Science Societies

A primer on intersectionality

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Intersectionality is a term that has become infused into social equity and justice work in recent years and can sometimes elicit strong emotional or political responses. It is an idea that is making the news daily and gaining momentum in virtually all fields of

study and social dimensions. Consequently, it impacts everyone around us every day. However, it is not always clear what this term truly means and how understanding this fundamental concept can help us make a more positive impact through the work we do.

Origins of the Term

The term “intersectionality” was first coined as a relatively obscure legal concept in 1989 by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics “intersect” with one another and overlap in a way that influences the lived experience of the individual. In the most neutral way, it describes how people from different backgrounds experience the world.

A graduate of Cornell University, Harvard University, and the University of Wisconsin, Crenshaw first published a paper on this topic in the University of Chicago Legal Forum (Crenshaw, 1989). She focused her initial work on the intersection of race and gender, largely due to the fact that first-wave feminism ignored the experiences of all but white women. Fortunately, the term has since evolved to encompass all aspects of personal social location and origins. A basic Venn diagram might give us a simplistic view of intersectionality where any one ellipse could represent one part of a person’s lived experience, from gender, to race, sexuality, religion, along with any aspect of physical appearance or ability (Figure 1). Rather than each factor being taken in isolation, the individual human at the center experiences the complexity of all these characteristics in combination, simultaneously.

Layered Identities

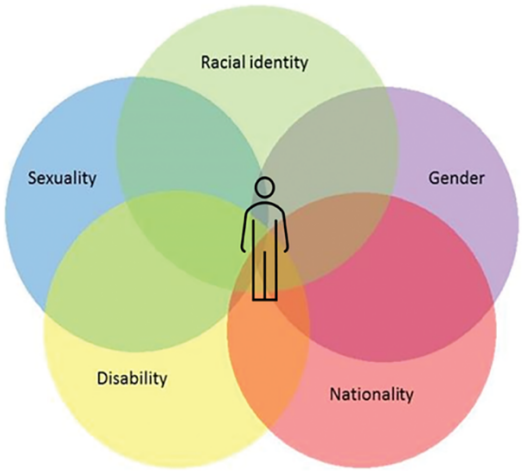

Figure 1: *Venn diagram providing a simplistic view of intersectionality where any one ellipse could represent one part of a person's lived experience, from gender, to race, sexuality, religion, along with any aspect of physical appearance or ability.*

However, the most recent criticism of this framework exposes the transient nature of some of these social dimensions. Therefore, we must begin to incorporate all lived experiences, past and present, from the role they play in their current organization, to their cultural heritage, their socioeconomic status, (dis)abilities, and beyond. It often helps to think of these as layered identities that may change through time and cannot be ascribed to an individual from outside sources. The layers give us a theoretical framework of different modes of discrimination or privilege, which we can see in action through that person's lived experiences. Often each layer of complexity represents some aspect of marginalization, challenges, and hidden obstacles (for more on these obstacles and challenges, read Berhe et al., 2022) to success, and each layer increases the challenges exponentially.

Call to Action

We now must consider the implications of intersectionality: most often, an individual experiences marginalization through not one, but often several layers of institutional and intrinsic bias. We have an obligation as a prestigious international scientific organization, as leaders in our respective fields, to take this concept away from being a highly politicized platform for debate. It is no longer something we dismiss on the news as a system of oppression or victimization. Rather, it comes down to our interpersonal

relationships and a recognition that each person's reality is completely different from our own. The institutions we serve and the infrastructure we work under impact each of us differently, and we must approach each other from a place of compassion and thoughtful openness and curiosity. Thinking from *this* depth of intersectionality can help us identify subtle dynamics that disadvantage some growers, customers, and collaborators, while giving advantage to others unjustly, by no fault or merit of their own.

What Can You Do?

We all deserve to have our voices heard, and our Societies will be stronger and more resilient when don't leave parts of our community behind by ignoring intersectionality and its **multiplicative** impact. We must listen and respect the voices of these communities and be open to thinking creatively about social justice and equity across all aspects of agronomy, crop science, and soil science outreach, education, and innovation, particularly as we consider how discrimination and systemic inequality contribute to block access to healthy food, clean water, and fresh air.

And most importantly, we must each respect each other, as valuable, contributing members of this community.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article is part of a series written by members of the Women in Science Committee, for all Society members. For more information, visit **www.agronomy.org/membership/women-in-science**, **www.crops.org/membership/women-in-science**, and **www.soils.org/membership/women-in-science**.

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