

Patricia Hill Collins: Intersecting Oppressions

Patricia Hill Collins is principally concerned with the relationships among empowerment, self-definition, and knowledge; and she is obviously concerned with black women: it is the oppression with which she is most intimately familiar. But Collins is also one of the few social thinkers who are able to rise above their own experiences; to challenge us with a significant view of oppression and identity politics that not only has the possibility of changing the world but also of opening up the prospect of continuous change.

For change to be continuous, it can't be exclusively focused on one social group. In other words, a social movement that is only concerned with racial inequality, will end its influence once equality for that group is achieved. What Patricia Hill Collins gives us is a way of transcending group specific politics that is based upon black feminist epistemology. However, it is vital to note that her intent is to place "U.S. Black women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences" (Collins, 2000, p. 228). Collins is saying that we can learn significantly from black women's knowledge.

Black women sit at a theoretically interesting point. Collins argues that black women are uniquely situated in that they stand at the focal point where two exceptionally powerful and prevalent systems of oppression come together: race and gender. Being able to understand this position as something she calls "intersectionality" opens up the possibility of seeing and understanding many more spaces of cross-cutting interests. That is, understanding the social position black women ought to compel us to see, and look for, other spaces where systems of inequality come together.

Just as important to this possibility of continuous change are the qualities of what Collins variously terms alternative or black feminist epistemology. This notion implies that the emphasis on social, *scientific* knowledge has hindered social reform. In this way of thinking about things, all knowledge is political and can be used to serve specific group interests. Social science is particularly susceptible to this because it simultaneously objectifies its subjects and denies the validity of lived experience as a form of knowing.

Black Feminist Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. Now, let's stop and think about that for a moment. Why would people study knowledge? The common sense understanding of knowledge is rather straightforward: knowledge is what you know; it is the fact or condition of knowing. Having knowledge means to have familiarity with an individual, thing, or event. For example, you know your friend; you know sociology; and you know $2 + 2 = 4$. So, what's to study? Common sense tells us that you either know $2 + 2 = 4$ or you don't; and you can know more or less about sociology or about your friend. If

epistemology is the study of knowledge, why and how is it studied? What are the problems and questions that have produced epistemology?

What I'm trying to get us to recognize is that despite our common sense understanding, there is something odd and disturbing about knowledge, disturbing in the sense that it prompts scrutiny. In fact, the idea of knowledge is so disturbing that philosophers have been studying it for almost 2500 years; and "nearly every great philosopher has contributed to the epistemological literature" (Merriam-Webster, 2002).

Human knowledge is disturbing because we're not exactly sure what it is, where it comes from, or how it can be validated. With human knowledge, there is at least the possibility that what we know is not the direct knowledge of events or the physical universe. As the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1944) puts it, "No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances" (p. 42). There are two main philosophical schools that attempt to address this possibility: empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism holds that all knowledge comes from and must be tested by sense experience; the data that come to us via our five senses. Rationalism, on the other hand, argues that sense experience can be wrong and that reason is our chief source and validation of knowledge.

There are, of course, many other philosophical schools of thought about knowledge. But my point is simply that knowing and knowledge are not as straightforward as they seem. Think of it this way: we are the only animal that takes its knowledge as something to be studied. My dog Maggie for example isn't concerned one iota about her knowledge; she simply knows what she knows. Knowledge for humans is not so easy.

As sociologists, we aren't usually concerned with the philosophical investigation of knowledge. However, sociology is interested in the social factors that influence how knowledge is created and how knowledge is socially used. One of the first sociologists to express these concerns was Karl Marx (1859/1978a): "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (p. 4). Marx (1932/1978b) is specifically concerned with the class based and oppressive nature of knowledge: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force" (p. 172, emphasis original). Notice that Marx connects knowledge (ideas) with material interests. What people know and think are intrinsically wrapped up with class position. Also notice that the elite in any society exercise disproportionate control over what ideas are accepted as truth. Thus, whatever else philosophy may say, sociologically we know that knowledge is influenced by and used in the politics surrounding class position.

Patricia Hill Collins argues that the politics of race and gender also influence knowledge. In Marxian terms, race and gender are part of our "social being." In order to talk about this issue, and specifically about black feminist knowledge, Collins juxtaposes Eurocentric, positivistic knowledge—the kind of knowledge in back of science. But before we get to that, I need to point out that there is more to knowledge than simply information. Knowledge—information and facts—can only exist within a context that is defined through specific ways of knowing and validation. In other words, human scrutinize how knowledge is produced and how it is validated as true. So, what ways of knowing and methods of validation are specific to Eurocentric, positivistic knowledge? Collins gives us four points. Note that sociology is generally defined as a social science; and insofar as it is a scientific inquiry into social life, it espouses these four points.

First, according to the positivistic approach, true or correct knowledge only comes when the observer separates him or her self from that which is being studied. You undoubtedly came across this idea in your methods class: the researcher must take an objective stand in order to safeguard against bias. Second, personal emotions must be set aside in the pursuit of pure knowledge. Third, no personal ethics or values must come into the research. Social science is to be value-free, not passing judgment or trying to impose values on others. And, fourth, knowledge progresses through cumulation and adversarial debate.

Cumulation in positivism is a particular way of building knowledge. Science is supposed to progress by testing the knowledge that others created before us and by throwing out the bad and holding onto the good. This incremental building is captured by Isaac Newton's famous dictum: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." But, as I've already implied, information and ideas can't be taken at face value. Thus, scientific knowledge is validated because it is tested and argued against from every angle. The belief is that only that which is left standing is truth. And it is upon those remnants that objective, scientific knowledge will be built.

Four tenets of black feminist epistemology: Collins gives us four characteristics of alternative epistemologies, ways of knowing and validating knowledge that challenges the status quo. As we review these, notice how each point stands in opposition to the tenets of positivistic knowledge.

The first point is that alternative epistemologies are built upon lived experience not upon an objectified position. Social science argues that to truly understand society and group life one must be removed from the particulars and concerns of the subjects being studied. In this way, *subjects are turned into objects of study*. Collins' (2000) alternative epistemology claims that it is only those men and women who experience the consequences of social being who can select "topics for investigation and methodologies used" (p. 258). Black feminist epistemology, then, begins with "connected knowers," those who know from personal experience.

The second dimension of Collins' alternative epistemology is the use of dialog rather than adversarial debate. As we've seen, knowledge claims in social science are assessed through adversarial debate. Using dialog to evaluate implies the presence of at least two subjects—thus knowledge isn't seen as having an objective existence apart from lived experiences; knowledge ongoingly emerges through dialog. In alternative epistemologies, then, we tend to see the use of personal pronouns such as "I" and "we" instead of the objectifying and distancing language of social science. Rather than disappearing, the author is central to and present in the text. In black feminist epistemology, the story is told and preserved in narrative form and not "torn apart in analysis" (Collins, 2000, p. 258).

Centering lived experiences and the use of dialog imply that knowledge is built around ethics of caring, Collins' third characteristic of black feminist knowledge. Rather than believing that researchers can be value-free, Collins argues that all knowledge is intrinsically value-laden and should thus be tested by the presence of empathy and compassion. Collins sees this tenet as healing the binary break between the intellect and emotion that Eurocentric knowledge values. Alternative epistemology is thus holistic; it doesn't require the separation of the researcher from her or his own experiences nor does it require, or assume that it is possible, to separate our thoughts from our feelings. Additionally, Collins (2000) argues that the presence of emotion validates the argument: "Emotion indicates that a speaker believes in the validity of an argument" (p. 263).

Fourth, black feminist epistemology requires personal accountability. Because knowledge is built upon lived experience, the assessment of knowledge is simultaneous

assessment of an individual's character, values, and ethics. This approach sees that all knowledge is based upon beliefs, things assumed to be true. And belief implies personal responsibility. Think about the implications of these two different approaches to knowing, information, and truth: One, information can be objective and truth exists apart from any observer; and, two, all information finds its existence and "truth" within a preexisting knowledge system that must be believed in order to work. The first allows for, indeed demands, the separation of personal responsibility from knowledge—knowledge exists as an objective entity apart from the knower. The second places accountability directly on the knower. Collins would ask us, which form of knowing is more likely to lead to social justice, one that denies ethical and moral accountability or one that demands it?

Implications of black feminist thought: By now we should see that for Collins ways of knowing and knowledge are not separable or sterile—they are not abstract entities that exist apart from the political values and beliefs of the individual. How we know and what we know have implications for who we see ourselves to be, how we live our lives, and how we treat others. Collins sees these connections as particularly important for black women in at least three ways.

First, there is a tension between common challenges and diverse experiences. Think for a moment about what it means to center the idea of lived experience. We've already touched upon several implications of this idea; but what *problem* might arise from this way of thinking? The notion of lived experience, if taken to an extreme, can privilege individual experience and knowledge to the exclusion of a collective standpoint. The possibility of this implication is particularly probable in a society like the United States that is built around the idea of individualism.

However, this isn't what Collins has in mind. One doesn't overshadow the other. According to Collins, the diverse responses are prompted by what Collins refers to as intersectionality. We'll explore this idea later but for now we want to see that each individual stands at a unique matrix of cross-cutting interests. These interests and the diverse responses they motivate are defined through such social positions as race, class, gender, sexual identity, religion, nationality, and so on.

So the lived experience of a middle-class, pagan, single, gay black woman living in Los Angeles will undoubtedly be different than a poverty stricken, Catholic, married black woman living in a small town in Mississippi. As Collins (2000) says, "it is important to stress that no homogeneous Black *woman's* standpoint exists" (p. 28, emphasis original). However, there are core themes or issues that come from living as a black woman such that "a Black *women's* collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges" (p. 28, emphasis original). In other words, a black women's epistemology recognizes this tension between common challenges and diverse responses, which in turn is producing a growing sensibility that black women, because of their gendered racial identity, "may be victimized by racism, misogyny, and poverty" (Collins, 2000, p. 26). Thus, even though individual black women may respond differently, based on different cross-cutting interests, there are themes or core issues that all black women can acknowledge and integrate into their self-identity.

Another implication of black feminist epistemology is informed by this growing sensibility of diversity within commonality: understanding these issues leads to the creation of "safe spaces." Safe spaces are "social spaces where Black women speak freely" (Collins, 2000, p. 100). These safe spaces are of course common occurrences for all oppressed groups. In order for an oppressed group to continue to exist as a viable social

group, the members must have spaces where they can express themselves apart from the hegemonic or ruling ideology.

Collins identifies three primary safe spaces for black women. The first is black women's relationships with one another. These relationships can form and function within informal relationships such as family and friends or they can occur within more formal and public spaces such as black churches and black women's organizations. In this context, Collins (2002) also points to the importance of mentoring within black women's circles; mentoring that empowers black women "by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women" (p. 102).

The other two safe spaces are cultural and are constituted by the black women's blues tradition and the voices of black women authors. Such cultural expressions have historically given voice to the voiceless. Those who were denied political or academic power could express their ideas and experiences through story and poetry. As long as the political majority could read these as "fictions," as long as they weren't faced with the facts of oppression, blacks were allowed these cultural outlets in "race markets." However, these books, stories, and poetry allowed oppressed people to communicate one with another and to produce a sense of shared identity.

There are several reasons why the blues are particularly important for constructing safe spaces and identities for black women. Blues originated out of the back and forth call of slaves working in the fields. It was born out of misery but simultaneously gave birth to hope. This hope wasn't simply expressed in words, but it was more powerfully felt in the rhythm and collectivity that made slave-work less arduous. The blues thus expresses to even the illiterate the experience of black America; and it wraps individual suffering in a transcendent collective consciousness that enables the oppressed to persevere in hope without bitterness.

The music of the classic blues singers of the 1920s—almost exclusively women—marks the early written record of this dimension of U.S. Black oral culture. The songs themselves were originally sung in small communities, where boundaries distinguishing singer from audience, call from response, and thought from action were fluid and permeable. (Collins, 2000, p. 106)

The importance of these safe spaces is that they provide opportunities for self-definition; and self-definition is the first step to empowerment: if a group is not defining itself, then it is being defined by and for the use of others. These safe spaces also allow black women to escape and resist "objectification as the Other" (Collins, 2000, p. 101), the images and ideas about black women found in the larger culture.

These safe spaces, then, are spaces of diversity not homogeneity: "the resulting reality is much more complex than one of an all-powerful White majority objectifying Black women with a unified U.S. Black community staunchly challenging these external assaults" (Collins, 2002, p. 101). However, even though these spaces recognize diversity, they are nonetheless exclusionary (here we can clearly see the tension that Collins notes). If these spaces did not exclude, they would not be safe: "By definition, such spaces become less 'safe' if shared with those who were not Black and female" (p. 110). Although exclusionary, the intent of these spaces is to produce "a more inclusionary, just society" (p. 110).

This idea leads us to our third implication of black feminist thought: the struggles for self-identity take place within an ongoing dialog between group knowledge or standpoint and experiences as a heterogeneous collective. Here Collins is

reconceptualizing the tension noted above between common challenges and diverse responses. This is important to note because one of the central features of Collins' approach is complexity. Collins wants us to see that most social issues, factors, and processes have multiple faces. Understanding how the different facets of inequality work together is paramount for understanding any part of it. In this case, on the one hand we have a *tension* between common challenges and diverse responses, and on the other hand we have a *dialog* between a common group standpoint and diverse experiences.

Collins is arguing that changes in thinking may alter behaviors and altering behaviors may produce changes in thinking. Thus, for U.S. black women as a collective, "the struggle for a self-defined Black feminism occurs through an ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another" (Collins, 2000, p. 30). For example, because black Americans have been racially segregated, black feminist practice and thought have emerged within the context of black community development. Other ideas and practices, such as Black Nationalism, have also come about due to racial segregation. Thus, black feminism and nationalism inform one another in the context of the Black community yet they are both distinct. And, of course, the relationships are reciprocal in that black feminist and nationalist thought influence black community development.

Collins also sees this dialog as a process of rearticulation rather than consciousness raising. During the 1960s and 1970s, consciousness raising was a principal method in the feminist movement. Consciousness raising groups would generally meet weekly, consist of no more than twelve women, and would encourage women to share their *personal experiences as women*. The intent was a kind of Marxian class consciousness that would precede social change, except that it was oriented around gender rather than class.

Rearticulation, according to Collins, is a vehicle for re-expressing a consciousness that quite often already exists in the public sphere. In rearticulation we can see the dialogic nature of Collins' perspective. Rather than a specific, limited method designed to motivate women toward social movement, Collins sees black feminism as part of an already existing national discourse. What black feminism can do is to take the core themes of black gendered oppression—such as racism, misogyny, and poverty—and infuse them with the lived experience of black women's taken-for-granted, everyday knowledge. This is brought back into the national discourse where practice and ideas are in a constant dialog: "Rather than viewing consciousness as a fixed entity, a more useful approach sees it as continually evolving and negotiated. A dynamic consciousness is vital to both individual and group agency." (Collins, 2000, p. 285)

The place of black intellectuals: Within this rearticulation, black feminist intellectuals have a specific place. To set ourselves up for this consideration, we can divide social intellectuals or academics into two broad groups: those who are pure researchers and those who are praxis researchers. Pure researchers hold to value-free sociology; the kind we noted above in considering Eurocentric thought. They are interested in simply discovering and explaining the social world. Praxis or critically oriented researchers are interested in ferreting out the processes of oppression and changing the social world. Black feminist intellectuals are of the latter kind, blending the lived experiences of black women with the highly specialized knowledge of intellectualism.

This dual intellectual citizenship gives black feminist scholars critical insights into the conditions of oppression. They both experience it as a lived reality and can think about it using the tools of critical analysis. Further, in studying oppression among black women, they are less likely to walk away "when the obstacles seem overwhelming or when the rewards for staying diminish" (Collins, 2000, p. 35). Black feminist intellectuals are

also more motivated in this area because they are defining themselves while studying gendered racial inequality.

Finally, Collins (2002) argues that black feminist intellectuals “alone can foster the group autonomy that fosters effective coalitions with other groups” (p. 36). In thinking about this it is important to remember that Collins recognizes that intellectuals are found within all walks of life. Intellectual status isn’t simply conferred as the result of academic credentials. Black feminist intellectuals are those who think reflexively and publicly about their own lived experiences within the context of broader social issues and ideas.

Black feminist intellectuals, then, function like intermediary groups. On the one hand, they are very much in touch with their own and their confidants’ experiences as a disenfranchised group; on the other hand, they are also in touch with intellectual heritages, diverse groups, and broader social justice issues. “By advocating, refining, and disseminating Black feminist thought, individuals from other groups who are engaged in similar social justice projects—Black men, African women, White men, Latinas, White women, and members of other U.S. racial/ethnic groups, for example—can identify points of connection that further social justice projects” (Collins, 2000, p. 37). Collins notes, however, that coalition building with other groups and intellectuals can be costly. Privileged group members often have to become traitors to the “privileges that their race, class, gender, sexuality, or citizenship status provide them” (p. 37).

Intersectionality and Matrices of Domination

Collins is best known for her ideas of intersectionality and the matrix of domination. *Intersectionality* is a particular way of understanding social location in terms of crisscross systems of oppression. Specifically, intersectionality is an “analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black women’s experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women” (Collins, 2000, p. 299).

This idea goes back to Max Weber and Georg Simmel, two theorists working in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. Weber’s concern was to understand the complications that status and power brought to Marx’s idea of class stratification. According to Weber, class consciousness and social change are more difficult to achieve than Marx first thought: status group affiliation and differences in power create concerns that may override class issues. For example, race may be more important than class for two racially distinct families living below the poverty. In such cases, social change becomes less likely.

Simmel was concerned with how modern living in cities created different kinds of friendship patterns. In smaller, more rural settings, Simmel claimed that people generally had what he termed “organic” social relationships. These relations are organic because very little if any choice was involved: many of the social groups in smaller, more stable settings overlap one with another and thus strongly influence group membership. For example, in traditional rural settings an individual would generally go to the same school as her or his family members. Chances are good that work groups would overlap with other groups as well, with one’s boss and fellow employees attending the same church. Such overlapping and “natural” group affiliations produced a good deal of social homogeneity. In modern, urban settings, the “rational” group membership pattern prevails. Here individuals choose their group affiliations apart from pre-existing memberships such as family. Additionally, social groups in large cities tend not to overlap and influence one another.

Simmel’s concern in outlining these two types of group membership patterns is to see how these differing patterns affect the person. Generally speaking, under conditions

of rational group membership, people will tend to see themselves as unique individuals with greater freedom of choice. However, in Simmel's scheme, this freedom and individuality is offset by increasing levels of anomie and the blasé attitude.

There is a way in which Collins blends these two approaches while at the same time going beyond them. Like Simmel, Collins is concerned with the influences of intersectionality on the individual. But the important issue for Collins is the way intersectionality creates different kinds of lived experiences and social realities. She is particularly concerned with how these interact with what passes as objective knowledge and with how diverse voices of intersectionality are denied under scientism. Like Weber, she is concerned about how intersectionality creates different kinds of inequalities and how these cross-cutting influences affect social change. But Collins brings Weber's notion of power into this analysis in a much more sophisticated way. Collins sees intersectionality working within a matrix of domination.

The *matrix of domination* refers to the overall organization of power in a society. There are two features to any matrix. First, any specific matrix has a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression. Just what and how these systems come together is historically and socially specific. Second, intersecting systems of oppression are specifically organized through four interrelated domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.

The structural domain consists of social structures such as law, polity, religion, and the economy. This domain sets the structural parameters that organize power relations. For example, prior to February 3, 1870 blacks in the United States could not legally vote. Although constitutionally enabled to vote, voting didn't become a reality for many African American people until almost a century later with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which officially ended Jim Crow law. Collins' point is that the structural domain sets the overall organization of power within a matrix of domination and that the structural domain is slow to change, often only yielding to large-scale social movements, such as the Civil War and the upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States.

The disciplinary domain manages oppression. Collins borrows this idea from both Weber and Michel Foucault: the disciplinary domain consists of bureaucratic organizations whose task it is to control and organize human behavior through routinization, rationalization, and surveillance. Here the matrix of domination is expressed through organizational protocol that hides the effects of racism and sexism under the canopy of efficiency, rationality, and equal treatment.

If we think about the contours of black feminist thought that Collins gives us, we can see that the American university system and the methods of financing research are good examples. Sexism and racism never raise their ugly heads when certain kinds of knowledge are systematically excluded in the name of science and objectivity. This same kind of pattern is seen in the U.S. economy. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005), in the first quarter of 2005 the average weekly income for white men was \$731.00, for white women \$601.00, for black men \$579.00, and for black women the average weekly wage was \$506.00. In a country that has outlawed discrimination based on race and sex, black women still make on average about 31% less than a white man.

In this domain, change can come through insider resistance. Collins uses the analogy of an egg. From a distance, the surface of the egg looks smooth and seamless. But upon closer inspection, the egg is revealed to be riddled with cracks. For those interested in social justice, working in a bureaucracy is like working the cracks, finding spaces and fissures to work and expand. Again, change is slow and incremental.

The hegemonic domain legitimates oppression. Max Weber was among the first to teach us that authority functions because people believe in it. This is the cultural sphere of influence where ideology and consciousness come together. The hegemonic domain links the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains. It is made up of the language we use, the images we respond to, the values we hold, and the ideas we entertain. And it is produced through school curricula and textbooks, religious teachings, mass media images and contexts, community cultures, and family histories. The black feminist priority of self-definition and critical, reflexive education are important stepping stones to deconstructing and dissuading the hegemonic domain. As Collins (2000) puts it, “Racist and sexist ideologies, if they are disbelieved, lose their impact” (p. 284).

The interpersonal domain influences everyday life. It is made up of the personal relationships we maintain as well as the different interactions that make up our daily life. Collins points out that change in this domain begins with the intrapersonal; that is, how an individual sees and understands her or his own self and experiences. In particular, people don’t generally have a problem identifying ways in which they have been victimized. But the first step in changing the interpersonal domain of the matrix of domination is seeing how our own “thoughts and actions uphold *someone else’s subordination*” (Collins, 2000, p. 287, emphasis added).

Part of this first step is seeing that people have a tendency to identify with an oppression, most likely the one they have experienced, and to consider all other oppressions as being of less importance. In the person’s mind their oppression has a tendency then to become a master status. This leads to a kind contradiction where the oppressed becomes the oppressor. For example, a black heterosexual woman may discriminate against lesbians without a second thought; or, a black Southern Baptist woman may believe that every school classroom ought to display the Ten Commandments. “Oppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognize that a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors” (Collins, 2000, p. 287).

Black Feminist Thought, Intersectionality, and Activism

There are a number of implications for activism that Collins draws out from black feminist thought and the notions of intersectionality and the matrix of domination. The first that I want to point out is the most immediate: Collins’ approach to epistemology and intersectionality conceptualizes resistance as a complex interplay of a variety of forces working at several levels; that is, the four interrelated domains of power that we’ve just reviewed.

This point of Collins’ isn’t an incidental issue. Remember that part of what is meant by modernity is the search for social equality. In modernity, primary paths for these social changes correspond to Collins’ first domain of power. For example, the United States *Declaration of Independence*, *Constitution*, and *Bill of Rights* together provide for principal mechanisms of structural change: the electoral process within a civil society guaranteed by the twin freedoms of press and speech and the upheaval or revolutionary process. Though we don’t usually think of the latter as a legitimated means of social change, it is how this nation began and it is how much of the more dramatic changes that surround equality have come about (for example, the social movements behind women’s suffrage and civil rights).

One of the ideas that comes out of postmodernism and considerations of late-modernity is the notion that guided or rational social change is no longer possible (see our chapters for Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens, and Jean Baudrillard). What Collins gives us is a different take on the issues of complexity and fragmentation. While

recognizing the complexity of intersectionality and the different levels of the matrix of domination, Collins also sees the four domains of power as interrelated and thus influencing one another. By themselves, the structural and disciplinary domains are most resilient to change; but the hegemonic and interpersonal domains are open to individual agency and change. Bringing these domains together creates a more dynamic system, wherein the priorities of black feminist thought and understanding the contradictions of oppression can empower social justice causes.

Collins' approach also has other important implications. Her ideas of intersectionality and the matrix of domination challenge many of our political assumptions. Black feminist epistemology, for example, challenges our assumptions concerning the separation of the private and public spheres. What it means to be a mother in a traditional black community is very different than in a white community: "Black women's experiences have never fit the logic of work in the public sphere juxtaposed to family obligations in the private sphere" (Collins, 2000, p. 228). Intersectionality also challenges the assumption that gender stratification affects all women in the same way; race and class matter, as does sexual identity.

Additionally, Collins' approach untangles relationships among knowledge, empowerment, and power; and opens up conceptual space to identify new connections within the matrix of domination. The idea of the matrix emphasizes connections and interdependencies rather than single structures of inequality. The idea itself prompts us to wonder about how social categories are related and mutually constituted. For example, how do race and sexual preference work together? Asking such a question might lead us to discover that homosexuality is viewed and treated differently in different racial cultures—is the lived experience of a black, gay male different than that of a white, gay male? If so, we might take the next step and ask how does class influence those differences? Or, if these lived experiences are different, we might be provoked to ask another question: are there different masculinities in different racial or class cultures?

As you might be able to surmise from this example, Collins' approach discourages binary thinking and labeling one oppression and/or activism as more important or radical. From Collins' point of view, it would be much too simplistic to say that a white male living in poverty is enjoying white privilege. In the same way, it would be one dimensional to say that any one group is more oppressed than another.

Collins' entire approach also shifts our understanding of social categories from bounded to fluid and highlights the processes of self definition as constructed in conjunction with others. Intersectionality implies that social categories are not bounded or static. Your social nearness or distance to another changes as the matrix of domination shifts, depending on which scheme is salient at any given moment. You and the person next to you may both be women; but that social nearness may be severed as the indices change to include religion, race, ethnicity, sexual practices or identities, class, and so forth. Groups are also constructed in connection to others. No group or identity stands alone. To state the obvious: the only way "white" as a social index can exist is if "black" exists. Intersectionality motivates us to look at just how our identities are constructed at the expense of others: "These examples suggest that moral positions as survivors of one expression of systemic violence become eroded in the absence of accepting responsibility of other expressions of systemic violence" (Collins, 2000, p. 247).

One final implication of Collins' approach: because groups' histories and inequalities are relational, understanding intersectionality and the matrix of domination means that some coalitions with some social groups are more difficult and less fruitful than others. Groups will more or less align on the issues of "victimization, access to positions of authority, unearned benefits, and traditions of resistance" (Collins, 2000, p.

248). The more closely aligned are these issues, more like likely and beneficial are coalitions. Coalitions will also ebb and flow, “based on the perceived saliency of issues to group members” (p. 248). We end, then, with the insight that inequalities and dominations are complex and dynamic.

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