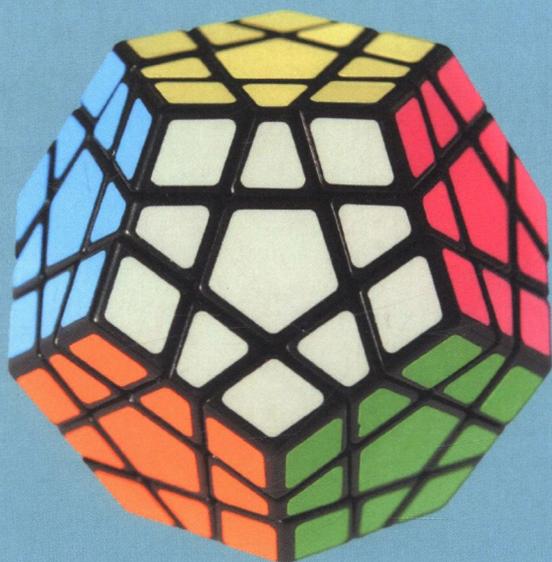


SHORT INTRODUCTIONS

# Introducing Intersectionality



MARY ROMERO

"Employing a sophisticated intersectional approach to introduce the complexities of intersectionality itself, Romero has achieved a tour-de-force. Through framing, extensive case examples, and accessible writing, she illustrates how intersectionality enables us to connect personal troubles to social problems and to see pathways to change for social justice."

**Lynn Weber, University of South Carolina**

"This lucid, jargon-free, and impressively comprehensive book by a leading scholar in the field is ideal for undergraduate courses on a wide range of topics, but it is so much more than that. It is vital reading, showing how inequality can be found in our own backyard and not just 'out there.' It is something, in other words, that we all can – and must – do something about."

**Leslie McCall, Graduate Center, City University of New York**

How can we hope to understand social inequality without considering race, class, and gender in tandem? How do they interact with other categories such as sexuality, citizenship, and ableism? How does an inclusive analysis of domination and privilege move us closer to solutions touching the lives of diverse populations? In this clearly written book, Mary Romero presents intersectionality as a core facet of the sociological imagination. One-dimensional approaches are no longer acceptable. Instead, we must examine all systems of oppression simultaneously, and how they integrate and work with or against each other to shape life experiences. Recognizing the dynamics of patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy, Romero shows how social inequality is maintained or minimized in various social settings and everyday sites of interaction. Drawing the theoretical threads together, the book demonstrates intersectional approaches in action in relation to the care crisis and wealth divide, to highlight the different understandings of these issues and their solutions arising from a comprehensive, intersectional examination.

Offering an overview of scholarly and activist tradition in the development of intersectionality and how to apply intersectionality as a lens for enriching our understandings of social life, this introductory text will be an invaluable and welcome resource for all students of sociology.

**Mary Romero** is Professor of Justice Studies and Social Inquiry at Arizona State University, and 110th President of the American Sociological Association

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# Introducing Intersectionality

Mary Romero

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# Introduction

Intersectionality's focus on social inequality has its roots and development in social justice research and struggle. As an activist project, intersectionality provides analytical tools for framing social justice issues in such a way as to expose how social exclusion or privilege occurs differently in various social positions, and it does this by focusing on the interaction of multiple systems of oppression. It is important to emphasize, however, that the concept is not just about poverty and those of lower socio-economic status. Intersectionality also helps us to understand privilege, riches, and access to higher education. It is a useful concept for understanding what the media have been calling the "1 percent." Access to inherited wealth, admission to Ivy Leagues (especially as a legacy student), and social networks of upward mobility form just as much "an intersection" as the school-to-prison pipeline and the father-and-son construction union or plumbing business.

In the early 1980s, the phrase "race, class and gender" was popularly referred to as the "holy trinity"; a growing number of researchers in the sociology of race and gender called attention to the explanatory power gained by analyzing interactions among these three systems of oppression and privilege. Research demonstrated that the inclusion of systems of power and social location were central to understanding everyday social interactions between individuals in society. Black feminists were at the vanguard of developing this new approach which challenged older theories that analyzed only one social category, for instance gender, without acknowledging that the experience of gender is not the same for a white woman as it is for a Black woman or a woman of color. In

studying class inequality, intersectionality insisted that both gender and race power relations were instrumental in comprehending the dynamics of class oppression and privilege. Race, class, and gender had long been treated as *variables* in sociological research. Intersectionality criticized the notion that these were simply variables to be controlled for. It also criticized the emphasis on one of these power systems, without taking into account the other two, as “essentialist.”

Clearly, neither racism, sexism, nor classism in the US can be fully explained by, for example, only analyzing the circumstances of elderly married poor Black women in the rural South. Treating the experience of this group as representative of all Black people, or all women, or all poor people is an essentialist view. Critical race scholars contributed to the understanding of systems of class oppression by documenting the ways in which race had always been a primary division in law, economics, and education in the US – and all other multicultural countries with histories of colonialism, conquest and immigration. Thus, neither class nor gender dynamics can be explained without figuring out the impact that racial differences have on oppression and/or privilege that individuals and communities experience. Without considering the interaction of systems of oppression and privilege, one might assume that racism, sexism or classism is the same experience regardless of your position in society. As social science came to recognize the different ways members of society experience oppression and privilege, it became important to explain how multiple systems of power interact in different times and locations.

In the past few decades, an increasing number of sociologists have come to accept that an intersectional approach was the key to understanding how inequality, privilege, and oppression worked. More sociologists came to recognize the limitations of one-dimensional approaches to social inequality. Class alone does not explain all aspects of poverty or housing segregation. Gender alone cannot account for wage disparities and occupation segregation. Race by itself does not provide a complete understanding of health disparities or college retention rates. Intersectionality, as an intellectual project, delves deeper into the nuances of social equality by pushing researchers to analyze the various manifestations of inequality. The holy trinity has been complicated by additional power systems: sexuality, ableism, ethnicity, citizenship and age play important roles in social identity and economic status – their reproduction and maintenance.

Among the social sciences, sociology has been a leader in developing the concept of intersectionality, both in theory and in research methods. Sociologists began using intersectionality to frame teaching as well as research addressing social inequality. For instance, growing numbers of scholars are contributing to disability studies by examining intersections

of race, class, gender and sexuality. Sociologists specializing in the sociology of immigration are incorporating race and gender, to understand how racism has shaped immigration legislation and law enforcement. Research in the sociology of family includes the intersection of systems of inequality – sexuality and citizenship, alongside race, class and gender. While intersectional approaches in sociology are gaining wider acceptance, not all fields of study embrace the concept or consider that only focusing on one category is an essentialist approach to the sociological imagination. Many sociologists embracing intersectionality are engaged in conversation with interdisciplinary programs and committed to social justice research.

The word “intersectionality” is frequently used as a noun describing inclusivity in social justice movements, organizations, and campaigns. In student services and human resources, the word appears alongside “diversity,” “multicultural,” “tolerance” and “difference.” However, “intersectionality” has a particular meaning and use in sociology. I developed this book as an invitation to engage students and inform them about the significance of intersectionality as a concept to help a sociological imagination. As C. Wright Mills explained the sociological imagination, it is the power to connect private troubles with public issues. In each of our lives, thinking about the interactions of race, social class, and gender in everyday life and in the political and economic arena does exactly that. My hope is that this book stimulates students’ curiosity about the many complexities of systems of privilege and oppression we encounter on a daily basis.

To begin, I will introduce intersectionality by drawing from experiences we are all familiar with – parenting and childhood. While not all of us are parents, we do recognize the ways our own childhood may not have always reflected the family life depicted in sitcoms or experienced by our friends. What happens when we attempt to plan programs aimed at children but we do not recognize diversity? What limitations are there to providing childcare and other assistance to parents if we assume that all families are the same and have the same needs? Why do some parents and children always seem to fit in, while others always appear as misfits?

Chapter 1 introduces intersectionality by examining the complexities of the interaction of race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship and age in the diversity found in parenting and childhood. The discussion of parents and children sheds light on why an intersectional approach is significant and what we miss in attempts to capture universal truths in sociology. I introduce how systems of power are apparent through social policies and the institutional practices in the law, education and economy that oppress or privilege certain types of sexuality, citizenship status, class and gender positions. Subsequent chapters break down the major components of

intersectionality, social identity and interlocking systems of oppression, and apply the perspective to everyday life and social issues. However, before tackling these topics, I turn to the question, “Where does intersectionality come from?”

Chapter 2 traces the critiques of one-dimensional approaches to explaining social inequality. Black feminist scholars and activists writing in the 1970s and 1980s called attention to the way they were excluded from the Black Power Movement, which primarily defined race from the position of Black working-class males, and a Feminist Movement that defined gender primarily from the position of white middle-class women. Scholars traced the roots of race, class and gender intersectionality to Black women’s writing by Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, and Anna Julia Cooper as early as the 1830s. Early writing and speeches contained a critique of political platforms that did not articulate their social position at the intersection of all three systems of inequality – gender, race and class. This chapter chronicles the major contributions to the development of intersectionality within sociology, which also highlights why certain concepts emerged as scholars aimed to understand social inequality. Actually, the concept “intersectionality” was born from activism and social justice struggles like the Civil Rights and Feminist Movements. Scholars joined with these to develop frameworks that incorporated marginalized voices.

I then explore ways of using intersectionality in a sociological approach to everyday life. Chapter 3 focuses on everyday life experiences on campus. I illustrate the complexities of lived experiences through the narratives of deaf African American college students, and working-class women, predominantly women of color, employed as janitors. I draw from Reshawna Chapple’s (2012) and Becky Pettitt’s (2008) dissertations to analyze how the intersectionality of everyday life functions on university campuses. Both scholars’ ethnographies capture experiences of everyday life that usually go unnoticed and unacknowledged. Chapple’s and Pettitt’s research identifies social practices and rituals experienced by Black deaf college women and women custodians to demonstrate the ways in which systems of social inequality are reproduced and maintained.

Social identities are the key aspect of mapping an intersectionality perspective. A visual way of conceptualizing intersectionality is by imagining a multi-dimensional graph with axes of gender, race, class, citizenship, ableness, age, sexualities and the like. These characteristics are part of our identity and everyday experiences. Even if one doesn’t want to be identified in this way, it is often impossible to control how others see you. Moreover, these identities are not fixed but fluid: which ones are central at any particular moment depends on the time and setting. How

family members see you is different from how you are perceived by classmates, fellow workers, teachers or managers. Thus, in a suburban high school class where all the students are white and more or less the same age and social class, gender or sexual identity are more likely to be the central elements identifying your coordinates. Similarly, in a mixed crowd protesting about civil rights, age, race, and social class may be very important axes.

To further illustrate the interaction of systems of oppression and privilege on identity, I will focus on gender identities (which we do not experience apart from our class, age, sexuality or ableness). Chapter 4 provides a framework for understanding why a young masculine middle-class Black man's gender is not socially constructed in the same way as that of a young poor homeless white man. While both may share a heterosexual masculine identity, when confronted by police in the inner city investigating a robbery, the social construction of their male identity is likely to place the Black male in harm's way. However, entering a business office, the Black middle-class male is more likely to gain entrance without any disturbance because his social class is primary. This chapter provides the tools for analyzing these experiences and recognizing power structures intersecting and shifting as we move from one social setting or one point in time to another. By examining gender through an intersectional lens, I will show the ways in which one identity may be salient in one social setting and another in a different setting; and at the same time, multiple identities are experienced simultaneously. This chapter prepares us to return attention to a more comprehensive overview of systems of oppression and privilege, which were briefly presented in chapter 1.

The question posed in chapter 5 is: "How are systems of oppression and privilege interlocked?" To answer that question, I focus on immigration and the social construction of citizenship. Examining the history of immigration legislation in the US makes evident how citizenship is socially constructed. It is important to recognize that citizenship status is complicated. Having a birthright to citizenship, becoming a naturalized citizen, having the right to live and work in the country but without full citizenship rights, or undocumented persons who have no rights to be in the country – these different citizenship statuses are linked to power systems interacting with forms of racial, class, gender, and sexual denomination and disability. Examining the legal history of citizenship and immigration in the US makes apparent the interconnection between systems of white supremacy and the complexity of systems of oppression surrounding citizenship, such as nationality, sexuality, gender and age. For example, there was a time when Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Greeks were not considered "white," and Blacks were considered three-fifths of

a citizen. Examining the policing of citizenship by laws, the state and other citizens will illustrate the practices and rituals used to produce and maintain privilege and oppression.

Chapter 6 further explores the type of sociological imagination that intersectionality brings to the study of social interaction, institutions and society by analyzing social issues. How does intersectionality examine social issues differently from one-dimensional approaches that consider each social identity as a variable to be controlled for, or simply adding race and gender together rather than all the complex multiple identities of lived experience? Why is this perspective important in understanding social issues? I approach the answers by using contemporary social issues: the wealth gap, the care crisis, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement. One might assume the wealth gap to be solely a class issue. However, an intersectional approach illuminates ways in which social class alone does not explain the wealth gap between rich and poor. Analysis needs to consider the history of gender, race and citizenship that determined property rights and inheritance laws. I then explore the care crisis which recent sociological literature tends to present as a relatively new social issue concerning families in the last two decades. However, an intersectional perspective demonstrates that issues currently classified as “the care crisis” actually date to an era before middle-class white women entered the labor force. I end this chapter discussing the Black Lives Matter Movement and its use of intersectionality.

The final chapter summarizes important points of intersectionality and highlights the significance of an intersectional sociological imagination in searching for solutions to social inequality.

It is important to note that “gender,” “race,” and “class” – as well as many other terms we will refer to in this book, such as “sexuality” and “social justice” – are themselves not fixed concepts. They do not have universal, undifferentiated meanings, and much sociological work involves breaking these ideas down to explore what they mean in different settings as social constructions. For instance, the sociology of gender teaches us that it is simplistic to treat gender as a crude categorization of “male” or “female.” Scholars of race have shown that racial categories do not exist in “nature,” but are social identities assigned to individuals and groups with real outcomes in their life experiences and opportunities. There is a long history of sociological work which tries to define what “class” is and how we measure it: is it about income, is it about tastes and lifestyle, etc.? And the same is true for many of the terms used in this book. This book does not explore each individual concept but what it means to put these categories together – but do bear in mind throughout that each of these social categories is fluid, contested and open to debate.