Intersectionality As A Key Theoretical And Analytic Framework

Intersectionality is a key theoretical and analytic framework through which most pertinently scholars in the social sciences and the humanities discuss the structural identities of race, class, gender and sexuality. In this essay, I explore the origins of the theory and its importance to our understanding of gender, subsequently impacting societal experiences, structures of power and oppression. I explore current debates surrounding the gender pay gap through an intersectional framework, focusing on the disparities between white and black women economically.

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality identifies a mode of analysis essential to our understanding of gender and sexual diversity and studies. Intersectionality acknowledges mutually constitutive forms of social oppression and expression rather than on single axes of difference; that is race, sexuality, age, gender, ability and other aspects of identity are simultaneously experienced and the different aspects of identity are shaped and influenced by one another.

Intersectionality examines how different aspects of identity intersect and how these intersections impact experiences, oppression and structural power. By using an intersectional framework, an individual is able to acknowledge the rich complexities and differences between people and how these different aspects of identity overlap and shape our experiences, life outcomes and perspective of the world. An example being the concept of “global sisterhood” and its idea that there is a neutral experience of being a woman; that is, across the world we all share common political interests, concerns, and needs obscures the fact that various cultural contexts shaped by race, religion, and access to resources find women facing different problems, not a universal issue, with their needs at cross-purposes to other women’s.

In a more recent essay, “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait”, Crenshaw reflects on the birth of the concept, driven upon thinking about the 1976 DeGraffenreid case, where Emma DeGraffenreid and several other black women sued General Motors for discrimination, arguing racial and gender segregation. Women were allowed to apply for some jobs, with men applying for others, however the problem being for black women the consequences were compounded. White women were given the jobs as well as black men, excluding black women. (Crenshaw, 2015) By using an intersectional framework, we can understand the case is deeply critical of not just identities, but the institutions using identity to exclude as forms of privilege. By engaging critically with this case and Crenshaw’s concept, I have come to understand the complexity of intersectionality in how one goes about and experiences the world, and intersectionality’s importance in giving many a lens to frame their circumstances and fight for their inclusion.

Public discussions of the gender pay gaps often focus on the wage disparities between men and women, obscuring how women of colour are particularly disadvantaged in comparison to white women. This suggests there has been a failure to tackle what the pay gap looks like when both race and gender are considered, proposing that if policies addressing these disparities are going to truly benefit all women, a more intersectional understanding of the pay gap is required. On average, black women are paid 21% less than white women, making 63 cents to 79 cents earned by a white woman. (Lockhart, 2018) If we use an intersectional framework, we can

understand how this debate is happening, as statistically 50% of Americans aren't aware of the pay gap between black women and white women, proposing similarities to the rhetoric of "global sisterhood", where a neutral experience of womanhood was emphasised and lacked acknowledgement of the different factors contributing to women of colour experiencing the world differently to white women. The gender pay gap has been at large focused on the pay disparities between men and women, largely with the assumption all women are paid the same. The pay gap experienced by black women is due to several factors; being they are over-represented in low-wage workforces, the struggle to access many of the higher-paying positions, as well as burdened with more student loan debt than their white counterparts. Through an intersectional framework, it can be acknowledged that black women face disadvantages and discrimination not only due to race but different intersecting forms of their identity, and their social, geographical and cultural context shapes their experiences and the way they move through life.

Julia Schuster's "Intersectional expectations: Young feminists' perceived failure at dealing with differences and their retreat to individualism" communicates the effect of intersectional expectations within feminist circles as complicated and creating anxieties amongst relatively privileged groups, who feel their participation or meaning of feminism doesn't live up to those intersectional expectations as its derived from a place of 'white privilege'. This is compatible with the current debate surrounding the pay disparities between white and black women as although white women experience pay inequality, black women experience an even more aggressive form as they experience inequality to men and white women, causing a potential retreat from white women from feminist debate as they might experience feelings of shame and privilege in comparison to the treatment of black women in society. (Schuster, 2016)

Intersectionality has been understood as an analytic framework used to acknowledge how bodies experience the world, are treated and are all positioned in society. The analysis of intersectionality has been significantly advanced by Crenshaw and has allowed gender to be understood as having significant impact on how bodies experience the world, oppression and structures of power, explored in the contemporary debate of the gender pay gap.