Doing Intersectionality Research: From Conceptual Issues to Practical Examples

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> *I do not see how colored women can be true to themselves unless they demand recognition for themselves and those they represent.*
> —Ida B. Wells-Barnett (Bell 1995)

Introduction

Research interrogating the simultaneity of oppression in American politics is rare. Political scientists, as compared to scholars of other disciplines, have paid far less attention to the ways in which race and gender operate in tandem to produce and maintain the unequal distribution of power and privilege in the American political system. Far too often, political scientists have treated race and gender as separate, dichotomous variables in regression models that employ *either/or* versus *both/and* identity categorizations. That is to say, political science as a discipline historically has had limited relevance and prescriptive utility for individuals and groups that confront interlocking systems of oppression, as it has largely ignored the intersection (or interaction) of race, class, and gender in American politics. For example, political scientists have seldom studied those who struggle with dual identity — specifically, African-American women — with a critical eye attentive to the ways in which race, gender, and class shape their public opinion and political behavior, as well as election campaigns and legislative decisions. Feeling called upon to both articulate and translate the complexities of life for African-American women, scholars from Jewel Prestage and Mae King to Linda Williams and Shelby Lewis have played a critical role in bringing to the academic fore the study of intersecting patterns of discrimination, as they unveiled a "portrait of marginality" and provided the theoretical framework on which intersectionality research is based today. The recent publication of several books and articles on and by African-American women in political science clearly attests to this fact (see, for example, Berger 2004; Hancock 2004; Jordan-Zachery 2003; Simien 2006; Smooth 2006). These works, concentrating as they do on race and gender, are excellent examples of intersectionality research authored by political scientists.

In light of this discussion, I provide a definition of intersectionality and outline basic assumptions that delineate its meaning. To underscore the importance of studying intersectionality, I recognize quantitative as well as qualitative examples of research that demonstrate the advantages of adopting an intersectional approach for political scientists. By these means, I hope to clarify a new research paradigm (broadly understood), which has gained widespread currency in other disciplines — namely, sociology and history. Three questions guide this essay: What do we mean by intersectionality, as scholars trained in political science? What basic assumptions underlie our approaches to intersectionality research? Is there evidence to suggest that intersecting identities affect political outcomes, both procedurally and substantively? I address these questions by examining scholarship on African-American women and politics. While I observe differences in the ways in which political scientists investigate the simultaneity of oppression faced by African-American women in scholarly research, I also recognize similarities in the ways in which their intersectional approaches complement one another as they add both breadth and depth to the study of American politics. All things considered, the goal of this essay is to highlight both conceptual issues and practical examples of intersectionality research that place African-American women at the center of their analyses, rather than their historically marginal position.

Intersectionality: Expressed Meaning and Practical Examples

Many scholars have offered similar concepts, from "double-disadvantage" to "multiple jeopardy" and the "metalanguage of race," but as to the origins of this exact term, "intersectionality" was probably first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991, 1993). It has been opined that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far. Intersectionality is an analytical tool that rejects the separability of identity categories, as it recognizes the heterogeneity of various race-sex groups. Firmly rooted in an experience-based epistemology, it encompasses perspectives that maintain that such identity categories as gender, age, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are mutually constituted and cannot be added together (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991, 1993; Wing 1997). Intersectionality research therefore places special emphasis on the simultaneity of oppression and stresses the need to move beyond simple, additive models — for instance, adding a dichotomous variable

such as race or gender to a regression model and controlling for its effects statistically (Simien 2006). In this sense, race and gender cannot be reduced to individual attributes to be measured and assessed for their separate contributions in explaining political outcomes, from vote choice to policy preferences. That is to say, race and gender cannot be defined in terms of strict dichotomies — *either* black/white *or* male/female — when race is "gendered" and gender is "racialized" in such a way that it creates distinct opportunities for all race-sex groups in various contexts.

One promising way to study intersectionality is to determine the impact of race and gender on substantive representation via the legislative performance of African-American women on the national level. Prior research has argued that African-American women legislators — namely, Cynthia McKinney and Maxine Waters — are forced to deal with institutional dynamics that constitute them as subordinate. In "Congressional Enactments of Race-Gender: Toward a Theory of Raced-Gendered Institutions," Hawkesworth (2003) situates the claims of marginalization from congresswomen of color within a larger interpretative framework using a mixed-methodological approach. Combining textual analysis of interview data with a case study of welfare reform, she develops a conception of race-gendering and provides examples of such enactments from the 103d and 104th Congresses. She contends that congresswomen of color are treated as less than equals during floor debates, committee operations, and interpersonal interactions. More specifically, they are silenced, excluded, and stereotyped by their colleagues. This analysis stresses the importance of studying Congresswomen of color — particularly, African-American Congresswomen — as a distinct group, as they report intersecting patterns of discrimination that transcend party lines and call into the question the legitimacy of policy outputs produced by majority rule. The author avers, "If race-gendering in Congress has palpable effects on individual Congresswomen of color, on public policy, and on the basic principles and practice of democracy, then there is good reason for political scientists to begin to theorize raced-gendered institutions and to explore racing-gendering practices within a wider range of political institutions" (Hawkesworth 2003, 548).

Another promising way to study intersectionality is to determine the impact of race and gender on substantive representation via the legislative performance of African-American women on the state level. Forthcoming research on state legislative behavior by Bryon D'Andra Orey and his colleagues Wendy Smooth, Kimberly S. Adams, and Kisha Harris-Clark shows that African-American women legislators are more likely to translate their dual identity based on race and gender into

progressive legislation, especially when compared to other race-sex groups in the Mississippi state legislature. Data from multiple legislative sessions show that black female state legislators typically outperform their colleagues when it comes to introducing progressive legislation and achieving bill passage success. Black female legislators are equally and, in some cases, more likely than other race-sex groups to achieve passage of the progressive legislation they introduce before the Mississippi state delegation. Such legislation ranges in topic from welfare and education to child advocacy, and reflects their constituents' interest. Using logistic regression to examine data from multiple legislative sessions, this analysis stresses the importance of studying African-American women state legislators as a distinct group, as they exhibit patterns of agreement (or cohesiveness) across policy issues that provide unique opportunities for multiracial coalition-building in the Mississippi state legislature. The authors aver that "the strongest message of these findings is the need to specify models in which differences are recognized, not just between groups as in the differences between blacks and whites or men and women in policymaking, but also among groups" and thus, new models of legislative performance must attend to the intersection of race and gender in determining policy outputs (Orey et al. forthcoming).

Intersectional approaches, as illustrated, contend that no social group is homogenous. Knowing quite simply that a woman lives in a sexist society is insufficient information to describe the complexity of her daily social interactions. Such diverse life experiences as stereotyping, silencing, and marginalization do not lend themselves to simple, categorical analysis based solely upon gender. It is also necessary to know the race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and class of the woman in question in order to describe said experiences accurately, especially when individuals can experience disadvantage and privilege simultaneously through the combined statuses of gender, race, and class. For instance, Michele Tracy Berger's ethnography of how HIV-infected women deal with the combined stigma of their illness and their drug use provides a perfect example of this kind of intersection. In *Workable Sisterhood* (2004), she describes how the nature and effect of "intersectional stigma" motivates crack-addicted sex workers who are HIV positive to transform their lives. By becoming active in social service organizations, they reconstruct their lives via roles as activists, advocates, and helpers working to assist others similarly infected with HIV who are often deprived of education, constantly reminded of their impending death, and subject to biased medical treatment. Utilizing in-depth interviews, direct and participant

observation, as well as contextual information, Berger produces a collective narrative about the ways in which race, gender, and class work in tandem with the stigma of HIV-positive status to empower women, resulting in the emergence of a liberated self that transcends oppressive conditions. The contribution of this conceptualization of the impact of intersectional stigma on individuals' pursuit for social justice cannot be underestimated, as the conceptualization yields a testimony of great resolve and grants agency to those who live with intersectional stigma. The interactive effect of social location (race, gender, and class) is compounded by stigmatized HIV-positive status, which produces a powerful dynamic whereby those infected with the disease are denied access to societal resources. The combined status — intersectional stigma — serves as a catalyst for political action that subsequently leads to the formation of support groups, workshops, and classes.

Perhaps my book, *Black Feminist Voices in Politics*, might shed further light on this point. Historical narratives at the beginning of each chapter take as their subject a black female activist from the nineteenth century. Intersectional complexity is conveyed via these narratives, as the individual black female activist represents the race-sex correspondence, and her daily social interactions extrapolate illustratively the combined statuses of race, gender, and class embodied by the individual. Maria W. Stewart constitutes one such historic example. The tragic loss of her husband, as well as the base tactics used by unscrupulous lawyers to rob Stewart of her rightful inheritance, jumpstarted her distinguished career as a writer, educator, and lecturer. Recognizing these circumstances as catalytic factors in the life of Stewart is essential to understanding the ways in which various forces and events shape the lives of individual black women as they similarly move through the world and face interlocking systems of oppression. In this case, hardship and suffering triggered black feminist activism and led to the subsequent formation of women's clubs, charitable organizations, and political alliances that benefited the larger community.

In the face of adversity, Stewart exhibited much poise and resiliency as she pursued positions of leadership and authority outside of the domestic sphere and into the political realm. Religion was a major force in her life, and coincidently, it went hand in hand with her political agenda. Similar to those women infected with HIV who figure prominently in Berger's ethnographic study — all of whom underwent some sort of "life reconstruction" that resulted from their lived experience with intersecting patterns of discrimination and sparked their subsequent activism in public life — Stewart represents the first among them to "feel

the iron" when structural barriers were in place to prevent women from entering the political arena. Correspondingly, I argue that factors rooted in lived experience warrant the development of black feminist consciousness that, in turn, serves as an impetus for political activism. Using narratives of injustice from the lives of historic black women, I conceptualize the impact of black feminist consciousness on individuals' political behavior to clarify results from a national telephone survey of the adult African-American population.

To reiterate, an intersectional approach expects that such identity categories as race, class, and gender fuse to create distinct opportunities, and so focusing on their intersection provides an avenue for investigating complex inequality in the United States. Such public identities as the "welfare queen" and "crack-mother" are modern examples of these intersecting identity categories, as they both function as constructs that attend to the ways in which race, class, and gender interact to provide the ideological justification for specific policy measures that produce undemocratic outcomes in the United States. It is in this regard that the work of Ange-Marie Hancock (2004) and Julia Jordan-Zachery (2003) becomes illustrative.

In *The Politics of Disgust*, Hancock argues that the public identity of the welfare queen — that of a young, poor, black, single mother on welfare who deliberately gives birth to children at the expense of taxpayers to increase her monthly check — has gained widespread notoriety and evokes such disgust that it undermines deliberative democracy. The public identity of the welfare queen, as it has been socially constructed and depicted in the news media, prevents inclusive communicative democracy by discouraging those who receive welfare benefits from speaking on their own behalf, inasmuch as their voices are effectively silenced by policymakers who label them as failed persons and dismiss their testimony. That is to say, the expressed interests and rights of those who participate in welfare programs are ignored and omitted from the deliberative process during legislative proceedings. Instead, policymakers engage in elite discourse between and among themselves as they charge welfare recipients with bad mothering, hypersexuality, and laziness. Hancock criticizes policymakers for reinforcing cultural stereotypes and making moral judgments about low-income mothers, whom they blame for perpetuating welfare dependency and transmitting a pathological lifestyle to children. Similarly, Julia Jordan-Zachery (2003) argues that the public identity of the crack mother — that of a young, poor, black, pregnant woman who abuses drugs purchased with her cash public

assistance — was socially constructed by the news media and motivated policymakers to draft legislation that forced crack mothers to restructure their family organization as they were sentenced to serve mandatory prison sentences. Policy elites used the public identity of the crack mother to link issues of morality, public safety, and family instability to poor, black, urban residents and, in turn, justified the disparity in sentencing for crack versus powder cocaine. Jordan-Zachery criticizes both the Reagan and Bush administrations for waging a war on drugs that targeted black women and rendered them, as well as their children, in many cases, wards of the state. In light of these examples, Hancock (2004) and Jordan-Zachery (2003) would likely concede that news media systematically proliferate cultural images of African-American women that inform public policy debates and yield legislative outcomes that reveal a fundamentally flawed approach toward legislative decision making and call into question the quality of substantive representation for historically marginalized groups in the United States.

By means of historical analysis, structured interviews, systematic investigation of floor debates, and textual analysis of media sources, the qualitative examples of intersectionality research cited here make visible that which traditional methodological approaches (or statistical models) have typically rendered invisible by *either* isolating the effects of gender and controlling for race *or* isolating the effects of race and controlling for gender via large-N data sets. Using large-N data sets and logistic regression, the authors of the quantitative examples cited here have taken as their subject African-American women in an effort to focus squarely upon the intersection of race and gender. Certainly, one clear advantage to intersectionality research — as evidenced by both approaches — is methodological and theoretical innovation.

Conclusion

In lived experience and political practice, certain identity categories overrule, capture, differentiate, and transgress others in the social, economic, and political structure of the United States. The theoretical demand is then to read these categories simultaneously. Given that intersections involve multiple comparisons and multidimensional conceptualizations that can be difficult to comprehend, researchers often fall back on salient theories that are conventionally designed, even though they do not adequately represent the complexity of American

political processes. Methodologically, researchers often hold one aspect (*either* race *or* gender) constant, so that their comparisons are more manageable. However, intersectionality research requires more than simply performing separate analyses by race and gender and using traditional theories to interpret the results. Political scientists must construct new theories and methodological approaches that address the complex processes through which social categories shape and, in effect, determine political outcomes. To this end, there is much work to be done.

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The Hollow and the Ghetto: Space, Race, and the Politics of Poverty

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The distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor has always been critical in the context of American poverty policy. Recent work by