social actors are struggling to maintain or improve their position according to the field's defining capital (economic, cultural, symbolic, and social) (Jenkins 1992). Fields, in addition to habitus and capital, are three interrelated concepts Bourdieu (1984) develops to show how culture serves as a site of social conflict and class domination. While Bourdieu (1984) echoes insights from intersectionality (e.g., relationality, boundaries, unique social locations, and unequal material realities), his work focuses primarily on a system of class domination and therefore is limited by its lack of an intersectional analysis. Thus, intersectional knowledge projects build upon (and improve) previous theories of culture such as Bourdieu's.

A second influence of intersectional knowledge projects concerns their ability to catalyze new questions and areas of investigation within existing academic disciplines, especially in fields that focus on the interconnectedness of the academy and some aspect of the general public (i.e., academic traditions that have a history of praxis). Tracing the patterns of incorporation of race, class, and gender studies generally, and intersectionality in particular, within the discipline of sociology provides a closer look at how intersectionality as a knowledge project can energize prevailing practices (Collins 2007). Intersectionality holds a special place within the discipline of sociology, particularly its history of praxis in the form of public sociology, where academic sociologists place their academic labor in conversation with a general public (Burawoy 2005). If, however, public (p. 64) sociology “represents the interests of humanity—interests in keeping at bay both state despotism and market tyranny” (ibid., 24), insights from intersectionality are central to a successful public sociology enterprise since public sociologists must recognize how these state and market systems operate in constellation with one another.

Thus, via its overlap with public sociology, intersectional scholarship potentially contributes much to the field of sociology. Yet one key feature of this knowledge project has had particular significance for the discipline: intersectionality's unique and novel analysis of power and inequality. Prior to the ubiquity of intersectional knowledge projects within the discipline, sociological analyses of power were less nuanced in that the concept of power itself was a largely taken-for-granted concept; that is, one either had or did not have power. However, as intersectional frameworks have been more prominent within sociological research, sociologists have come to produce more theoretically sophisticated concepts of power, locating power relationally and complexly across multiple intersecting systems of domination (e.g., race, class, gender; Dill 1983)

and operating within different domains of social organization (i.e., structural, cultural, disciplinary, and interpersonal; Collins 2009). Such a conceptualization allows for more robust analyses of power and inequality, as an intersectional framework enables sociologists to account for social experiences located outside and between social boundaries; these include those marginal experiences that might otherwise “fall through the cracks” when power is analyzed along single and independent axes (see, e.g., Harvey Wingfield 2009). This increased emphasis on relationality, multiplicity, complexity, and boundaries in sociological analyses of power and inequality reflects a larger recognition within the discipline of the theoretical importance of such concepts (Emirbayer 1997; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Walby 2007).

In this way, intersectional knowledge projects might be understood as catalyzing a paradigm shift within the discipline of sociology (Kuhn [1962]1996), thereby revolutionizing the way contemporary sociologists discuss and come to understand relations of power and inequality. Therefore, a third important influence of intersectional knowledge projects consists of their efficacy in encouraging existing fields to rethink their main assumptions and paradigms. While established paradigms may have already begun to shift in the discipline of sociology and related areas of study, intersectional knowledge projects’ ability to catalyze new questions are seemingly more recent within other social science disciplines, such as political science (Simien 2007; Simien and Hancock 2011). Dhamoon’s (2011) effort to highlight key considerations involved in mainstreaming intersectional knowledge in political science research is a prime example of how intersectional knowledge projects can catalyze new areas of investigation in existing fields, eventually leading long-standing academic traditions to rethink central tenets. Often this influence stems from intersectional knowledge projects’ epistemological recognition that a field’s dominant assumptions and paradigms are produced within a context of power relations, where white, middle-class, (p. 65) heterosexual, male, able-bodied experiences are taken as the (invisible) norm. Take gender for example. Recognizing that much of the canonical scholarship on gender was produced largely by male scholars, intersectional knowledge projects have interrogated the basic epistemological assumptions embedded in classic gender scholarship. For example, Williams’s (2000) concept of the ideal worker norm illuminates the ways workplaces are structured around an imagined ideal worker, which assumes workers have male bodies and men’s social experiences. Highlighting how this assumption is embedded not only in workplace structures but also implicitly in previous scholarship on gender, work, and family, Williams demonstrates how the ideal worker norm excludes women from equally participating in the workplace.

Intersectionality’s focus on relationality, multiplicity, complexity, and social boundaries has helped to recast gender beyond narrow definitions of *woman* and has shifted

attention to the complex, relational boundaries that construct our understandings of masculinity and femininity. Here, scholars have pointed to the ways the parameters (i.e., boundaries) around masculinity get defined in relationship to, and draw power from, constructions around femininity (Connell 1987; Kimmel 1994). In doing so, scholars have unveiled masculinity and male domination as visible social experiences that result in unequal material realities. In fact, we might consider the ways intersectional knowledge projects have recast the main ideas of inequality studies more broadly. While previous research on inequality focused largely on those bearing the brunt of inequality (e.g., women, minorities, the poor), intersectionality's emphasis on the complex and coconstructing relationship between domination systems highlights the importance of researching the privileged as well as the disadvantaged to more fully address the complex and multifaceted dynamics of inequality (Choo and Ferree 2010). This contribution to studies of inequality has not only resulted in the growing attention to men and masculinity within gender studies but has also provided a backdrop against which we have seen the emergence of whiteness studies and research on the economic elite.⁹

Intersectionality, Gender, and Politics

Here we revisit the core question that motivates this essay: how do we make sense of intersectionality as a construct that is so widespread, visible, yet simultaneously loosely defined and paradoxical? Approaching intersectionality as a knowledge project allows us to explore how the distinguishing features of intersectionality as described already did not emerge fully formed. Rather, these same ideas reappear across many social locations yet remain invisible, in part, (p. 66) because they have not yet been connected as part of one broader knowledge project. At the same time, a prevailing narrative does dominate intersectionality's told emergence. Often, scholars geographically locate intersectionality's genesis in the United States, emerging largely from African American women's (and other U.S. women of color) experiences in the social movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (see, e.g., Nash 2008; Weldon 2008). This narrative acknowledges intersectional knowledge projects' ties with U.S. black feminist politics in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by its travels into academic settings in the 1980s and 1990s. In essence, this narrative ties intersectionality to themes of gender and politics.

The acceptance of this taken-for-granted narrative about intersectionality's ostensible origins sheds light on our overarching question. We suggest that intersectional knowledge projects are deeply implicated in late twentieth and early twenty-first century politics and that the travels of such projects into academic settings heightened some aspects of intersectional knowledge projects while suppressing others. This leads us to

take a closer look at the connections between intersectionality as a knowledge project and understandings of power and politics that emerged both in academic settings and wider political arenas. Here, we examine two contemporary sites that have been differentially affected by intersectional knowledge projects: (1) the significance of the close ties that intersectionality has had with women's studies and gender scholarship; and (2) the effects, if any, of intersectional knowledge projects on the wider American political arena. Our first site traces the close ties that intersectionality has with women's studies and gender scholarship, raising the question of how power relations affected intersectionality's ability to travel into the center of this area of inquiry (at least in feminist theory), and the political implications of this trajectory. For our second site, we explore varying patterns of visibility and invisibility within the wider American political arena, with special attention to the implications of intersectionality for democracy.

Intersectionality, Women's Studies, and Gender Scholarship

Today, intersectionality occupies significant space and status within women's studies and gender scholarship, evidenced by its reach into scholars' research agendas, departments' infrastructures, topics of articles, books and key journals, special journal issues, conference themes, course syllabi components, and full courses designated entirely to intersectionality. Thus, it is commonplace today to see scholars list intersectionality as a research interest or area of expertise on their academic websites or university homepages. Intersectional language frequently describes departmental or disciplinary aims or serves as a core component of departmental curriculum and syllabi.¹⁰ Moreover, intersectionality occupies a significant space in the content of articles appearing in some of the (p. 67) field's most prominent journals,¹¹ and several gender studies journals have dedicated entire issues to the topic, such as the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* issue titled "Institutionalizing Intersectionality" (2009, vol. 11, no. 4), the *European Journal of Women's Studies* issue on "Intersectionality" (2006, vol. 13, no. 3), the symposium on intersectionality in *Politics & Gender* (2007, vol. 3, no. 2), and *Sex Roles'* special issue on intersectional approaches to empirical research on gender (2008, vol. 59, no. 5-6). A plethora of books have been written about intersectionality,¹² and publishers have dedicated entire book series to the topic, such as Routledge's "Advances in Feminist Studies and Intersectionality" and Palgrave Macmillan's series "The Politics of Intersectionality." Intersectionality has also served as an organizing theme for various academic conferences.¹³

Intersectionality's extensive influence, perhaps even dominance, in contemporary women's studies and gender scholarship raises key questions from a sociology of knowledge standpoint: what are the implications of intersectionality's extensive travels

into these particular fields of knowledge production? Why have women's studies scholars initially and gender studies scholars now, both within interdisciplinary women's studies units and traditional disciplinary units, been so receptive to this idea of intersectionality? Who are these people? What theoretical and empirical challenges do they face that intersectionality helps to address? By illustrating the dialectical relationship between knowledge production and politics, we offer a preliminary answer to these questions.

African American women are prominent within the origin stories of intersectionality as connected to feminist politics of the 1960s and 1970s because, as a collectivity, they were uniquely positioned to have multiple angles of vision and experiential knowledge on social inequalities in U.S. society as well as on the political action strategies needed to address them. In the struggle for civil rights, African American women saw how racism worked to economically exploit African Americans as a collectivity. With African American men, they were positioned to see how racism and class exploitation operated within U.S. society. The civil rights movement aimed to address the political disenfranchisement and the economic poverty of African Americans and similarly placed racial minorities. At the same time, African American women could also see how sexism shaped their opportunities and experiences as women—for example, their confinement to low-paying, dead-end jobs reserved for women, and the oppression they experienced from men within the civil rights movement who largely prioritized the fight against racism at the expense of fighting gender inequality. Subsequently in the women's movement, African American women experienced racism at the hands of white women who advocated for an idea of a universal sisterhood yet failed to acknowledge the white, middle-class biases implicit in their model, thereby excluding the experiences and concerns of women of color. For example, while the women's movement chose to focus on abortion rights as the centerpiece of their reproductive rights political platform, women of color struggled to draw attention within the movement to the extensive sterilization practices being performed on various women of color, (p. 68) including blacks, Native Americans, and Chicanas. Women of color's experiences with sterilization abuse were largely marginalized within the feminist movement's agenda for reproductive freedom while abortion rights, an issue more pertinent to the lives of white women, took center stage (Roberts 1997). Sexuality also formed an important part of an emerging black feminist movement, initiated by African American lesbians and bisexual women who highlighted the ways sexuality operated as a system of power through such mechanisms as heteronormativity (Combahee River Collective [1977]1995). The constellation of African American women's experiences with race, class, gender, and sexual oppression, often in the context of social movement politics of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, catalyzed African American women to call for new approaches to analyses of oppression and social inequality (Davis 1983; Dill 1983; Lorde 1984; Collins 1993).

During this same period, scholars and activists in other social locations also began to examine how their specific experiences at intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality produced the patterns of privilege and disadvantage that shaped their individual and group experiences. For example, Latinas and Asian American women followed similar paths in developing feminist projects that took the specificity of cultural and ethnic differences into account, for example, religiosity, language, and citizenship status (Roth 2004). Although black feminists were prominent in the articulation of and visibility afforded to intersectionality in the late twentieth-century U.S. context, other groups of women advanced similar knowledge claims from a variety of social locations, including works from Native American, Chicana, and Chinese American perspectives by scholars such as Paula Gunn Allen, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Maxine Hong Kingston as well as by working-class, Marxist, and queer women (Combahee River Collective [1977]1995; Davis 1983; Lorde 1984; Rich 1986; Jordan 2002). Collectively, a series of social actors began to theorize the core ideas and epistemologies that eventually became associated with the intersectional approach, arguing that socially constructed categories of difference and inequality interact—simultaneously—with other systems of power (Collins 1993). Such a theoretical framework recognizes how social actors or groups might concurrently experience oppression and privilege, and it considers how race, class, gender, and sexuality function in the structural bases of domination and subordination and therefore how these systems of power get institutionalized in society. As such, women working both inside and outside the black feminist context offered fresh analyses of inequality that considered the intersecting nature of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, ethnicity, language status, citizenship status, and other systems of power, yet such contributions from these other social locations are often omitted from intersectionality's stock narrative.

The case of the U.S. women's movement, the visibility of intersectional knowledge projects, and the emergence of women's studies within the academy underscores the interrelationship between knowledge production and political (p. 69) possibilities, thereby offering insight into intersectionality's unique travel trajectory in the academy. Stated differently, the case of intersectionality in this particular historical and intellectual context illustrates the ways knowledge production can shape politics and, similarly, the ways politics can shape knowledge production. Intersectionality as a recognizable analytical strategy came on the heels of a U.S. feminist movement that moved in two directions. On one hand, it moved into a phase of unobtrusive mobilization, a movement that shifted to focus to getting rules and regulations changed in ways that fostered gender equity. In this organizational mode, the women's movement has experienced considerable success, for example, the passage of Title IX. On the other hand, the broad social agenda of an overtly feminist movement was politically derailed, in part, because of its failure to grapple with differences among women's unique social experiences and

unequal material realities in the context of the backlash leveled at the national movement.

This historical event reveals two features of the interrelationship between knowledge production and political possibilities that can account for intersectional knowledge projects' travels in the academy, including an explanation for how these projects became so closely aligned with women's studies and gender scholarship. First, despite the fact that the grassroots U.S. women's movement showed considerable promise, such movements were stifled in part due to the tremendous resistance to feminism launched by political figures and by the popular press. The knowledge developed in local settings as a constellation of grassroots organizations that worked across differences of race, class, and sexuality remained local and didn't travel. For example, Anne Valk's (2008) study of grassroots organizations in Washington, D.C., provides a provocative glimpse of how women who were committed to diverse political projects struggled with one another in fashioning a feminist movement that could be called "intersectional." In contrast to the richness of ideas advanced by women on the front line of the women's movement, dominant gender analyses—or published knowledge—of the time was ill-equipped to theorize the era's political needs. The politically galvanizing gender knowledge projects that garnered national attention—perhaps most notably Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*—offered an analysis of gender oppression that largely assumed a similar experience among women: white, middle-class, suburban, heterosexual, homemaker. Despite the pivotal role played by women of color in catalyzing and maintaining the movement (Roth 2004), the media routinely painted feminism as "white." Moreover, white movement leaders inadvertently or intentionally marginalized women of color's voices and political needs by organizing a feminist politics according to the type of gender oppression offered by the most visibly prevailing (i.e., published) gender knowledge projects of the time. Given that a knowledge project's visibility is always shaped by the dominant power relationships of a particular social, historical, and intellectual context, the knowledge project represented in Friedan's highly influential book helped to set the agenda for a very narrow type of (p. 70) feminist politics. In this way, we can see how knowledge shapes politics, creating political possibilities but also political pitfalls.

Second, the interrelationship between knowledge and politics is evident in that the political victories of the women's movement, notably the establishment of women's studies programs at universities across the country, had significant implications for knowledge production. For the first time, institutionalized intellectual spaces were created to produce knowledge about women's experiences. The scholars and activists operating in these newly created intellectual spaces continued to struggle with the unresolved contradictions of the women's movement regarding race, class, and sexuality

yet lacked access to the rich record of actual feminist politics suggested in Valk's (2008) work. It is important to remember that women of color who had been involved in the women's movement also moved into the academy during the period of the formation of women's studies, albeit in much smaller numbers than white women and not necessarily into programs dedicated specifically to women's studies. As a knowledge paradigm of praxis, intersectional knowledge projects offered feminist scholars and activists alike a theoretical template (but not an actual politics) for addressing the unresolved issues from the feminist movement. Intersectionality may have been especially appealing to gender scholars within women's studies programs because it satisfied a theoretical need during a time when women's studies scholarship had not yet rigidly adapted a paradigmatic approach to the study of women's complex experiences. The legacy of this historical convergence, revealed by the dialectical relationship between knowledge production and politics, is evident in intersectionality's present-day command of gender scholarship. Once a knowledge paradigm takes hold, it becomes difficult to shift (Kuhn [1962]1996).

Yet while this account might explain in part why intersectionality initially became and continues to be so closely aligned with gender scholarship, the question still left unanswered is: what are the implications of having intersectionality so closely associated with gender? One implication seems to be that intersectionality has come to be characterized as a feminist theory (or some other tool for feminist scholarship, such as a feminist research paradigm). Characterizing intersectionality as a feminist theory presents two challenges: (1) intersectionality becomes synonymous with or a derivative of feminist theory; and (2) our ability to recognize other intellectual traditions that exhibit key features of intersectional thought is limited. These are challenges for intersectional knowledge projects in that they might misrepresent what is really going on in this field of knowledge production by overstating intersectional knowledge projects' affinities with feminist theory and understating convergences with other sites of knowledge production. In the first case, intersectionality's close association with gender scholarship has resulted in scholars naming (or defining) intersectionality as a feminist theory. Perhaps most notably, Kathy Davis's (2008) characterization of intersectionality as a successful feminist (p. 71) theory places intersectionality in the pantheon of feminist theories.¹⁴ Such a move presents a second challenge in that, by defining intersectionality as a feminist theory, other sites of intersectional knowledge production are at risk of getting overlooked. One such site might be American pragmatism, which shares many of the core ideas of intersectional knowledge projects outlined in the first part of the chapter. Namely, pragmatic knowledge projects reject dichotomous thinking and embrace an understanding of the world grounded in relational processes, they acknowledge the complexity of human experiences and destabilize claims to truth by highlighting individual and group experiences as a form of evidence and epistemological insight, and they advocate for a brand of theory that is rooted in practice (Rochberg-Halton 1987;

Seigfried 1993). Notably, pragmatism's affinities with feminist theory have been acknowledged (Seigfried 1993). Such work raises questions around the potential to overlook intersectional knowledge project's affinities with other sites of knowledge production. The case of American pragmatism might be particularly significant when we consider questions around political change and action and pragmatism's reputation for "getting things done" alongside the erasure of social action and praxis from self-identified intersectional knowledge projects inside the academy. Does the recognition of such affinities reveal that core features of intersectional knowledge projects did not get erased but rather are expressed in alternative knowledge traditions? In the same way Jennifer Nash suggests decoupling intersectionality from black feminism, perhaps intersectional scholars should seek to loosen, or at least broaden, intersectional knowledge projects' affinity with feminist theorizing to open this unique knowledge project's insights to fields of research beyond gender studies.¹⁵

Another implication of having intersectionality so closely aligned with gender is that gender scholars become intersectionality's major advocates in the academy. This presents its own challenges, as studies of gender are almost required to be intersectional, and intersectional studies become tightly connoted with analyses of gender. Such a tight affinity might blind us to other avenues of knowledge production in that knowledge simply gets recycled through the disciplines. Andrew Abbott's (2001) work on the evolution and organization of knowledge in the social sciences points to the ways fractal (or dichotomous) thinking operates to produce narrow avenues of academic inquiry and discovery. By tightly linking intersectionality to gender scholarship, gender scholars occupy a potentially confining position whereby they are unable to entertain—or even see—research questions that fall outside the parameters of an intersectional framework. This is due to the fractal logic governing knowledge production once a research tradition becomes tightly aligned with a discipline of study (Abbott 2001).

Another implication of having intersectional knowledge projects so closely aligned with gender concerns the ways initiating intersectional arguments within the parameters of gender essentially shape subsequent intersectional (p. 72) scholarship. Specifically, intersectionality can be reduced to one variation of feminist theory or practice, thus subordinating intersectionality to feminist agendas. If gender scholarship and its conventions become the starting point for intersectional knowledge projects, then all intersectional scholarship may be inflected by these point-of-origin concerns. Valerie Smith's (1998) analysis of literary sources illustrates how the sequencing of identity categories and systems of power affected subsequent intersectional analyses, such as starting with race and then incorporating gender, yields different accounts of social phenomena than accounts that start with gender and incorporate race. In essence, what appear to be intersectional arguments are, in actuality, patterns of incorporation of

additional categories into a master category. In the case of intersectional knowledge projects' association with gender scholarship, we see the more politically powerful category of gender serving as the master category.

Such an arrangement leads us to ask: what does intersectionality look like without gender? Similarly, given its close affinity with black feminist and women of color studies, what does intersectionality look like without race? Can we take the major intellectual contributions of intersectionality and apply them to other sites of analysis? Detaching intersectionality from studies of gender might lead to other productive sites of inquiry of intersecting systems of power. Importantly, scholars are beginning to push intersectional knowledge projects in this direction, evidenced by, for instance, the "Under-Examined Intersectionalities" workshop at the 2010 University of California, Los Angeles, intersectionality conference, which featured intersectional analyses of less traditional topics such as the built environment and religion as well as new work in the field of disability studies.¹⁶ In this way, gender scholars' "ownership" of the intersectionality paradigm might blind gender scholars and nongender scholars alike, as it ushers gender scholars to apply intersectional analyses almost robotically, and it might prevent nongender scholars from considering insights from intersectionality that are germane to their areas of expertise.

Intersectionality and Democratic Politics

Another site where the main ideas of intersectionality have made uneven progress concerns varying patterns of visibility and invisibility within the wider American political arena. In what ways, if any, have intersectional knowledge projects influenced broader political processes? There are no definitive answers to this question, only suggestive arguments for how and where intersectional knowledge projects appear in American politics. To explore this question further, and in a way that cuts across disciplinary boundaries, we engage a standard and more expansive definition of *the political*.

One way to examine how and where intersectional knowledge projects appear in American politics is to begin with a standard definition, where (p. 73) politics is understood to mean the processes, philosophies, behaviors, and systems of organization that relate to state governance. This understanding of the political is especially pervasive in political science intersectional research. For example, several authors have looked at the intersectional conditions under which members of specific intersectional communities are silenced or burdened, particularly in legislative elections and the U.S. Congress (Bratton and Haynie 1999; Hawkesworth 2003; Smooth 2006).¹⁷ Others have sought to integrate intersectional analyses into public policy making and leadership (Manuel 2006;

Hankivsky and Cormier 2011). Such scholarship points to some specific and productive ways intersectional knowledge projects have begun to enter into the U.S. democratic political arena, where the political is conceptualized as phenomena related to state governance.

A more expansive definition of the political also helps to highlight the varying patterns of visibility and invisibility that intersectional knowledge projects have made in U.S. democratic politics. This more expansive definition recognizes the multiple ways politics, and specifically democratic politics, get discussed. Similar to the Greek *politikos*, an expansive understanding of the political “involves the negotiations of a pluralist world, people of different views, interests, and backgrounds interacting in order to accomplish some task” (Boyte 2004, xi-xii). This includes various interpretations of “everyday politics” (see, e.g., Scott 1985, 1990; Kelley 1994; Cohen 2004; Harris-Lacewell 2004), which are typically enacted in citizen-created spaces by political “amateurs” rather than experts (Boyte 2004), often outside official political institutions (Fraser 1989). Rather than conceptualizing politics specifically as state power, an expansive understanding of politics refers to power more generally. An example is Collins’s (2004) understanding of black sexual politics, which examines the different ways racism, sexism, and heterosexism intersect as systems of power; although Collins takes state-level processes into account, her conceptualization of black sexual politics encompasses social processes beyond the state. In this chapter, we work in both registers of the political, recognizing the tension between knowledge projects that understand politics as state governance and ones that conceptualize politics as power writ large. Feminists have made similar claims in their move to define “the personal is political,” pointing to the numerous ways systems of power operate outside formal political institutions, shaping even the most intimate and personal domains of our social experiences and material realities. Our following examples around U.S. democratic politics and popular culture work at the intersection of this tension between standard and more expansive definitions of the political, with an eye toward the emancipatory potential of intersectional knowledge projects rooted in a commitment to praxis and social justice.

Recall that for the purposes of this volume’s focus on intersectionality, gender, and politics, we identified Dill’s (2002) insight that “working at the intersections” (or intersectionality) encompasses an analytical strategy that (p. 74) insists on examining the multidimensionality of human experience that might aid in the empowerment of individuals and communities. The race, class, and gender practitioners in Dill’s study approached intersectionality not simply as an academic knowledge project, the implicit focus of much contemporary gender scholarship, but also as “an important tool linking theory with practice that can aid in the empowerment of communities and individuals” (Dill 2002, 6). This understanding of praxis as linked to social justice agendas

suggests that understandings of intersectionality within the context of black feminist and similar social movement politics also had an eye on the broader theme of democratic politics. The shift from the race/class/gender/sexuality politics associated with social movement politics and praxis of the 1950s–1970s changed during the period of incorporation into the academy in the 1980s and 1990s. We suggest that intersectionality (or at least its ideas) had a more “bridging” character during the 1980s, straddling academic and political arenas when the term intersectionality became incorporated into academic norms and practices. This shift fostered a narrowing of vision, reducing the social justice ethos that initially animated intersectional knowledge projects.

We propose that a similar redefinition occurred when social justice initiatives of race/class/gender/sexuality emerging from social movement politics became recast as diversity agendas. Having implications for American democratic politics, diversity agendas advance a limited politics of monocategorical thinking that results in binaries of blacks–whites, men–women, race–gender, and the like. Moreover, diversity agendas suggest a strategy of tolerance, of learning to be sensitive to the differences of others rather than challenging and reforming the very categories themselves that create categorical differences. In essence, the construct of diversity stands as the public face of the conceptual framework of intersectionality, a face that, like intersectionality, has moved farther away from its moorings in social movement politics.

Here we examine two major sites of contemporary politics where these phenomena can be observed. U.S. electoral politics constitutes one important site for examining the workings of intersectional knowledge projects. The 2008 presidential election provided a provocative example of how ideas about intersectionality have penetrated the political arena (see, e.g., Hancock 2009; Junn 2009). In that historic democratic primary, despite the fact that all candidates had both racial and gendered identities, mass media routinely emphasized Barack Obama’s race and Hillary Clinton’s gender. Depicting the candidates in this fashion fostered media coverage of African American women who were asked to “pick” between their race and their gender as a way to predict their voting patterns in the election. Moreover, the social class of the candidates remained a background yet ever-present factor in the campaign, though it never rose to the level of visibility granted race and gender. Once the primaries were over and the campaign for the general election ensued, the electorate was once again ushered into a narrow conceptual (p. 75) framework in which they were to choose between Obama’s race and Sarah Palin’s gender, yet this time social class did enter the debate, as Obama was casted as an Ivy League educated, out-of-touch elite and Palin was portrayed as an intellectually unsophisticated nonelite. Yet these ideas about race, gender, and class as they were discussed in the mass media were hardly put in dialogue with one another. For example, it was assumed that Palin’s identity (notably, the media discussed these as identity

categories rather than systems of power) would attract the female electorate and the working-class electorate, though her candidacy, motivated by a logic of simple identity politics, was never really deployed to pull in the votes of poor women. Intersectional knowledge projects eschew the kind of monocategorical thinking that characterized the 2008 presidential election. Overall, the thirty years of academic scholarship touting the intersectional nature of race, class, and gender in shaping individual identities, as well as the opportunity structures that individuals encounter, seemingly made little headway in influencing mass media coverage of the election.

The 2010 midterm elections provided more evidence that the main ideas of intersectional knowledge projects have made little headway in shaping outcomes in actual political arenas. U.S. electoral politics witnessed an unprecedented number of conservative women candidates, all white, several of whom were endorsed by the emerging Tea Party movement. Either-or thinking (and, once again, simple identity politics) suggests that *women* and *nonelite* (which was the platform on which many were running) candidates would lead to support for policies that help women and working- and middle-class people; however, in the November 2010 elections, this was not the case. How were we to make sense of these nonelite, white women's support for policies that appear, at least at first glance, not in their best interests? Insights from intersectional knowledge paradigms would lead us to think about these women's complex and multifaceted relationships with privilege and power to make sense of their advocacy for policies that overwhelmingly favor rich men. Yet intersectionality's inability to penetrate U.S. electoral politics left many Americans, perhaps specifically those with feminist sensibilities, conflicted by the women's presence. Were feminists to celebrate or denounce these young, nonelite, nonincumbent insurgent women's campaigns? Lacking easy access to intersectional analyses, commentators, and participants of U.S. electoral politics were unnecessarily ill-equipped to make sense of the political spectacle.

Politics do not occur exclusively within the realm of formal political institutions. Popular culture is also an important site of politics, in that the ideas and frames of mass media have the ability to shape political beliefs and behaviors. Moreover, popular culture constitutes a site of political action itself (Iton 2008). Examples from contemporary popular culture provide additional evidence that intersectional knowledge projects have an uneven effect in political spheres. Specific attention to performances of diversity in popular culture (as (p. 76) a substitute for richness of the conceptual framework associated with intersectionality) further demonstrates how these substitutions enable neoliberal social policies to persist.

A look at hip-hop music provides one highly visible, contemporary example where we can see the ways popular culture becomes a site for shaping political beliefs and mobilizing political action. While hip-hop culture, and specifically rap music, has had a political bent

from its inception (Chepp 2011), contemporary rap artists and audiences continue to use the pop cultural phenomenon as a platform for raising political awareness and staging action for social change. One high-profile example of this is visible in rapper Nelly's 2004 planned visit to Spelman College in support of a bone marrow drive being sponsored by his foundation *4Sho4Kids*. Nelly dedicated himself to the cause after his sister was diagnosed with leukemia. However, the women of Spelman did not immediately embrace Nelly's announced visit. Having access to a comprehensive university curriculum around intersectionality and faculty support, Spelman students took action and sought to hold Nelly accountable for the images portrayed in his music videos, which largely degraded women of color. They suggested that Nelly hold the bone marrow drive but then participate in a campus dialogue about the depictions of women in hip-hop. The protest organized by the women at Spelman received national attention, and Nelly and his foundation ultimately pulled out of the event. Consistent with other intersectional knowledge projects, the students of Spelman demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the complicated and multifaceted power relations at work. The president of Spelman's Student Government Association, Asha Jennings, said, "Nelly wants us to help his sister...but he's degrading hundreds of us" (cited in Neal 2006, 140). Jennings articulates the links between gender and racial oppression, complex and unequal relationships between and among groups—such as Nelly's sister, millions of other women of color, and male rappers, and a commitment to social justice. McCall (2005) might classify Spelman students' intersectional approach as *intracategorical complexity*, in which the students sought to highlight social inequalities within a master category, in this case, inequalities within a racial group. The protest at Spelman points to the uneven progress of intersectional analyses at work in popular culture. On one hand, Jennings and her fellow students at Spelman College successfully deploy intersectional ideas and practices in their efforts to use popular culture (hip-hop videos) as a platform and target for staging political action. At the same time, scores of pop cultural figures such as Nelly lack an intersectional perspective around how their public relations commitments to political and philanthropic issues cannot be detached from the complicated and multifaceted power relationships intertwined in their own artistic and cultural work. Too often pop stars, like Nelly, will opt out of opportunities for real engagement with intersectional knowledge projects that have the potential to lead to dialogue and social change.

(p. 77) **Challenges That Confront Contemporary Intersectional Knowledge Projects**

Within the academy, and especially within gender scholarship, intersectionality's seemingly fluid boundaries, focus on relationality, and attentiveness to complex and multifaceted power relations via a sustained reflexivity about its own practice makes for a particularly dynamic field of study. Indeed, these features might be responsible for intersectionality's success and adaptability across disciplines as described earlier (Davis 2008; Nash 2009). At the same time, the fact that intersectional knowledge projects are practiced by so many people in so many different ways suggests that this same ambiguity and open-endedness may be potential conceptual weaknesses of intersectional knowledge projects. Thus, its ostensible popularity within the academy when coupled with its virtual invisibility within nonacademic, broader political arenas suggest that intersectionality faces several unique challenges in the early twenty-first century.

One challenge is the seemingly shifting terrain that characterizes intersectional knowledge projects, where various projects might look considerably different across assorted knowledge-producing locations. In part, this is likely due to intersectionality's travels into traditional disciplines that already have an established set of discursive and methodological practices. The contours of intersectionality, which might be uniquely malleable (Davis 2008), get shaped to fit the existing rules, routines, and overarching questions of a given discipline. Here, we might consider how intersectional knowledge projects change shape as they travel to different disciplines, adapting to disciplinary conventions as they move. While this adaptability may have contributed to intersectionality's success in the academy (Davis 2008), it poses a challenge in that intersectional knowledge projects can become unrecognizable to scholars across disciplines, fostering an environment where intersectional knowledge becomes atomized, and a single linear narrative about intersectional knowledge projects' key aims and practitioners is reiterated. The failure to recognize intersectional knowledge projects across disciplinary locations contributes to the subjugated nature of some intersectional knowledge projects (e.g., American pragmatism) at the expense of the hypervisibility of others (e.g., the intellectual work of black feminists). This lack of a clear message might also contribute to the virtual absence of intersectionality in broader political arenas.

A second challenge facing contemporary intersectional knowledge projects concerns the changing nature of its relationship with the social justice traditions of oppressed groups and whether this association inhibits intersectionality's ability to secure a position of legitimacy within the academy. That is, can intersectional knowledge projects become

more powerful by disassociating from the less powerful? Historically, decontextualization has been a way of enhancing (p. 78) a theory's status within the academy. Here we might think of postmodernism, a knowledge project known for its abstraction, decontextualization, and overall disassociation from the social conditions of groups and individuals on the ground. Yet postmodern knowledge projects have attracted substantial power and attention within the academy. For example, in their sociological theory textbook, Ritzer and Goodman (2004, 594) assert that "it is abundantly clear that postmodernism has become the most important development not only in sociological theory but in a wide range of academic and nonacademic fields." Applying insights from the sociology of science, Davis (2008) points to intersectionality's appeal to generalists and specialists alike, a key feature of successful social theories. This logic highlights the importance and power of decontextualization. Can intersectionality follow this path to enhance its own power and privilege? Some scholars wish to leave the origins behind, arguing that intersectionality is more than voices from the margin. Nash (2008, 10) refers to this as an "unresolved theoretical dispute" within intersectional scholarship, in which it is "unclear whether intersectionality is a theory of marginalized subjectivity or a generalized theory of identity." While intersectional knowledge projects' current associations with the political agendas of the oppressed may limit their potential reach within the academy, decontextualizing intersectional knowledge projects and linking them to a grand theoretical tradition can address this challenge.

Travelling into traditional disciplines and becoming decontextualized from actual social conditions can have some unintended consequences for intersectionality. Intersectional analyses get attached to projects that look at, for example, nonmale bodies, nonwhite people, nonheterosexuals, and nonmiddle-class families. That is, scholars tend to call their work intersectional by claiming to look at race when doing work on nonwhite populations or gender so long as they are looking at women. Such assumptions renormalize and make invisible whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and "able" bodies, among other hegemonic systems. And herein lies a critical paradox within intersectional knowledge projects. Intersectional scholarship has expanded the boundaries of inequality studies by drawing attention to the relational, multifaceted, and complex processes between systems of power, pointing to the ways, for example, constructions of masculinity, whiteness, and heterosexuality derive meaning and power from corresponding (i.e., presumed "opposite") socially constructed categories and from each other. However, intersectional scholarship inadvertently reinscribes these systems of privilege by rendering them nongendered, nonraced, and sexually nonremarkable, in other words, "normal." This renormalization results in research that approaches these categories as unmarked and, as such, uninterrogated (Choo and Ferree 2010).

The challenge that confronts intersectionality as a sociology of knowledge project is that, because it is inherently dynamic, specifying its symbolic and structural boundaries is difficult (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Specifically, what type of theoretical character does it exhibit, traditional or critical? Whether (p. 79) contemporary intersectional knowledge projects can be understood as theories fundamentally grounded in practice is debatable. However, intersectional knowledge projects continue to be deployed as having the potential to effecting positive social change in people's lives (Manuel 2006). While some might argue that intersectionality's affinity to social praxis is simply a function of its close association with feminist theory, one might draw attention to its affinities with other theoretical traditions that are grounded in a set of lived practices, such as critical race theory or American pragmatism (Rochberg-Halton 1987; Seigfried 1993). To fully engage such questions, we must consider who intersectionality's main practitioners are (i.e., people who create and sustain structural locations for it, within and outside the academy, and within the academy, within traditional disciplines, in interdisciplinary areas, and as transdisciplinary endeavors). This is the creative tension between stasis and change, played out in the field of contemporary politics.

A final challenge concerns the continued salience of social justice as part of intersectionality as a knowledge project. Given the challenges in electoral politics and popular culture, how might attending to the conceptual framework of intersectionality foster democratic ideals? Democratic societies have long expressed a belief in the importance of communities to the civil society and the strength of U.S. political institutions. Yet democratic possibilities have been facilitated or hindered by the kinds of communities people have in mind. Democratic societies also require a new kind of identity, one grounded in multiplicity and complexity and with new understandings of relationality. How might we build an argument concerning the specific ways that a conceptual framework of intersectionality might foster both the vibrant communities and a robust identity politics that is vital for democratic societies?

In essence, democratic societies require new kinds of communities that ensure participation and that can grapple with legacies of oppression and resulting social and material inequalities. Market-based, individualistic conceptions of exchange relations must be replaced with robust understandings of community as a foundational construct for politics. Collins (2010) suggests that the construct of *community* might be uniquely well positioned to politically situate social groups that are increasingly recognized, thanks to insights from intersectionality, as diverse and crosscutting (Cohen 1999).

Democratic societies also require new forms of identity that take into account the complex, multifaceted, and relational nature of contemporary social realities. Recasting social groups to reflect intersectional premises requires a more robust identity politics

than those put forth during the U.S. social movements of the mid-twentieth century. For example, Cohen (1997, 480) understands queer identities, broadly defined, as political locations and lived experiences around which to organize, based upon “their similar positions, as marginalized subjects relative to the state.” By reconceptualizing identity in this way (i.e., as a complex, multifaceted relationship to state power), Cohen argues that we can understand, for example, how gay HIV/AIDS activists and heterosexual black women on welfare (p. 80) who are single parents can serve as useful political allies to one another. Both sets of queer identities challenge state definitions of what constitutes “normal” and “respectable” sexuality, and both face material penalties from the state as a result of their unique social locations relative to the state.

When combined, these shifts in understandings of community, identity, and politics have important implications for coalition building in the political landscape. These new conceptions of identities and communities can broaden our understanding of political allies and effective political partnerships. Rather than organizing along single systems of power (e.g., either gender or racial oppression) or single issues (e.g., either HIV/AIDS activism or welfare reform) or on behalf of a single community (e.g., either gay activists or single mothers), intersectional approaches to coalition building enhance democratic possibilities by expanding definitions of political allies, political identities, and political communities. Moreover, an intersectional conceptual approach to coalition building not only offers a way to organize across difference but also enables democratic actors to highlight less-than-immediately obvious similarities across individuals, interests, and groups (Cole 2008). To place this in the context of the previously cited example, an intersectional conceptual approach to coalition building provides queer communities and poor single mothers not only a framework for organizing across their differences but also an intersectional approach to coalition politics for identifying their less-than-immediate similarities. In this case, Cohen (1997) might point out their similarly marginalized positions to state power. Such a robust approach to power and politics in the United States would facilitate democratic ideals and encourage more meaningful democratic victories in that coalitions could avoid the pitfalls of unidimensional coalition politics, organized along a single axis of power or identity. Instead, intersectional frameworks allow democratic actors to build alliances organized around complex, multifaceted, and relational points of commonality, difference, and political purpose.

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Notes:

(1.) Fields more closely associated with the humanities and the arts also show patterns of embracing intersectionality. In this chapter, we focus on the social sciences, primarily in response to the focus of this handbook. We are aware that we rely on sociology more heavily than other social science disciplines. Our goal is not to survey the intersectionality scholarship in all social science fields; rather, we encourage readers across disciplines to take the themes introduced in this chapter and apply them to their own scholarly fields. Although we draw largely from sociological scholarship, we are writing to a broad audience, not just sociologists. Indeed, the field of intersectionality assumes you read broadly and across disciplines.

(2.) For example, the recent literature on intersectionality, methodology, and empirical validity (see, e.g., Hancock 2007a, 2007b; Bowleg 2008) is likely a response to the critique that intersectionality scholarship lacks a precise (Nash 2008) and diverse (McCall 2005) methodological approach.

(3.) In this essay, we use *oppression* to refer to specific systems of power such as racial oppression or gender oppression. Social inequalities typically stem from systems of oppression, yet they need not do so. For example, small children and adults are not “equal,” yet this form of social inequality may not be an accurate measure of age oppression. In contrast, systems of power organized around ideas of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, and ability that violate norms of social justice constitute systems of oppression that catalyze characteristic forms of social organization. Social inequality and social justice can coexist. For a useful discussion of issues of oppression, see Young (1990, 66–95). In this essay, we use the term *social inequality* to reference systems of oppression.

(4.) The sociology of knowledge is a subfield of sociology explicitly concerned with the socially constructed nature of knowledge production and legitimation. This perspective maintains there is no one social truth; rather, via interaction with one another, we decide what “counts” as truth. This socially determined truth or knowledge gets legitimated by those in authoritative expert positions (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Michel Foucault, among others, illustrates how knowledge production and legitimation go hand in hand with relations of power and domination (Foucault 1980; Lyotard 1979/1984).

(5.) These intersecting systems of power are organized in different social domains (Collins 2000). Collins (2009) outlines four different domains of power that serve as locations where intersecting systems of power and the social inequalities associated with them are organized: structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal.

(6.) The development of this thinking went through several iterations, including the (1) *separate and different approach* (the idea that racial oppression can be compared to gender oppression but they are seen as separate influences) and the (2) *additive approach* (which “adds together” the effects of each system of oppression as static, equal parts of a whole). Collins (1993) argues that although this additive framework recognizes an important *element* of interaction that is absent from the separate and different approach, the additive approach is ultimately too simplistic in that it depends on dichotomous thinking (i.e., you are either oppressor or oppressed) and assumes that dichotomies can be ranked (i.e., assumes some groups are more oppressed than others). Collins argues that we need to ask new questions—ones that take relationality into account—if we are going to reconceptualize how structures of domination and oppression are maintained.

(7.) Notably, McCall (2005, 1774) recognizes that different intersectional knowledge projects are shaped by the type of methodological approach employed.

(8.) Critiquing previous systems theory grounded in the social sciences (e.g., the work of Niklas Luhmann, Talcott Parsons, or Émile Durkheim), Walby (2007) turns to complexity theory, which is more rooted in the natural sciences, as a way to develop a systems theory where systems do not operate in a static functionalist way (e.g., Parsons). While complexity theory has very little to say about social inequality, Walby suggests that it might offer a very useful contribution to intersectionality if we adapt complexity concepts such as the systems–environment distinction (allowing for the nonsaturation of a system in the environment that it occupies, thereby accounting for multiple systems of inequality as well as for the potentially nonnested, nonreducible nature of systems) and path dependency as mechanisms for understanding nonlinear changes along multiple axes of inequality. Walby suggests that such complexity insights make for a more flexible understanding of systems and their interaction with other systems, a very valuable feature to any theory of intersecting systems of social inequality.

(9.) The scholarship on the social construction of whiteness and its relationship to privilege is vast. For an early example of this work emerging out of the critical race studies legal tradition see Harris (1993). For examples of recent attention given to scholarship on the economic elite, see McCall's (forthcoming) book, *The Un/deserving Rich: American Beliefs about Inequality, Opportunity, and Redistribution*, as well as the first Elites Research Network conference held at Columbia University in October 2010.

(10.) In 2011, the website for Indiana University's department of gender studies described itself as "a transdisciplinary department engaging students in the study of gender and the intersection of gender with other substantive categories of analysis and identity, including race, sexuality, class, disability, and nationality" (<http://www.indiana.edu/~gender/>). Similarly, the website for the program of feminist studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, describes feminist studies as "research and teaching [that] focus on the ways that relations of gender, intersecting with race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, nation, ability, and other differences, affect every aspect of society" (http://www.femst.ucsb.edu/who_we_are.html). The department of gender, women & sexuality studies at the University of Washington states on its homepage: "Intersectional and transnational analyses foreground our studies of race and ethnicity in U.S. and global contexts, as we analyze how these social formations intersect with gender, women, and sexuality in specific times and places" (<http://depts.washington.edu/webwomen/>).

(11.) A survey of articles appearing in the following selection of women's studies and feminist academic journals between January 2000 and December 2010 yields the following results (the numbers in the parentheses signify how many entries during this date range included the term *intersectionality* in an article's text): *Gender & Society* (54), *Sex Roles* (40), *Feminist Formations* (previously *NWSA Journal*) (37), *Signs* (33), *Women's*

Studies International Forum (25), *Feminist Studies* (17), and *Feminist Theory* (9). Note that these search results might include, in addition to full articles that focus on intersectionality, articles that simply mention the term or book reviews or other types of publications aside from full articles. Nonetheless, the search results point to the ubiquity of the term within the field.

(12.) Such books include *Gender, Race, Class and Health: Intersectional Approaches* (Schulz and Mullings 2005), *Intersectionality and Politics: Recent Research on Gender, Race, and Political Representation in the United States* (Hardy-Fanta 2007), *Gender Relations: Intersectionality and Beyond* by (Siltanen and Doucet 2008), *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, and Gender* (Berger and Guidroz 2009), *Emerging Intersections: Race, Class, and Gender in Theory, Policy, and Practice* (Dill and Zambrana 2009), *Theorizing Intersectionality and Sexuality* (Taylor, Hines, and Casey 2010), and *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies* (Lutz, Vivar, and Supik 2011).

(13.) Academic conferences organized around the theme of intersectionality include the 2004 National Women's Studies Association conference, "Women in the Middle: Borders, Barriers, Intersections," the 2006 European Science Foundation conference "Intersectionality, Identity and Power: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Intersectionality Studies," the 2008 Nordic Conference on "Gender, Intersectionality and Regional Development" in Sweden, the 2009 international conference in Frankfurt "Celebrating Intersectionality? Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies," the 2010 Critical Race Studies Symposium on "Intersectionality: Challenging Theory, Reframing Politics, Transforming Movements" sponsored by the University of California, Los Angeles, School of Law, and the 2011 Eastern Sociological Society conference on "Intersectionalities and Complex Inequalities."

(14.) Davis's article has been widely cited and read; for example, Sage Journals Online lists Davis's article as the most read of all *Feminist Theory* articles in October 2010, a full year and a half after its publication in April 2008.

(15.) Nash presented this argument at the UCLA Critical Race Studies Symposium: *Intersectionality: Challenging Theory, Reframing Politics, Transforming Movements* in a session entitled, "As Intersectionality Crosses Disciplines: Understanding Our Pasts and Continuing Our Futures" (March 12, 2010).

(16.) At the time of writing this chapter, *Research in Social Science and Disability* is accepting manuscript submissions for an upcoming volume, "Intersectionality Revisited," arguing that "it is necessary to update our theories of disability, incorporate intersectionality theories which ignore disability, update theories of intersectionality to

include disability, and use newer data to produce more relevant results” (cited from the CFP). The volume is scheduled for publication in August 2012.

(17.) Our appreciation goes to the anonymous reviewer who suggested these empirical works.

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