“Mapping the Margins” Intersectionality: A Primer


As a foundational work illustrating the theory of intersectionality, please consider the following excerpts from Crenshaw’s work. What do these quotes suggest about intersectionality and its power to name social systems of power and subordination?

“The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.” (p. 1242)

“I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both.” (p. 1243-4).

“I should say at the outset that intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity… My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.” (p. 1244-5).

Structural Intersectionality
“Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment.” (p. 1249)

“Women of color are differently situated in the economic, social, and political worlds. When reform efforts undertaken on behalf of women neglect this fact, women of color are less likely to have their needs met than women who are racially privileged.” (p. 1250)

Political Intersectionality
“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. The need to split one’s political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront. Indeed, their specific race and gendered experiences, although intersectional, often define as well as confine the interests of the entire group. For example, racism as experienced by people of color who are of a particular gender—male—tends to determine the parameters of antiracist strategies, just as sexism as experience by women who are of a particular race—white—tends to ground the women’s movement… Among the most troubling political consequences of the failure of antiracist and feminist discourses to address the intersections of race and gender is the fact that, to the extent that they can forward the interest of “people of color” and “women,” respectively, one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other.” (p. 1251-2).

Mark Brimhall-Vargas, Ph.D.
“Mapping the Margins” Intersectionality: A Primer

Representational Intersectionality
“With respect to the rape of Black women, race and gender converge so that the concerns of minority women fall into the void between concerns about women’s issues and concerns about racism. But when one discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of the other, the power relations that each attempts to challenge are strengthened. For example, when feminists fail to acknowledge the role that race played in the public response to the rape of the Central Park jogger, feminism contributes to the forces that produce disproportionate punishment for Black men who rape white women, and when antiracists represent the case solely in terms of racial domination, they belittle the fact that women particularly, and all people generally, should be outraged by the gender violence the case represented.” (p. 1282).

“Perhaps the devaluation of women of color implicit here is linked to how women of color are represented in cultural imagery… An analysis of what may be termed ‘representational intersectionality’ would include both the ways in which these images are produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color.” (p. 1283).

Conclusion
“But to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that the category has no significance in our world.” (p. 1296).

“In the context of antiracism, recognizing the ways in which the intersectional experiences of women of color are marginalized in prevailing conceptions of identity politics does not require that we give up attempts to organize as communities of color. Rather, intersectionality provides a basis for reconceptualizing race as a coalition between men and women of color… Race can also be a coalition of straight and gay people of color, and thus serve as a basis for critique of churches and other cultural institutions that reproduce heterosexism.” (p. 1299).

“The most one could expect is that we will dare to speak against internal exclusions and marginalizations, that we might call attention to how the identity of ‘the group’ has been centered on the intersectional identities of a few.” (p. 1299).