Debating the Future of “Intersectionality”

COINED BY KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW IN 1991, the term “intersectionality” is a methodological concept for tracking women of color. Gaining prominence in academia, it became a buzzword at the end of the 20th century, and remains vital today.

Intersectionality provides a way to understand and problematize structures of inequality. It offers the possibility to recognize the importance (and lack) of diversity in scholarly thought, and facilitates a reexamination of the ways legal, civic, and social forces affect intersectional positionalities.

“The term ‘intersectionality’ has traveled to become a marker for a number of different kinds of analyses that, at times, predate the creation of the term,” says Kristie Dotson, College of Arts and Letters professor of philosophy. “In recent years, the concept of intersectionality has come under considerable fire.”

Dotson notes that she worked to develop the MSU symposium “Thinking Intersectionality: A Rare Event” to highlight why intersectionality remains a key concept for addressing and appreciating diversity in meaningful ways. It was designed, she says, to address and explore concerns, challenges, and ways to ensure intersectionality’s continued use by engaging Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and Nira Yuval-Davis, three prominent proponents of intersectionality.

Kimberlé Crenshaw is a University of California at Los Angeles professor of law who teaches civil rights and other courses in critical race studies and constitutional law at UCLA and Columbia School of Law. Her primary scholarly interests center around race and the law. At the University of Wisconsin Law School, Crenshaw was a William H. Hastie Fellow. She also clerked for Justice Shirley Abrahamson of the Wisconsin Supreme Court.


Patricia Hill Collins is a Distinguished University Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park; formerly head of the Department of African American Studies at the University of Cincinnati; and past president of the American Sociological Association Council. She is the co-author of “Race, Class, & Gender: An Anthology” (2012); and author of “Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism” (2005); and “Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment” (1990).

Nira Yuval-Davis is the Director of the Research Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) at the University of East London in the UK. She has written extensively on theoretical and empirical aspects of intersected nationalisms, racisms, fundamentalisms, citizenships, identities, belonging/s and gender relations in Britain and Europe, Israel and other Settler Societies. Her books include “The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations;” and “Gender and Nation” (Politics and Culture series).

Held 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday, April 6, 2013, in Erickson Kiva on the MSU campus, the symposium was presented by the MSU Department of Philosophy and co-sponsored by the College of Arts and Letters, MSU College of Law, Office for Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives, African and African American Studies, Indigenous Law and Policy Center, James Madison College, Center for Gender in Global Context, Sociology, Anthropology, and Residential College in Arts and Humanities.

A private meet-and-greet reception was held in the Hannah Center Banquet Room on Friday evening prior to the symposium, and a post-event reception was also held.