Intersectionality is a theory of identity and of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a lawyer and legal scholar, was the first to use the word intersectionality to describe how the oppression faced by Black women was distinct from oppression solely from race or sex. Crenshaw analyzed how employment nondiscrimination law that used the discrete categories of sex and race (as well as color, religion, and national origin) failed to protect Black women who face forms of discrimination that emanate from the intersection of race and sex. Crenshaw’s insights allowed scholars to articulate how “major axes of social divisions in a given society at a given time, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 4). The intersections matter.

Although Crenshaw was the first to use the term intersectionality, the observation had been around for well over a century. African American women were the first identify how forms of power and elements of identity intersected. Activists in the late 1800s and early 1900s, such as Sojourner Truth, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, all noted how sex and race intersected in a way that made Black women’s social location and struggles unique. Recognizing the contribution of their foremothers, a group of Black feminists wrote the Combahee River Collective Statement in 1974 in which they outlined how “the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” In the Statement, they explained:

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.

Intersectionality as a theory of identity is helpful because it prevents reducing complex identities down to a single ingredient, and then attributing to the ingredient causal power to explain why a person acts in a particular way. Intersectionality as a theory of power is helpful because it shifts attention away from “preoccupations with intentional prejudice and toward perspectives grounded in analysis of systemic dynamics and institutional power” (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2013, p. 922).

Identity and power need to be considered. Women’s and Gender Studies professor Vivian M. May (2015) explained that intersectionality “approaches lived identities as interlaced and systems of oppression as enmeshed and mutually reinforcing” (p. 3). Thus, intersectionality enables analysis at both the “micropolitical level of everyday life and at the macropolitical level of social structures, material practices, and cultural norms” (p. 5). An intersectional approach should inform how people understand interpersonal communication, organizational cultures, and institutional structures.
When teaching, we have used a range of metaphors to explain intersectionality. Because the concept asks you to think about multiple things (none of which are static) at once, it can be difficult to wrap your brain around. We offer three metaphors because we have found different explanations work for different people. So, we offer a mathematical explanation, a baking explanation, and a musical explanation (in the video).

The mathematical explanation: University of Iowa legal scholar and critical race feminist Adrien Wing (1997) explained the theory of intersectionality as the idea that identity is “multiplicative” rather than additive (p. 30). Instead of understanding identity as the addition of one independent element to another and another, like in a pop-bead necklace, identity makes more sense if you think of each element as inextricably linked with the others. An intersectional approach makes clear that all facets of identity are integral, interlocking parts of a whole. Identity is not

\[ 1+1+1+1+1 = 6 \]

because we are not six people. Instead, each person is, well, one person. So, instead, identity is

\[ 1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1 \]

because all the ingredients in our identity interact with and infuse the others to make each personal the singular person they are.

The cooking explanation: Author Audre Lorde (1984) offered a description of how an intersectional approach is necessary to fully understand and accept your own identity:

As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present that as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as a part of my living. (p. 120)

Lorde’s metaphor ingredients is useful when explaining intersectionality. For example, a cake is an object with ingredients such as flour, eggs, oil, sugar, and milk that can exist separately from each other but, once combined, each element influences the others. Even though the cake contains all the ingredients, none are recognizable in their separate forms. A cake is not just flour and eggs and sugar and oil and milk. A cake is a cake only when the ingredients are so fused together that they cannot be separated again. Like a cake, human identity is the result of a fascinating alchemic process in which ingredients are fused in such a way that each is influenced by the others, to the point where you cannot extricate the flour from the cake once it is baked. The flour is not simply flour (and gender is not simple gender) once fused with other ingredients.


