

COMPANION NOTES 03

INSIDE INTERSECTIONALITY: POWER DYNAMICS AND RACISM

Home Truths 2 - Race Equity Series
For the anti-racist curious

ADVISORY NOTICE

Racism is complex. There is no simple fix. We recommend that these companion notes be read reflectively. And please aim high to help mainstream civil society play its part in building a life-affirming anti-racist future.

Key points

1

Intersectionality is the study of power and domination. It helps to explain how power dynamics – informed by force such as racism, classism, misogyny, ableism, anti-queerness – impact lives along identity lines.

3

Organisations operating intersectionally on anti-racism and race equity seek to overturn oppressive power dynamics in their own institution as well as in issues of concern in the outside world.

2

Intersectionality is much misunderstood. At its heart it is about power and replacing oppressive power dynamics with life-affirming arrangements.

Introduction

Intersectionality studies how power dynamics create patterns of inequity in society. It examines how legal and other forms of power, informed by ideologies of racism, misogyny, class interests, ableism, anti-queerness and so on, harm some populations and help others.

Leading legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw's groundbreaking work on intersectionality cited the case of five [Black women](#) employed at General Motors (GM). The group sued the company, on the grounds that, because they were both Black and women, they were blocked certain type of jobs within the organisation.

The court held that the women could not sue for discrimination as a group because they were unable to prove that GM discriminated generally against either Black people, or generally against women. The judgement stated that protections against discrimination based on 'race' and sex could not be combined to create a new protection for people belonging to a group combining both characteristics.

In other words, the court could not see how racism and misogyny could coalesce in a unique way to hold back the employees.

The wrong end of the telescope

On the surface, the case against GM is about life as a Black woman. However, intersectionality is not about identity per se. At its centre, it is about what happens when power, informed by dehumanising ideologies, collides with real lives. By focussing too much on identities and impacts, we can end up looking at intersectionality from the wrong end of the telescope.

Intersectionality helps us to see how power works against numerous populations. It shows how some people, such as Black women, who straddle more than one of these categories, face compounded interacting layers of harm.

Intersectionality asks us to notice but not get stuck on the outcomes of particular identity

groups. In part, because social categories are not neatly bounded and fixed. They are [fluid](#), constructed and relational. For example, notions of being white take on social meaning in relation to ideas of what it is to be Black.

By recognising how identities are created and sustained we can avoid a facile version of identity politics – where identities and the success of some groups come at the expense of others. It is not necessary to choose between [anti-racist efforts](#) or support for working class people who happen to be white.

It is possible to turn the telescope around. With intersectionality we can productively engage with [identity](#) and pay more attention to [politics](#) and give added meaning to this important concept.

PRACTICAL POLITICS

Intersectionality is about how power dynamics shape outcomes. That makes intersectionality inherently (small p) political. This has a number of implications for civil society organisations seeking to act with intersectionality in mind.

One, is an understanding that racism, classism, misogyny and so on are not the same – but that they are connected and harmful. They inform and are informed by how power works. Ultimately, to stop any one of these forces it is necessary to stop them all – by dismantling and replacing their shared underpinnings.

Another implication is that intersectional work highlights the connection of overbearing power to social, economic and environmental damage. Organisations will seek to address the power imbalances that drive inequitable impacts, e.g., by undertaking strategic litigation to move power to the side of those experiencing harms.

Poverty-focussed organisations operating in this way will try to reduce concentration of wealth and undo ways in which economic

precarity are hardwired into how the economy operates. Elsewhere, those in civil society seeking to improve health may work for properly funded and holistic healthcare systems, for access to good food and housing and to combat environmental hazards.

And those working on the climate crisis will challenge the ways in which vested interest, such as corporate power, may disproportionately influence environmental policies to the detriment of those who extract fewest resources.

Another consequence of intersectionality-informed approaches is that they draw attention to power disparities inside organisations and movements as a whole. This may mean that funded civil society organisations proactively seek to divest themselves of excess power and to generously support community-led activism, insights and organising.



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DEEP ANTI-RACIST WORK IS INHERENTLY INTERSECTIONAL

Given that intersectionality puts the issue of power front and centre in change work, a question remains. How does intersectionality live alongside specific anti-racist and race equity work?

The first thing to say is that intersectionality does not dictate that intervening against racism can only occur while simultaneously doing so against misogyny, classism, disablism, anti-queerism and other forms of inequity. It doesn't have to be everything all at once. But intersectionality does emphasise acting to change power dynamics. And therefore, deep anti-racist work is inherently intersectional.

This can bring wider positive impacts for justice. A case in point is racism as a [cause](#) of maternal deaths. The latest [data](#) shows that Black maternal deaths are three times that of white women. The same data also shows that "UK maternal death rate has returned to levels that we have not seen for the past 20 years."

Interventions at the level of power will address issues such as the need for adequate resourcing, investing in medical knowledge, creating conditions for empathetic care and prioritising listening to women. In doing so, these efforts to change experiences of Black women will likely benefit the maternal health of all women.





Elsewhere, work undertaken at [Imkaan](#) – an organisation addressing violence against Black and Minoritised Ethnic women and girls – is both anti-racist and intersectional. It is informed by the perspective that the "...criminal justice system [is]... designed and implemented by white men, primarily reflecting their perspectives, values, and interests." And, as such, Imkaan undertakes specific work on women refugees, as they face [additional risks](#) of harm, including sexual violence and damaging detention experiences.

INSTITUTIONALISING INTERSECTIONALITY AN ANTI-RACISM

Intersectionality is more than worrying about multiple populations on the wrong side of racism, misogyny and other dehumanising ideologies. It offers a way to re-engineer how we think about, deconstruct and reassemble power dynamics in service of life-affirming outcomes.

For civil society institutions intersectionality is a call to reconsider its use of power for race and other equitable outcomes. Rather than providing a neat set of answers, it leaves organisations to grapple with important questions.

QUESTIONS FOR MAINSTREAM ORGANISATIONS

 <p>How have we used our power for oppressive ends?</p>	 <p>How are we going to lend or give up our institutional power so that we are part of the solution, not the problem?</p>	 <p>How are harmful power dynamics and racism at work in our central issue(s)?</p>	 <p>How are we intervening to dismantle oppressive power arrangements to create life-affirming and liberating outcomes?</p>
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These kinds of questions are at the heart of intersectional practice and wrestling with them is part of the process.

Conclusions

Despite the ubiquity and apparent 'common sense' of intersectionality, this concept is much misunderstood. To do justice to intersectionality and give it its proper place in transformative work requires civil society institutions that are working to fundamentally change how and in whose interest power works.

Equally, organisations that are not yet seeking to change power dynamics can helpfully acknowledge that their current emphasis is elsewhere.

By putting power at the heart of intersectionality, this big idea will become clearer, be used more precisely and will get its bite back.

We are here to support these efforts.

Please send your ideas, trials and triumphs to hometruthstwo@acevo.org.uk.

We are also interested in feedback on these Companion Notes and how we can make future editions as helpful as possible.

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Useful resources

As well as the links in the text you may find the following resources helpful:

Home Truths 2 (HT2) video catchup of session on [Inside Intersectionality](#).

HT2 blog on [Intersectionality](#).

[Imkaan](#) on intersectionality, Black and Minoritised Ethnic women and sexual violence.

Reflections from [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) on intersectionality.

Intersectionality as [interconnected](#) struggle.

[Patricia Hill Collins](#) on intersectionality and Black feminist thought.