



Commentary

It's Not Just About Abortion: Incorporating Intersectionality in Research About Women of Color and Reproduction

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Intersectionality was first articulated in the 1970s and 1980s by women of color scholars, such as Deborah King, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzualdua, and Nira Yuval-Davis, and has now become a core concept in women's and gender studies. It is generally understood within feminist circles that researchers must address the interlocking effects of identities, oppressions, and privileges to fully understand the range and complexity of women's experiences. Women (and men) not only experience the effects of gender in their lives, but they are also affected by their race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability, among other aspects of their identities. These identities do not operate separately from one another, but work in tandem to shape the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions of individuals and social groups. In sum, intersectionality is not about identity politics, but is about the social, cultural, political, and economic processes that affect our lives.

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Intersectionality has been examined as a theoretical, analytical, and epistemologic framework, but it has been underexamined as a methodologic approach or process, that is, as a set of governing principles, methods, practices, procedures, and techniques used to collect and analyze data. What intersectional methodology looks like in practice has not been clear. Increasingly, social scientists—particularly in political science, sociology, psychology, and geography—are writing about how to “operationalize” intersectionality in research design and have begun to recommend best practices that capture its complexity, especially in survey and experimental research (Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005).

The question addressed here is: How can we incorporate intersectionality in research on reproductive and sexual health and politics? I use my research on the reproductive justice movement as a springboard for discussion. This essay is not meant to be comprehensive; this is not possible given the limited space allotted for this article. Instead, the hope is that the ideas

presented will spur more researchers to think about how to incorporate intersectionality into their research designs.

It seems that my research on women of color and the politics of reproduction is the epitome of intersectional research. After all, women of color are at the center of the analysis. Early social science studies that employed an intersectional approach indeed focused on specific groups of women of color, such as studies of African-American women legislators or Latina workers in the labor market (Browne & Misra, 2003; McCall, 2005; Simien, 2007). The goal of these studies was to include the lived experiences of previously neglected social groups. Intersectionality encompasses more than that, however; it is about being mindful of the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and the other markers of difference regardless of the research topic. Researchers can incorporate intersectionality when deliberating the choice of research topic, the kinds of research questions asked or hypotheses posed, the methods used, the interview and survey questions posed, the data sampling techniques used, and the coding strategy that will be developed.

We need to think of intersectionality at every stage of the process when designing a research project. This requires asking oneself a variety of questions: Whom should I interview or survey? Which advocacy groups should I observe? What documentary sources should I sample? Does my sample closely reflect the nuances of my research topic? What coding strategy would help me to capture intersectionality in this particular project?

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What kinds of variables should I develop? What regression model would best capture the effects of intersectionality in my study? These questions can be applied to both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and are useful whether a researcher is conducting a highly structured survey for quantitative analysis or semistructured, personal interviews for an interpretive project that focuses on belief and value systems.

These questions are important for researchers designing projects that examine reproductive health policy and advocacy. An intersectional approach requires moving beyond the usual pro-choice and anti-abortion advocacy groups, such as NARAL Prochoice America, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and National Right to Life Committee, when devising a data sampling strategy; it requires that we look at other groups that might not come immediately to mind, such as the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, the National Black Women's Health Project, and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health. If a researcher is conducting a media analysis of reproductive health issues, it is important that she or he diversify the sources. The sample should not draw from mainstream newspapers and news magazines only (such as the *New York Times* and *Time*), but also from women's magazines and ethnic media sources (such as the *Amsterdam News* and *Colorlines*). Such sampling techniques can yield cultural, social, and political perspectives that might otherwise never surface, such as the fears concerning genocide that many in the African-American community harbor about abortion (Kumeh, 2010). These fears could possibly affect the level of African-American support, acceptance, and use of particular reproductive technologies.

Some social scientists have suggested a few best practices for quantitative projects that go beyond merely adding variables for race, gender, class, and sexual orientation to a model. Researchers must construct models that capture the nuances of the interaction of these variables. Some examples include disaggregating samples by race and gender; building separate regression models for different social groups, for example, separate models for white men and women, African-American men and women, and so on; using explanatory variables in experimental and factorial designs; creating interactive variables (gender \times race) instead of mutually exclusive independent variables (gender + race + class) in regression equations (McCall, 2005; Steinbugler, Press & Dias, 2006; Warner, 2008).

Research projects on abortion tend to follow the additive model in which race, ethnicity, and class are treated as mutually exclusive variables. This is not necessarily a bad thing, because it has produced some valuable information. For example, we have learned that African-American women are five times more likely than White women to obtain abortions; Latinas are twice as likely as White women to do so (Cohen, 2008). There is some speculation that this might be due to higher rates of unintended pregnancy and less access to contraceptives among African-American women and Latinas (Cohen, 2008). Research has also found that African-American women underreport abortions in survey research at rates higher than their White and Latina counterparts (Jagannathan, 2001). In other words, researchers have shown that race is an important predictor in abortion behavior, but this only skims the surface of an intersectional analysis. We still have to figure out why race is such a strong predictor and how it may be mitigated by other factors, such as socioeconomic status and cultural norms.

This might require building different regression models for different groups of women—African-American women, Latinas, White women, and Asian American/Pacific Islander women. It

could also mean creating models that examine how different variables might work in conjunction with one another. The issues with the disparities in abortion rates (as well as in rates of unintended pregnancy and contraceptive use) could possibly be the effect of the interactive effects of race and class.

My own research on women of color and the reproductive justice movement has forced me to think even more deeply about how intersectional methodology is important to the study of abortion and reproductive health. The reproductive justice movement places intersectionality—and human rights doctrine—at the center of its mission and organizing activities with the belief that this new framework will encourage more women of color and other marginalized groups to become more involved in the political movement for reproductive freedom (Silliman, Fried, Ross, & Gutierrez, 2004). Many women of color—as well as poor, working-class, and lesbian women—believe that their needs have not been adequately addressed in the mainstream “pro-choice” movement. Moreover, focus group research has shown that women of color and low-income women do not identify with the pro-choice message; in fact, the choice rhetoric is almost meaningless to them. Reproductive justice activists argue that the pro-choice movement's seemingly singular focus on abortion rights neglects how race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and other markers of difference are implicated in reproductive rights for many women. Reproductive justice activists also argue that mainstream pro-choice activists have failed to see how reproduction is connected to other social justice issues, such as economic justice, welfare reform, prison reform, the adoption and foster care systems, immigration, LGBT rights, and environmental justice. Last, reproductive rights is not only about the right to obtain an abortion, but also about the right to reproduce at all and to keep and raise the children that one has in safe and healthy environments (Silliman et al., 2004).

As researchers, we can learn from reproductive justice activists. We should begin by placing reproductive and sexual health and abortion within the proper historical, cultural, social, political, and economic contexts, and studying reproduction in relation to other social issues. Abortion and reproduction do not exist in a vacuum. For example, we should study the environmental impact on reproduction, including the impact of constant exposure to pesticides on migrant agricultural workers or the impact of chemicals on workers in the beauty care industry, many of whom are Asian American and Pacific Islander women (Roelofs, Azaroff, Holcroft, Nguyen, & Doan, 2008). We should conduct more studies on the impact of the Hyde amendment, which forbids federal funding for abortions, and welfare policies on low-income women's access to abortion and other reproductive health services. Have private funding sources such as the National Network of Abortion Funds adequately filled that gap? We should examine the possible reasons why the African-American community has high rates of infant mortality, why African-American women have abortions at higher rates, and why middle-class African Americans have higher rates of infertility but do not seek treatment at rates comparable with those of Whites (Roberts, 1997; Williams, 2008). We should conduct more research that attempts to understand why African-American, Latina, and Asian-American women have low rates of mammography, breast cancer screening, and Pap smears (Williams, 2008). This is only a small sampling of the kinds of research questions that an intersectional approach can generate within the field of abortion and reproductive health.

The reproductive justice movement is also a reminder of the differences among women of color. Even though women of

color do share some common experiences, such as the history of government-sanctioned sterilization campaigns targeting African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans, there are notable historical and cultural differences that can lead to different policy priorities and outcomes (Silliman et al 2004). The issues of nationhood and sovereignty and the reliance on Indian Health Services affect the reproductive lives of Native American women, for example, whereas the border politics between the United States and Mexico have an effect on Chicana/Mexican-American women. Differences in class, sexual orientation, and even citizenship status also have an impact on women of color. Although many African-American women and Latinas are middle class, a disproportionate percentage of women in these communities live in poverty and rely on government programs. Some women of color identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer; their lives, including their reproductive lives, are affected by homophobia, especially when dealing with health care providers and antigay public policies. U.S. immigration policy affects many women of color. We should not assume that women of color are a monolithic group, and our projects should reflect that, for example, by creating variables and codes that capture the complexity of the interaction of these points of difference.

Some researchers may initially assume that all of our research must be thoroughly intersectional and that it is no longer acceptable to conduct studies that focus on White, middle-class women. That, however, is a very limited interpretation. Hancock (2007) warns that we cannot assume that race and gender are equally employed in a specific study, because there may be instances in which race might be more prominent than gender. Even in those cases, a researcher still needs to remain mindful that other factors, such as gender or class, might mitigate the experiences of race. It is acceptable to study specific groups, including middle-class White women, but a researcher must be clear that she or he is probing the experiences of a specific group and warn that the results should not be generalized beyond that specific group.

There is no set formula for employing an intersectional methodology. The bottom line is this: When designing projects

on abortion and reproduction, especially those that claim to study the general population, we need to employ strategies that capture the nuances of intersectional identities, inequalities, and privileges of different social groups.

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