

Intersectionality: Defining and Framing for SGM Populations

Thank you for joining us today. This morning I am going to talk about why intersectional frameworks are vital in understanding the issues facing the vast diversity of people found within SGM communities. In June 2015, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of marriage equality, finally ending years of battle for the federal legal protection of same sex marriage and the recognition of these marriages across state lines. However, marriage equality did not address many of concerns facing SGM populations, in particular, the most marginalized within these communities. Studies suggest that the primary concerns facing SGM communities fall into two broad categories: 1) economic justice and poverty, and 2) violence and discrimination. However, the ways in which poverty and discrimination are experienced vary among within SGM populations and understanding this is key in addressing issues of social justice within these communities. Importantly, we will see how SGMs experience poverty and discrimination in different ways depending on not only their group membership and identities, but also the ways in which these identities intersect.

Economic Justice and Poverty:

Economic justice and poverty include employment opportunities, benefits, education access, housing security and homelessness, food and food insecurity, and healthcare. Data shows us that SGM populations are disproportionately impacted by these social conditions. For example, 20.7% of SGMs live on less than \$12,000 a year compared 17% of heterosexuals.

In looking at gender, gender identity, and gender diversity we see:

- 24% percent of lesbians and bisexual women (single or in relationships) live in poverty, compared to only 15% of gay and bisexual men (Albelda et al., 2009).
- This also impacts families as SGM women are more likely to have children than their male counterparts.

These disparities are even more stark among trans people,

- 29% of trans people live in poverty (James, et al., 2016).
- 15% of trans people live on less than \$10,000 a year, compared to 4% in the general population (MAP, 2013).
- One-fifth of trans individuals have reported being homeless at some point (Grant et al., 2011).

In looking at sexuality within SGM communities we see:

- Bisexual adults face heightened levels of poverty compared to their gay and lesbian counterparts, with approximately 40% of bisexual men and 42% of bisexual women living in poverty (Gorman et al., 2015).

In looking at age, and how poverty impacts people across the life course, we see:

- Approximately 40 percent of youth served at drop-in centers, street outreach programs, and housing programs identify as SGM; of these, 30% identify as lesbian or gay, and 10% identify as bisexual (Badgett et al., 2013).
- In looking at our elder communities, we see that while only 4.6 percent of opposite-sex couples 65 and older live in poverty, and only 4.9 percent of older male same-sex couples live in poverty, 9.1

percent of 65+ female same sex couples live at or below the federal poverty line (MAP, 2013).

Just as what we see within the majority population, those most marginalized face higher levels of poverty and are disproportionately impacted by economic injustice. Of course, much of the poverty and economic disparities we see are rooted in the discrimination and violence (mental, physical, and sexual) SGMs disproportionately experience.

Violence and Discrimination:

Violence and discrimination against SGMs include general homophobia and biphobia, and overrepresentation and mistreatment within the prison industrial complex (Hanssens et al., 2014), enabling of discrimination through religious freedom laws, continued use of conversion therapies, and the sustained physical and psychological violence against trans individuals (NCAVP, 2014; Forge, 2012). However, we know that people of color and immigrants are most at risk and disproportionately face discrimination both within and outside of SGM communities.

In the U.S, one out of every three SGM people identifies as a person of color and people of color are more likely than Whites to identify as SGM (Gates and Newport, 2012). SGM people of color face disparities far beyond those of their White counterparts in and out of SGM communities. SGM persons of color are subject to increased rates of discrimination in the workplace, in health care, education, with law enforcement, and they face racism and discrimination within the mainstream SGM communities (MAP, 2015; Choi et al., 2011; Teunis, 2007). SGM immigrants face many of these problems in addition to possible apprehension, harassment, and assault within detention facilities (Hanssens et al., 2014). Additionally, SGM students regularly face discrimination and harassment in

educational environments – from elementary school to college, which lead to negative academic and social outcomes (GLSEN, 2013).

In just looking at workplace discrimination alone we see that,

- Between 75 and 82 percent of SGM Asian/Pacific Islander (API) individuals report discrimination at work (MAP, 2015).
- Four in 10 Black SGMs report similar discrimination at work (MAP, 2015).

Trans people of color, and in particular, trans women of color, face additional disadvantages and discrimination, and disproportionately high rates of hate crimes and homicides (NCAVP, 2014). For example, trans people of color were 2.5 times as likely to experience physical violence compared to their cis counterparts (MAP, 2015). In 2017 alone, there were 27 homicides among trans women that we know about (Holter, 2017).

As we see here, poverty and discrimination are at the root of the many social justice issues facing SGM communities. It is not just that we should understand how these issues are compounded with each other but also how these issues impact members of SGM communities differently, not only depending on the gender or sexual identities, but how these identities intersect with each other and their other identities and social locations.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality examines how social identities and group memberships impact life experiences and access to resources. It is the “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: 299).

Although intersectionality, as a concept, was first “named” by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 (Crenshaw 1989), we know that Black feminist scholars and activists have long emphasized the intersections of their simultaneous and multiple identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality, and the ways in which they influence their lived experiences. During a speech at an 1851 women’s rights convention in Akron, Ohio, abolitionist and activist Sojourner Truth famously asked, “Ain’t I a woman?” as she discussed the challenges unique to Black women at the time, explaining to her audience that her racial and gender oppressions were intertwined. Sojourner Truth also famously bared her breast, in another oratorical demonstration of her humanity, to be met with responses that reinforced how sexuality often meets at the intersection of race and gender (Washington, 1993). Since then, Black feminist scholars and activists have complicated notions of single identity issues that traditional feminists often employed, emphasizing that, as Audre Lorde said, there was no hierarchy of identity and oppression (Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1981).

Intersectionality is not just used as a framework to examine the lives and experiences of Black women and other women of color, but it is also used to examine the role that intersecting identities and oppressions have on the lives and experiences of other women and men of color, and it provides us with a better understanding of how identities, overall, intersect (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Scholars, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall argue that intersectionality has expanded to a field of study to include, “investigation[s] of intersectional dynamics... debates about the scope and content of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological paradigm, and... political interventions employing an intersectional lens” (2013, p. 785).

Importantly, intersectionality examines how intersecting identities impact access to power, resources, and levels of social oppression. Patricia Hill Collins calls this the *matrix of domination* and explains it as, “the overall organization of

hierarchical power relations for any society. Any specific matrix of domination has 1. a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression, e.g. race, social class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, ethnicity and age; and 2, a particular organization of its domains of power, e.g. structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal” (Collins, 2000, p. 299). As such, intersectional frameworks are vital in examining the experiences of marginalized communities as intersectionality examines access to resources and power. It is important to understand how intersecting identities and interlocking oppressions impact the way in which groups experience issues within their communities and how, as explained earlier, issues are compounded among different populations. Intersectionality also helps us to understand that sexuality and gender identity are merely parts of a person’s complex identity, all of which impact their access to resources, their experiences with power, and, even more basically, the ways in which they experience the social world.

In order to more effectively provide resources to communities, it is vital that researchers and service providers possess a better understanding of how intersecting identities impact access to resources. Because as Brittany Cooper (2014) has written, “we have to remember that intersectionality was never put forth as an account of identity but rather an account of power.” In essence, how does identity and the ways in which they intersect, impact power? Intersectionality allows researchers to consider the ways in which inequalities are produced within particular social contexts and helps to gain a better understanding of the commonalities as well as differences in these patterns as they emerge in various social locations. Today we will hear from a variety of brilliant scholars about why a critical intersectional analysis is important as it provides the framework for analyzing the effects of gendered, sexual, racial/ethnic, and class-based inequalities in health, education, and even experiences in the criminal justice system and how these impact social policy and data collection. But again, and I can’t emphasize

enough, throughout today's sessions, please think about how, as scholars, an intersectional framework can be used to better understand the lives and experiences of the vast diversity of people we find in SGM communities. And remember, we are not pathologizing SGM communities today, but rather understanding how intersecting identities impact experiences and social conditions. It is important to note the barriers people face and how "age, socioeconomic status, race, geographic location, ability, and gender" (Young and Fisher-Borne, 2018, p. 410) influence health, wellness, and other social factors and how the most marginalized members of our communities are resilient in the face of their intersecting oppressions. Thank you.

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