CHAPTER 1

Conceptual Framework for Intersectionality

As discussed in the Introduction, to capture the depth and breadth of the human experience and to meet the objectives defined by the CSWE, social work professionals must embrace a holistic and comprehensive approach. In this chapter, we outline the central epistemological and theoretical assumptions underlying this perspective and discuss the main intersectional concepts. We also stress the importance of viewing intersectionality as a methodology and as a mechanism for social change. Throughout, we describe the ways in which the intersectionality perspective meets the challenges facing the social work profession.

Intersectionality as a Theory

Conceptualized primarily as a theoretical perspective and guiding paradigm, a methodology, a mechanism for social change (Association for Women's Rights in Development [AWID], 2004), and a policy framework (Crenshaw, 1991), intersectionality posits that socially constructed categories of oppression and privilege, such as race, class, gender, and age, simultaneously interact to create unique life experiences (Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991; King, 1998; McCall, 2005). Challenging former feminist perspectives, feminist women of color (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996; Brewer, 1993; Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991; King, 1988) argued strongly that race, class, and gender are inseparable determinants of inequalities that interdependently "form interlocking patterns. The interlocking patterns in turn serve as a bases for developing multiple systems of domination that affect access to power and privileges, influence social relationships, construct meanings, and shape people's everyday experience" (Andersen, 1996, p. xii).

Intersectionality posits that an understanding of a person's social location, that is, his or her place in society that is formed by the intersection of social constructions that mark privilege and oppression, is essential to capturing the complexity of that person's experiences, including his or her actions, choices, and outcomes. In addition to capturing the complexity of a person's experiences, an intersectional perspective minimizes the risk of

nuances or "missing variations" in experiences being discounted (Landry, 2006). Missing such variations is a prevalent pathway to the unfavorable and insensitive practice of homogenizing the experiences of others. The avoidance of homogenization is particularly essential in disciplines, such as social work, that have an interest and level of sensitivity in working with and advocating on behalf of diverse and marginalized populations.

In conceptualizing intersectionality, attention is most often devoted to the interaction between the primary categories of oppressions such as race, class, and gender. Crenshaw (1994) refers to this level of intersectionality as *structural intersectionality.* She emphasizes the importance of acknowledging other locations where structures of power intersect. For example, considering immigrant women in battering shelters, Crenshaw suggests that "their status as immigrants can render them vulnerable in ways that are similarly coercive, yet not easily reducible to economic class" (p. 96).

Reflecting the applicability and implications of intersecting oppressions across the variety of dimensions that affect an individual's experience, Crenshaw (1994) also posits the need to consider intersectionality at the political and representational levels: "The concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" (p. 98). The concept of representational intersectionality emphasizes "how the production of images of women of color and the contestations over those images tend to ignore the intersectional interests of women of color" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1282). Citing examples in which Black women are further marginalized by being negatively represented via rap lyrics and other forms of media, Crenshaw illuminates the power and complexity of these socially constructed divisions.

Although the notion of intersectionality is historically rooted, its place within academic discourse is still in its infancy and its primary champions continue to confront challenges associated with demarginalizing or unsuppressing a nontraditional paradigm in a traditional academic environment (Collins, 2000). Many challenges, including achieving a consensus on a common language, clarity in defining concepts, and even agreement on the extent to which intersectionality qualifies as a theory, accompany this stage of development.

Theories support the production of knowledge and generation of evidence that, in turn, have the ability to influence services, inform policies, and drive practices (White & Klein, 2002). Specifically, White and Klein purport that scientific theory contributes to the development of knowledge by assisting us to "predict, to interpret, to explain, to formulate questions, to integrate research, to make deductions, and to lead us into novel areas of research" (p. 229).

Intersectionality offers explanations related to the complexity of the human experience as marked by social constructions of privilege and oppression and has pushed some social scientists to formulate intersectional questions and to enter novel areas of research. Embracing a more positivistic or traditional perspective, some (e.g., Landry, 2006) assert that even though there are assumptions and hypotheses associated with intersectionality, insufficient empirical testing positions intersectionality to fall short of being considered as a theory. Embracing an alternative perspective, we believe intersectionality warrants the status of a theory and, as is the case of all "good" theories, is steadily evolving. To convey the conceptualization of intersectionality, we present the epistemological foundation of intersectionality, followed by the key assumptions and concepts associated with intersectionality theory.

Black Feminist Epistemology as a Foundation for Intersectionality

An Afrocentric feminist epistemology is a way of "knowing" that reflects the unique standpoint of Black women. Black feminist thought, as conceptualized by Collins (1990), is specialized knowledge created by African American women that clarifies the standpoint of and for Black women. Collins states, "Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (Collins, 1990, p. 22) and encompasses "a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (Collins, 1990, p. 39). Appropriately, Black feminist thought serves as an epistemological foundation for many of the Black feminist intellectuals who champion intersectionality. A Black feminist or Afrocentric thought provides a framework for understanding and theorizing the experiences of Black women. Highlighting the unique worldviews and experiences of Black women in making meaning and projecting knowledge claims about Black women, an epistemological framework that embraces Black feminist thought provides sound justification for exploring the complex experiences of African American women in particular and marginalized populations in general. Additionally, a Black feminist epistemology emphasizes the need to use and promote an alternative and interpretive race, class, and gender framework that dismisses additive models—those that consider race plus class plus gender—and replaces them with intersectional models and frameworks (Collins, 2000).

Theoretical Assumptions of Intersectionality

Assumptions, which are those beliefs that must be accepted as true in order to ascribe to a certain theory, model, or framework, should be clearly stated, as they give insight into the reasoning that supports the theory, model, or framework (White & Klein, 2002). The basic premise of intersectionality is that the human experience is complex and consists of "multiple, layered identities, derived from social relations, history and the operations of structures of power" (AWID, 2004, p. 2). Themes central to this assumption include the ideas of (1) contextuality and dynamism of intersections, (2) mutual constitution, and (3) matrix of domination. Additionally, intersectionality posits that one should not assume "the combining of identities as additively increasing one's burden but instead as producing substantively distinct experiences" (AWID, 2004, p. 2). Themes central to this assumption include simultaneity and multiplicity.

Contextuality and Dynamism of Interactions

Intersectionality assumes the importance of recognizing and instigating the context-specific, processual, and often contradictory aspects of race/ethnicity, class, and gender. More specifically, feminist intersectional theorists recognize race, gender, and class as socially constructed, unstable, and shifting meanings as well as social relations. To understand the intersections of race, class, and gender, such categories "should be analyzed in the context of structural changes in the world: globalization, massive redistribution of capital and wealth, growing inequality" (Andersen, 2005, p. 445). Using concepts central to social work, Landry (2006) posits that dimensions of inequality interact on three contextual levels referred to as the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

The macro level refers to society and is viewed from the top down, with concepts such as racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. These systems represent power relationships between Whites and Blacks, men and women, and capitalists and workers. This level pertains to social structural forms of discrimination (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). The mezzo level refers to institutions and organizations that provide essential services to society, such as the educational system, health care system, and state and local government agencies. Though institutions and organizations are comprised of individuals, they take on a life of their own. The micro level, also known as the individual level, is where each person resides, regardless of social location, with respect to race, gender, and class. This level pertains to daily face-to-face interactions (e.g., jobs, stores, introductions, etc.). Terms associated with the mezzo and micro levels are *sexism, privilege, simultaneity,* and *multiplicative.* Collins (1995) maintains that intersectionality describes the micro-level process, namely, how individuals and groups occupy a social position within interlocking structures of oppression.

The classification of society into macro, mezzo, and micro levels is useful in explaining how power systems operate at each level (see Figure 1). The concepts and assumptions of the intersectionality theory vary according to the level being examined (Landry, 2006). Even though there have been divergent views as for which facets of society the intersectionality analysis is most appropriate (see Collins, 1995; West & Fenstermaker, 1995), the intersectionality approach has been researched and applied at all three levels.

Mutual Constitution

According to Rothenberg (2001), mutual constitution suggests that even though racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism "have their own intrinsic logic," they "operate in conjunction with each other to form an enormously complex set of interlocking and self-perpetuating relations of domination and subordination" (pp. 1–2). Thus, intersectionality theorists assert that, for instance, "gender is constructed by a range of interlocking inequalities" (Lorber, 1998, p. 138), including race, class, and age. As a result, the meaning of womanhood for a middle-class, middle-age, African American woman is different than that held by a working-class, older, White woman. Research on gender alone is insufficient to describe the experiences or expose the subordination of women. For an intersectional perspective to be applied to gender analysis, the gender category must be used in

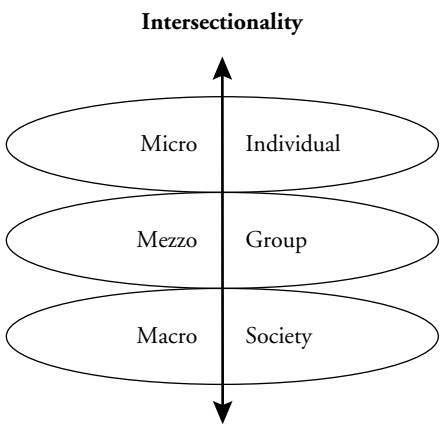

Figure 1. Illustration of the interaction of levels at which intersectionality exists.

conjunction with at least one other intersecting category of oppression in order to produce a more accurate depiction of the problem.[1]

Simultaneity and Multiplicity

Simultaneity posits that "people are members of more than one community at the same time, and can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege (e.g. a women may be a respected medical professional but suffer domestic violence in her home)" (AWID, 2004, p. 2). Intersectional scholars conceptualize this assumption of simultaneity in three ways (Landry, 2006). First, some intersectional theorists suggest that, at the structural level, the relations of inequality are always present; but depending on the context as well as the issue at hand, "in some cases, race may be the more significant predictor of black women's status; in others gender or class may be more influential" (King, 1988, p. 48). Aware of the importance of making a distinction between situational salience and absence, Collins (1993) states that the "recognition that one category may have salience over another for a given time and place does not minimize the theoretical importance of assuming that race, class, and gender as categories of analysis structure all relationships" (p. 26). Finally, Baca Zinn and Dill (1996) emphasize the experiential dimension of simultaneity by suggesting that "people experience race, class, gender, and sexuality differently depending upon their social location in the structures of race, gender, race, and sexuality" (pp. 326–327). Similarly, Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley (2004) note that women, depending on their social locations, experience relations of inequality in varying configurations and degrees of intensity.

Landry (2006) observes that presence and simultaneity of categories of inequality are always acknowledged by intersectionality theorists, but some researchers suggest that their theoretical significance varies across situations (e.g., King, 1988). Feminists, such as Collins (1993), emphasize that it is always important to theoretically assume that all categories are important and then to empirically determine which ones are salient in a given context. Yet a third group of intersectional scholars, such as Baca Zinn and Dill (1996), recognize a variation in the experiential dimensions of intersectionality.

Key Concepts of Intersectionality

Concepts are key components of any theoretical perspective, as they provide a way of communicating about abstract ideas in an organized manner (White & Klein, 2002). Concepts represent the defined language that is used to communicate with one another about theories. Because of social work's orientation to issues of social justice, equality, and diverse populations, the key concepts associated with intersectionality and their applicability at multiple system levels (micro, mezzo, and macro) are not foreign to the social work professional.

Social Inequality

Kerbo (2003) defines social inequality as the condition whereby people have unequal access to valued resources, services, and positions in society. He further states that these inequalities can emerge in terms of how individuals and groups are ranked and evaluated

[1]Landry (2006) makes a distinction between the saturated intersectional model and the reduced intersectional models. According to Landry, the saturated model includes eight social locations. The reduced models include various combinations of six or four locations.

by others. Although several of the early social science scholars (e.g., Marx, Weber, and Durkheim) were divergent on some level about the origins, form, and consequences of social inequality, they recognized it as a pervasive phenomenon. However, they dismissed race as a critical aspect and focused more on social class as the major determinant (Allen & Chung, 2000) of social inequality. Positing an intersectionality perspective, King (1988) argued that a concentration solely on socioeconomic concerns neglects the fact that racism, sexism, and class constitute three interdependent power systems contributing to social inequality.

Over- and Underinclusion

Social inequality continues to be a prominent feature in society, but some groups are still underresearched or even overlooked in academic literature (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990). For example, despite the dramatic increased participation of many groups, particularly women, over the past fifty years in both economic and political facets and the private, public, and nonprofit job sectors, significant disparities continue (Hayghe, 1997; Albelda & Tilly, 1997). In 1994, Burbridge reported that the proportion of White women in the labor market increased by a third, and the number of minorities doubled over the past two decades. Not only does such a study illustrate the significance of race, because the minorities, in general, lag behind the achievements of White women, but it also illustrates the invisibility of groups within the minority population. This homogenization of the minority population makes it to difficult determine the degree of advancement achieved among different groups within this population.

Marginalization

Historically, women of color have been battling against marginalization and exclusion in almost every facet of society (e.g., political, economical, and social). Their pursuit to achieve visibility dates back to the late nineteenth century (see Cooper, 1892/1988; Harper, 1893/1995). Because the intricate interplay between race and gender is an active process producing different outcomes for different groups of people, some groups are subject to greater degrees of oppression than others and vice versa (Crenshaw, 1989). Consequently, it is imperative to understand the concept of social location and the significant role it plays in determining who gets what and who gets left out.

Social Location

The interpretation of ideas about race and gender in social science research is the outcome of ongoing social contestation, and social actors use these ideas to create social realities, including the unequal distribution of resources among individuals in diverse racial and gender categories (Glenn, 1999). This process explicates a classification that is socially rather than biologically defined. These social constructions are rooted in centuries of racial discrimination. America's unique racial and ethnic reality began during the seventeenth century when the colonists began to identify themselves as "White," distinguishing themselves from the Indian and slaves (Foner & Fredrickson, 2004). This racial and ethnic reality was shaped by a history that included the enslavement of Africans, the conquest of Indians and Mexicans, and the exploitation of Asians and other non-White labor (Allen & Chung, 2000). Beisel and Kay (2004) contend that even though contemporary sociology generally uses the term *race* to refer to categories marked by bodily difference (mostly skin color) and ethnicity, this categorization does not recognize that people see what they are socially cued to see.

Race and gender are social constructs—their content or meaning is not absolute nor is it derived from concrete factors such as biology. Rather its significance emerges from its use of a particular group of people (Glenn, 1999; Landry, 2006). Race, gender, and class all represent simple social locations where individuals (or social actors) are often thought of as being Black or White, female or male, and belonging to the working class, the middle class, or the upper class (Landry, 2006). According to Collins (1998), an individual's social location usually sets the stage for the rest of his or her life. Landry (2006) introduces the idea of complex social location, suggesting that individuals are not a member of a race, or a particular gender, or of an individual class, but rather they carry all three characteristics simultaneously. Because humans are complex beings embedded in multiple groups and organizations engaged in innumerable actions, the simple assessment of the categories of race, gender, and class as separate entities operating independently of each other does not provide a sufficient lens through which to evaluate social inequalities (Landry, 2006).

Traditionally, analysis of inequality has been preoccupied with one of these dimensions; race, gender, and class have been assessed as separate noninteracting categories of oppression. But people do not experience gender or race or class per se, rather they experience inequality as an African American female schoolteacher or as a White male steelworker (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 1999). Some scholars have criticized the traditional approach, arguing that social locations are created by the intersection of three identities and that the research on only race, gender, or class ignores the multifaceted nature of a person's experiences and captures only part of a more complex whole (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1984; King, 1988). In essence, race, gender, and class represent distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression (Collins, 1993).

The concept of social inequality, specifically how social location influences economic inequality, has been central to the social sciences (Allen & Chung, 2000). Unfortunately, the continued analysis of separate categories has resulted in socially constructed divisions that render many groups invisible, thus perpetuating social inequality. In essence, the social exclusion of groups or individuals via the construction of identity markers, and the resulting hierarchical relations and use of power and privilege to institute and maintain such divisions, fuel the process of oppression and hold major implications for marginalized populations. Chow, Wilkinson, and Baca Zinn (1996) asserted that the social divisions of gender, race, and class operate in tandem and result in systems of domination that affect access to power and privileges, influence social relationships, construct meanings, and shape people's everyday experiences.

Matrix of Domination

The matrix of domination (Collins, 2000) view asserts that even though race, class, and gender may be used as descriptive demographic variables, the fundamental reality is that they are continuously changing social relations of inequality and systems of oppression larger than individual demographics or identities (Andersen, 2005; Kennelly, 2004). In addition, Andersen (2005) argues, "race, class and gender are not just about diversity—as if understanding race, class, and gender is solely about the plurality of views and experiences" (p. 445). If these categories of analysis are conceptualized as demographic characteristics, identities, or attributes of diversity only, they contribute to the reproduction of privilege and domination (Andersen & Collins, 2004). Instead, "analyzing race, class, and gender must be about the hierarchies and systems of domination that permeate society" (Andersen, 2005, p. 446).

Understanding Intersectionality as a Theoretical Perspective, a Methodology, and a Mechanism for Social Change

The conceptualization of intersectionality as an evolving theoretical perspective and as a methodology and a mechanism for social change appropriately reflects its responsiveness to the needs of today's social work professional and others interested in fully understanding marginalized populations.

Conceptualized as a methodology grounded in Black feminist epistemology, intersectionality addresses the need for methods that are useful in challenging the contradictions between beliefs and values and subsequent practices and policies that arise from the privileged experiences of dominant groups and the devalued reality experienced by marginalized populations (Collins, 2000). Collins (1990) states that "traditional social science research assesses African American women's experiences in families using the normative yardstick developed from the experiences of middle-class American and European nuclear families" (p. 46), thereby masking the complexity of the Black family and Black women. An intersectional methodology helps capture the complexity experienced by marginalized populations such as Black women and their families.

As a mechanism for social change grounded in Black feminist epistemology, an intersectional perspective stresses the notion of human agency and emphasizes an empowerment perspective that gives value to the outside-within position in which Black feminist intellectuals often find themselves. Reflecting this empowerment perspective, Collins (2000) asserts that those in outside-within locations have the ability to visualize and promote "new angles of vision" (p. 11) on critical issues, such as oppression, that are critical to their experiences yet foreign to the experiences of the dominant group. Nonetheless, this unique vision frequently comes at a cost. Collins shares the following example: "By identifying my position as a participant in and observer of Black women's communities, I run the risk of being discredited as being too subjective and hence less scholarly" (p. 19). Additionally, as a mechanism for social change, an intersectional perspective is applicable to promoting social justice and change at all levels from the individual to the institutional. Although the focus of Black feminists is on American Black women, Collins states that "Black feminist thought constitutes one part of a much larger social justice project that goes far beyond the experiences of African-American women" (p. 19). As Crenshaw (1994) asserts, "through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (p. 113).

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