After considering what gender is and isn’t, we are going to complicate things a bit by looking at how a variety of other socially constructed categories of difference and inequality such as race, ethnicity, social class, religion, age, and sexuality shape gender. As is the case with prisms in a kaleidoscope, the interaction of gender with other social prisms creates complex patterns of identity and relationships for people across groups and situations. Because there are so many different social prisms that interact with gender in daily life, we can only discuss a few in this chapter; however, other social categories are explored throughout this book. The articles we have selected for this chapter illustrate three key arguments. First, gender is a complex and multifaceted array of experiences and meanings that cannot be understood without considering the social context within which they are situated. Second, variations in the meaning and display of gender are related to different levels of prestige, privilege, and power associated with membership in other socially constructed categories of difference and inequality. Third, gender intersects with other socially constructed categories of difference and inequality at all levels discussed in the introduction to this book—individual, interactional, and institutional.

**Privilege**

In our daily lives, there usually isn’t enough time or opportunity to consider how the interaction of multiple social categories to which we belong affects beliefs, behaviors, and life chances. In particular, we are discouraged from critically examining our culture, as will be discussed in Chapter 3. People who occupy positions of privilege often do not notice how their privileged social positions influence them. In the United States, privilege is associated with white skin color, masculinity, wealth, heterosexuality,
Part I: Prisms

Youth, able-bodiedness, and so on. It seems normal to those of us who occupy privileged positions and those we interact with, that our positions of privilege be deferred to, allowing us to move more freely in society. Peggy McIntosh (1998) is a pioneer in examining these hidden and unearned benefits of privilege. She argues that there are implicit benefits of privilege and that persons who have “unearned advantages” often do not understand how their privilege is a function of the disempowerment of others. For example, male privilege seems “normal” and White privilege seems “natural” to those who are male and/or White.

The struggle for women’s rights also has seen the effects of privilege, with White women historically dominating this struggle. The privilege of race and social class created a view of woman as a universal category, and while many women of color stood up for women’s rights, they did so in response to a universal definition of womanhood derived from White privilege (hooks, 1981). This pattern of White dominance in the women’s movement is not a recent phenomenon. For example, in 1867 former slave Sojourner Truth responded to a White man who felt women were more delicate than men, told of the exertion by describing the toil of her work as a slave and asked “ain’t I a woman” (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). One hundred years later, women of color including Audre Lorde (1982), bell hooks (1981), Angela Davis (1981), Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), and others continued to speak out against White privilege within the women’s movement. These women, recognizing that the issues facing women of color were not always the same as those of White women, carried on a battle to make African American women visible in the second wave of feminism. For example, while White feminists were fighting for the right to abortion, African American women were fighting other laws and sterilization practices that denied them the right to control their own fertility. Women of color, including Patricia Hill Collins (this chapter) and others, some of whom are listed in this introduction, continue to challenge the White-dominated definitions of gender and fight to include in the analysis of gender an understanding of the experience of domination and privilege of all women.

Understanding the Interaction of Gender With Other Categories of Difference and Inequality

Throughout this chapter introduction, you will read about social scientists and social activists who attempt to understand the interactions between “interlocking oppressions.” Social scientists develop theories, with their primary focus on explanation, whereas social activists explore the topic of interlocking oppressions from the perspective of initiating social change. Although the goals of explanation and change are rarely separated in feminist research, they reflect different emphases (Collins, 1990). As such, these two different agendas shape attempts to understand the interaction of gender with multiple social prisms of difference and inequality. Much of this research on intersectionality is written by women, with a focus on women, because it came out of conflicts and challenging issues within the women’s movement. As you read through this chapter and book, it is important to remember that the two socially defined gender categories in Western culture, masculinity and femininity, intersect with other prisms of difference and inequality.

The effort to include the perspectives and experiences of all women in understanding gender is complicated. Previous theories had to be expanded to include the interaction of gender with other social categories of difference and privilege. We group these efforts into three different approaches. The earliest approach is to treat each social category of difference and inequality as if it was separate and not overlapping. A second, more recent approach is to add up the different social categories that an individual belongs to and summarize the effects of the social categories of privilege and power. The third and newest approach attempts to understand the simultaneous interaction of gender with all other categories of difference and inequality.
These three approaches are described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

**Separate and Different Approach**

Deborah King (1988) describes the earliest approach as the “race-sex analogy.” She characterizes this approach as one in which oppressions related to race are compared to those related to gender, but each is seen as a separate influence. King quotes Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who in 1860 stated that “Prejudice against color, of which we hear so much, is no stronger than that against sex” (p. 43). This approach, the “race-sex analogy,” continued well into the late twentieth century and can get in the way of a deeper understanding of the complexity of gender. For example, in the race-sex analogy, gender is assumed to have the same effect for African American and White women, while race is defined as the same experience for African American men and women. However, the reading by Karen Pyke and Denise Johnson in this chapter, which explores Asian American women’s definitions of “femininity,” illustrates how we cannot assume that gender will mean the same thing to different women from the same society. Although these Vietnamese American and Korean American women were born and raised in the United States, they live with two different cultural definitions of femininity, an idea we will consider in more depth in the next chapter. Although these Vietnamese American and Korean American women were born and raised in the United States, they live with two different cultural definitions of femininity, an idea we will consider in more depth in the next chapter. Although they may try, the reality is that Asian American women cannot draw a line down their bodies separating gender from ethnicity and culture. As these women’s words suggest, the effects of prisms of difference on daily experience are inextricably intertwined. For example, African American females cannot always be certain that the discrimination they face is due to race or gender, or both. As individuals, we are complex combinations of multiple social identities. Separating the effects of multiple social prisms theoretically does not always make sense and it is almost impossible to do on an individual level.

Looking at these individual challenges, King (1988) argues that attempting to determine which “ism” is most oppressive and most important to overcome (e.g., sexism, racism, or classism) does not address the real-life situations. This approach pits the interests of each subordinated group against the others and asks individuals to choose one group identity over others. For example, must poor, African American women decide which group will best address their situations in society: groups fighting racial inequality, gender inequality, or class inequality? The situations of poor, African American women are more complex than this single-issue approach can address.

The race-sex analogy of treating one “ism” at a time has been criticized because, although some needs and experiences of oppressed people are included, others are ignored. For instance, Collins (1990) describes the position of African American women as that of “outsiders within” the feminist movement and in relations with women in general. She and others have criticized the women’s movement for leaving out of its agenda and awareness the experiences and needs of African American women (e.g., King, 1988). This focus on one “ism” or another—the formation of social action groups around one category of difference and inequality—is called identity politics.

**Additive Approach**

The second approach used by theorists to understand how multiple social prisms interact at the level of individual life examines the effects of multiple social categories in an additive model. In this approach, the effects of race, ethnicity, class, and other social prisms are added together as static, equal parts of a whole (King, 1988). Returning to the earlier example of poor, African American women, the strategy is one of adding up the effects of racism, sexism, and classism to equal what is termed *triple jeopardy*. If that same woman was also a lesbian, according to the additive model, her situation would be that of *quadruple jeopardy*.

Although this approach takes into account multiple social identities in understanding oppression, King and others reject it as too simplistic. We cannot simply add up the complex inequalities
across social categories of difference and inequality because the weight of each social category varies based upon individual situations. McIntosh (1998) argues that privileges associated with membership in particular social categories interact to create “interlocking oppressions” whose implications and meanings shift across time and situations. For example, for African American women in some situations, their gender will be more salient, while in other situations their race will be more salient.

Interaction Approach

The third approach to understanding the social and personal consequences of membership in multiple socially constructed categories is called multiracial theory. Various terms are used by multiracial theorists to describe “interlocking oppressions,” including: intersectional analysis (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996), interrelated (Weber, 2001), simultaneous (Collins, 1990; Weber, 2001), multiplicative or multiple jeopardy (King, 1988), matrix of domination (Collins, 1990), and relational (Baca Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotelo, & Messner, 2001; Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996). For the purposes of this book, we describe this approach as consisting of “prismatic” or intersectional interactions, which occur when socially constructed categories of difference and inequality interact with other categories in the patterns of individuals’ lives. A brief discussion of some of these different models for explaining “interlocking oppressions” is useful in deepening our understanding of the complex interactions of membership in multiple social prisms.

King (1988) brings these interactions to light, discussing the concept of multiple jeopardy, in which she refers not only “to several, simultaneous oppressions, but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well” (p. 47). As a result, socially constructed categories of difference and inequality fold into individual identities; not in an additive way, but in a way in which the total construction of an individual’s identity incorporates the relationship of the identities to each other. King’s model includes both multiple social identities and situational factors to understand individual differences. For example, being a submissive woman might matter more in certain religious groups where women have more restricted roles, while race or class may be less salient in that situation because the latter social prisms are likely to be similar across the religious group.

Baca Zinn et al. (2001) emphasize that gender is relational. Focusing on gender as a process (Connell, 1987), they argue that “the meaning of woman is defined by the existence of women of different races and classes” (Baca Zinn et al. 2001, p. 174). As Pyke and Johnson’s reading illustrates, the fact that the Asian American women they interviewed were confused over whether to accept Asian standards of gender or American standards “normalizes” and makes White femininity dominant.

Collins (1990), on the other hand, conceptualizes oppressions as existing in a “matrix of domination” in which individuals not only experience but also resist multiple inequalities. Collins argues that domination and resistance can be found at three levels: personal, cultural, and institutional. Individuals with the most privilege and power—White, upper-class men—control dominant definitions of gender in this model. Collins discusses how “White skin privilege” has limited White feminists’ understandings of gender oppression to their own experiences and created considerable tension in the women’s movement. Tensions occur on all three levels—personal, within and between groups, and at the level of institutions such as the women’s movement itself—all of which maintain power differentials. In her article in this chapter, Collins seeks a deeper understanding of gender oppression by considering how oppressions related to sexism, racism, and classism operate simultaneously. The reading by Williams in this chapter illustrates Hill’s “matrix of domination” by explaining how toy store workers within two very different (social class) toy stores deal with both domination and resistance across gender, race, and class.

As you can see, this third approach does not treat interlocking oppressions as strictly additive. The unequal power of groups created by systems
of inequality affects interpersonal power in all relationships, both within and across gender categories. The articles in this chapter illustrate how multiple socially constructed prisms interact to shape both the identities and opportunities of individuals. They also show how interpersonal relationships are intricately tied to the larger structures of society and how gender is maintained across groups in society.

These efforts to understand gender through the lens of multiple social prisms of difference and inequality can be problematic. One concern is that gender could be reduced to what has been described as a continually changing quilt of life experiences (Baca Zinn et al., 2001; Connell, 1992). That is, if the third approach is taken to the extreme, gender is seen as a series of individual experiences and the approach could no longer be used as a tool for explaining patterns across groups, which would be meaningless in generating social action. Thus, the current challenge for researchers and theorists is to forge an explanation of the interaction of gender with other socially constructed prisms that both recognizes and reflects the experiences of individuals, while at the same time highlighting the patterns that occur across groups of individuals.

Leslie McCall’s reading in this chapter argues that the methodology of intersexuality research is complicated by the need to define “categories” of difference and inequality. Much of feminist research uses qualitative research. In this reading, she argues for using categories such as gender, race, and social class, even though they are imperfect, in quantitative research to study the complexity associated with examining multiple categories of difference and inequality.

Since we live in a world that includes many socially constructed categories of difference and inequality, understanding the ways social prisms come together is critical for understanding gender. How we visualize the effects of multiple social prisms depends upon whether we seek social justice, theoretical understanding, or both. If multiple social categories are linked, then what are the mechanisms by which difference is created, supported, and changed? Are multiple identities multiplied, as King suggests; added, as others suggest; or combined into a matrix, as Collins suggests? We raise these questions not to confuse you, but rather to challenge you to try to understand the complexity of gender relations.

**PRISOMATIC INTERACTIONS**

We return now to the metaphor of the kaleidoscope to help us sort out this question of how to deal with multiple social identities in explaining gender. Understanding the interaction of several socially constructed identities can be compared to the ray of light passing through the prisms of a kaleidoscope. Socially constructed categories serve as prisms that create life experiences. Although the kaleidoscope produces a flowing and constantly changing array of patterns, so too do we find individual life experiences that are unique and flowing. However, similar colors and patterns often reoccur in slightly different forms. Sometimes, when we look through a real kaleidoscope, we find a beautiful image in which blue is dominant.

Although we may not be able to replicate the specific image, it would not be unusual for us to see another blue-dominant pattern. Gender differences emerge in a similar form; not as a single, fixed pattern, but as a dominant, broad pattern that encompasses many unique but similar patterns.

The prism metaphor offers an avenue for systematically envisioning the complexity of gender relations. We would argue that to fully understand this interaction of social influences, one must focus on power. The distribution of privilege and oppression is a function of power relations (Baca Zinn et al., 2001). All of the articles in this chapter examine differences defined by power relations, and power operates at every level of life, from the intimate and familial (see reading by Pyke & Johnson in this chapter) to the institutional (see reading by Williams in this chapter). It is difficult to explain the combined effects of multiple social prisms without focusing on power. We argue that the power one accrues from a combination of socially constructed categories explains the patterns created by these categories. However, one cannot add up the effects from each
category one belongs to, as in the additive approach described earlier. Instead, one must understand that, like the prisms in the kaleidoscope, the power of any single socially constructed identity is related to all other categories. The final patterns that appear are based upon the combinations of power that shape the patterns. Individuals’ life experiences, then, take unique forms as race, class, ethnicity, religion, age, ability/disability, body type, and other socially constructed characteristics are combined to create patterns that emerge across contexts and daily life experiences.

Consider your own social identities and the social categories to which you belong. How do they mold you at this time and how did they, or might they, mold your experience of gender at other times and under different circumstances? Consider other social prisms such as age, ability/disability, religion, and national identity. If you were to build your own kaleidoscope of gender, what prisms would you include? What prisms interact with gender to shape your life? Do these prisms create privilege or disadvantage for you? Think about how these socially constructed categories combine to create your life experiences and how they are supported by the social structure in which you live. Keep your answers in mind as you read these articles to gain a better understanding of the role prisms play in shaping gender and affecting your life.

REFERENCES


Introduction to Reading 6

This excerpt from Christine L. Williams’s book Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality builds upon Patricia Hill Collins’s idea of a “matrix of domination” in which race, class, and gender intersect to create different life experiences for women. The data and findings in her book, and in this chapter, are based upon an ethnographic analysis of two toy stores.
In this Chapter, I explore the consequences of job sorting for interactions between clerks and customers. I argue that race and gender segregation of jobs perpetuates stereotypes that shape the meanings and consequences of routinized shopping encounters. When different kinds of people fill each role in a ritualized service encounter, the result is the reproduction of social inequality.

To illustrate this, imagine a service industry where all servers would be women and all customers men. This was the scenario encountered by Arlie Hochschild (1983) in her study of flight attendants in the 1970s. She argued that this stratification reinforced assumptions linking femininity with servility and masculinity with economic and social power. As Goffman (1977) observes, virtually any stereotype will come to seem natural and inevitable if ritualized interactions that reinforce it are repeated often enough.

Of course, in actual practice, service rituals are often modified. Despite their goal of precisely scripting the service encounter, corporations cannot control all interactions between clerks and customers... [T]here is always room for creativity and individual expression within the constraints of the role. Corporate ideals have to be translated into local contexts. In a study of Burger King and McDonald’s restaurants in New York City, Jennifer Parker Talwar (2002) found that the scripts mandated by these companies had to be changed according to the ethnic makeup of the neighborhoods where the restaurants were located. For instance, the requirement that workers always smile upset many customers in

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**Inequality on the Shopping Floor**

Christine L. Williams

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a predominately Chinese neighborhood, who interpreted the behavior as overly pushy. In one franchise, greeters were hired to welcome customers respectfully at the front door and accompany them to the order counter to assist them in making their selections.

Not only local context but the actual mix of customer and clerk will shape the service encounter. In this chapter, I describe how white service workers encounter a different set of customer expectations than black service workers, resulting in different modifications of the scripted role. Likewise, white customers encounter a different set of service worker expectations than black customers.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) uses the concept of a “matrix of domination” to analyze these shifting configurations of race and gender and their consequences for social interaction. In contrast to those who might assume that all women face similar forms of domination and oppression, she argues that sexism comes in a variety of forms that are shaped by the contexts of race, social class, and sexuality. Discrimination against black women is different from discrimination against white women because these groups are located at different places on what she calls the matrix of domination. Black women are typically subject to domination on the basis of gender, race, and class, while white women suffer from gender domination but are privileged by their race and class as well. This matrix operates at all levels of society and culture. Its workings are evident in the scarcity of black women and the total absence of black men at the higher-paying Diamond Toys compared to their over-representation at the Toy Warehouse. It is also apparent in the division of tasks within the stores, where white men monopolize the director positions, white or light-skinned women are concentrated in cashiering jobs, and darker-skinned African American women and men work as stockers and gofers.

In this chapter I explore how the matrix of domination shapes, but does not fully determine, customer-worker interactions in the toy store. I focus on the interaction rules that govern the shopping floor and how they reproduce stereotypes about different groups. There are both formal rules, developed by corporations, and informal rules, developed by workers to protect their dignity and self-respect. I also discuss what happens when these rules are not followed and interactions break down into conflict. Whether the interaction can be repaired will depend on the matrix because different groups have different resources to draw on to assert their will in the toy store. It will also depend on the creativity and personalities of the individuals involved. The meanings of workplace rituals are not fixed and self-evident but change depending on the mix of individuals engaged in the interaction. Only through a process of symbolic interaction among active, creative, knowledgeable participants do the meanings and consequences of these rituals emerge (Blumer 1969). . . .

SHOP-FLOOR CULTURE

Interactions between customers and workers in toy stores are governed by informal rules that are shaped but not determined by the corporate cultures. These rules are sometimes known as “the ropes.” New hires pick up the ropes from observing experienced workers.

One of the first lessons I learned on the shopping floor was that middle-class white women shoppers got whatever they wanted. I suppose that as a middle-class white woman I should have found this empowering. Instead I came to understand it as a result of race and class privilege.

Most of the customers at both stores were women. At the Toy Warehouse we were told that women made 90 percent of the purchase decisions, so we were to treat women deferentially. Olive told me that the store abided by the “$19,800 rule.” If a customer wanted to return merchandise and it was questionable whether we should take the return (because it had been broken or worn out by the customer, or because the customer had lost the receipt), we should err on the side of the customer. A $200 loss today might please the customer so much that she would
return to the store and spend the rest of the $20,000 on each of her children.

But in my experience only the white women got this kind of treatment. Not surprisingly, many developed a sense of entitlement and threw fits when they were not accommodated. . . .

Middle-class white women had a reputation at the store of being especially demanding and abusive toward salesclerks. Susan, a thirty-five-year-old Latina, agreed with my observation that rich white women were the most demanding customers; she said they always demanded to see the manager and always got appeased. Susan, one of the people who taught me the ropes at the service desk, said that Latinas/os never demanded to see the manager and never threatened to stop shopping at the Toy Warehouse. I asked if she had ever seen a black person do this; at first she said no, and then she said yes. She remembered that sometimes at the end of the month poor blacks got upset at the service desk and demanded to see a manager. She explained that at the end of the month if they ran out of money they might try to return the merchandise that they had purchased earlier in the month but that had already been used. If the workers at the service desk turned down the request for a refund, they demanded to see the manager. But, she said, they were not going to get satisfaction.

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Susan’s remarks about demanding and complaining shoppers illustrate some of the elaborate stereotypes that service desk workers used in the course of their daily transactions. Immediate assumptions were made about customers based on their race, gender, and apparent social class; workers responded to customers using these cues.

Because middle-class white women were the most coveted customers at the Toy Warehouse, many developed a sense of entitlement. On one occasion, a very pregnant white woman came up to the service desk to return a teddy bear mobile for over the baby crib. The mechanism that played music and moved the mobile wasn’t working, so she wanted to exchange it for one that was working. We sent her into the store to find another one for an even exchange. She came back after quite a while with another one in a box that she had opened. (Customers weren’t supposed to open the factory-sealed boxes, but we didn’t say anything.) She said that one package that she had opened also had a broken mechanism but that she had found a mobile with a different motif (clowns instead of teddy bears) made by the same company that had a mechanism in it that worked. She asked if she could replace that for the broken one in her original box. She said, “So will you do this and make a customer happy? If you do it I will come back to shop here more, and if you don’t I won’t ever set foot in the store. So what’s it going to be? Do you want a happy customer or not?” I couldn’t believe the attitude but I kept my mouth shut. I thought about the floor workers who would get in trouble for all those open boxes. My supervisor Vannie said she could make the switch. The woman never said thank you, but then customers rarely did.

To me, one of the most eye-opening examples of white women’s sense of entitlement that I witnessed in the Toy Warehouse was their refusal to check their bags at the counter. Since stealing was such a big problem in the store, customers were required to leave all large bags and backpacks at the service desk. A large sign indicating this policy was posted on the store’s entrance. The vast majority of customers carrying bags immediately approached the desk to comply with the rule. The exception was white women, who almost universally ignored the sign. When challenged, they would argue—“But my wallet is in there!” or “I need my bag with me!”—and we would have to insist so as not to appear unfair to the other people. I guiltily recognized myself in their behavior. Since then, I have always turned over my bag.

White women developed a sense of entitlement because in most instances they got what they wanted. Members of other groups who wanted to return used merchandise, or who needed special consideration, were rarely granted their request. . . .

It has been well documented that African Americans suffer discrimination in public places, including stores (Feagin and Sikes 1995); this
phenomenon is sometimes referred to jokingly as “shopping while black” (Williams 2004). They report being followed by security, treated harshly by attendants, and flatly refused service. The flip side of this discrimination is the privilege experienced by middle-class whites. This privilege is not recognized precisely because it is so customary. Whites expect first-rate service; when it is not forthcoming, some feel victimized, even discriminated against. This was especially apparent in the Toy Warehouse, where most of the salespeople were black. I noticed that when white women customers were subjected to long waits in line, or if they received what they perceived as uncaring attention, they would often sigh loudly, roll their eyes, and try to make eye contact with other whites, looking for a sign of recognition that the service they were receiving was inferior and unfair.

At Diamond Toys most customers didn’t mind waiting for their turn to consult with me. When the lines were long they didn’t make rude huffing noises or try to make eye contact with their fellow sufferers. The two stores were staffed and structured quite differently, and that certainly helps to explain some differences in the experiences (and satisfaction) of the customers. We were so understaffed at the Toy Warehouse that I felt as if I were running the whole time I was at work. However, I couldn’t help thinking that customers—who were mostly white—cut us more slack at Diamond Toys because most of us were white. We were presumed to be professional, caring, and knowledgeable even when we weren’t. My African American coworkers at the Toy Warehouse, in contrast, were assumed to be incompetent and uncaring. Like the people who employed domestic workers studied by Julia Wrigley (1995), white customers seemed less respectful of racial/ethnic minority service workers than white workers; they were willing to pay more and wait more for the services of whites because they assumed that whites were more refined and intelligent.

White customers at the Toy Warehouse seemed frequently unnerved by their interactions with the clerks in the store. One time at the Toy Warehouse a white woman customer stopped my coworker Gail to ask for a gift suggestion for a ten-year-old boy. Gail, who was swiftly walking across the floor to deal with another customer’s request, practically shouted at her, “Don’t ask me about no boys; I got girls, not sons!” and then took off. The white woman looked startled at the response and maybe even a bit mortified. What she didn’t know was that Gail found a coworker who had sons to answer the woman’s question. The caring, efficiency, and sense of humor of my coworkers at the Toy Warehouse often went unnoticed by white customers.

Realizing that white customers in particular treated them with disrespect and even disdain, my African American coworkers developed interational skills to minimize their involvement with them. I noticed at the service desk that the black women who worked there didn’t smile or act concerned when customers came up for complaints or returns. They did their work well and efficiently (or at least as efficiently as possible given the myriad demands on their energies when they were at the service desk), but they did not exude a sense that they really cared. Rather, they looked suspicious, or bored, or resigned, or maybe a little miffed. That might be a defense mechanism. If they looked solicitous, then the customers would walk all over them. Over time I learned that this attitude of ennui or suspicion was cultivated as a way to garner respect for their work. It was saying, “This isn’t my problem, it’s your problem, but I will see what can be done to fix it.” If workers were more gung-ho and it turned out that the problem couldn’t be fixed, then they would look incompetent, which was the assumption that too many white customers were willing to make of black women. So they made it look as if the problem were insurmountable, and then when they did resolve it (which was most of the time) they garnered a little bit of respect. But it was at the cost of appearing unfriendly, so the store got hit with bad customer service evaluations.

Manipulating customers through self-presentation constitutes an informal “feeling rule” (Hochschild...
1983). These techniques for displaying affect were developed by workers to manage and minimize difficult customer interactions. I call them informal rules because management would prefer that workers always convey serious concern and solicitude. This was the case at both stores. With few exceptions, workers at Diamond Toys accepted this directive, but many workers at the Toy Warehouse resisted it, recognizing that, if they were African Americans, adopting an attitude of servility would reinforce racism among shoppers. The informal rules were sensitive to race and gender dynamics in a way that management rules could not be. Different groups had to use different means to do their jobs.

Moreover, the stratification of the jobs at the store meant that we all had different levels of formal and informal power to resolve situations. White men had the most power in the stores. The store directors in both places where I worked were white men who could and did trump any decision made by managers or sales associates. Sales associates had virtually no options for resolving disputes. Measures intended to keep us from stealing also prevented us from dealing with customer complaints or special requests. We couldn’t offer small discounts or make up a price when the tag was missing, for example, because doing so would make the store vulnerable to employee theft. Thus maintaining control was dependent on the race, gender, and organizational authority of both workers and customers.

**Interaction Breakdown: Social Control in the Toy Store**

It may seem anathema to talk about power and control in the context of toy shopping. But customers frequently misbehaved in the stores where I worked. Every day I witnessed customers ripping open packages, hiding garbage, spilling Cokes, and generally making a mess of the store. One of my coworkers at Diamond Toys even found a dirty diaper on a shelf. There is a sort of gleeful abandon that some shoppers experience in a store. Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) describes how shoppers at Wal-Mart could tear down in minutes a clothing display that had taken her all day to arrange. She speculates that after full days of picking up after family members at home, some women shoppers like to experience a turn at being the messy ones.

As an older white woman, I could exercise some control over the extremes of this bad behavior. I could stand nearby, for example, and the customer might notice me and guiltily try to stuff the toy back into the box or replace the dozen toys she had pulled off the shelf. We weren’t allowed to confront customers, even if we suspected them of stealing or destroying the merchandise, but we were expected to develop subtle ways to control them. I couldn’t do this as well as my male coworkers could, but I was definitely more respected (and feared) than my women coworkers who were African American, Asian, and Latina.

One example of this involved Thelma, who was about fifty years old and was one of the two African American salesclerks at Diamond Toys. In the break room we talked about how rich the people were who shopped at the store. She said she easily got them to spend a lot of money, and she gave an example of how recently she had talked people into spending over $200. She said she was really good with the kids; she got them to behave by threatening to take away their toys. Their mothers were so grateful they sometimes asked her to come home with them and work for them. While she was proud of her selling ability, at the same time this particular reaction upset her. The women’s offers clearly drew on cultural conventions linking black women to domestic service and to the “mammy” stereotype in particular. Thelma said that she objected to being treated like a servant. She said that the day before a customer had called her a “bitch” to one of the managers. She had asked the customer not to sit on the display tables because they were not sturdy and we had all been instructed to keep people off them. She asked her to not sit there in a polite way, but the woman got mad and complained to the manager, “That bitch told me to
move. What if I had been disabled?” Thelma saw this treatment as racist and sexist. She said, “I am not her bitch,” meaning her servant.

The customers that I had the hardest time controlling were men. Men were outnumbered by women in both stores. At the Toy Warehouse, I saw them mostly on the weekend, which seemed to be the most popular time for fathers to come in with their children. (I often wondered if they were divorced fathers.) At Diamond Toys, I observed men tourists shopping with their families, businessmen buying small gifts for their children back home, and, during the Christmas season, men buying high-end toys for their wives. In general men seemed annoyed to be in the stores, and they sometimes acted annoyed with me, especially when they were unaccompanied by women. One white man at the Toy Warehouse tossed his shopping list at me when I was working at the service desk. He expected me to assemble the items for him or get someone else to do it. One apparently very wealthy white man at Diamond Toys tossed his credit card at me while pointing to merchandise kept in the glass cases. I had to scurry after him to keep up with his numerous demands. Some men were just mean. On two occasions at Diamond Toys, men demanded to use my telephone, which the store had strict rules against. I said they weren’t allowed to use it, and they just reached over the counter and did it anyway. I was terrified that [my supervisor] would walk by and yell at me, maybe even fire me. One time during the Christmas rush a white man complained to me about the wait at my register, an uncommon occurrence at Diamond Toys. I explained that two of the workers hadn’t shown up that day. He told me I should fire them. (Why he thought I had this power I couldn’t guess.) On another occasion at Diamond Toys, a business professor in town for a professional convention was upset because a Barney sippy cup he wanted to buy was missing its price tag and I couldn’t find it listed in the store inventory. He made me call over the store director and subjected both of us to a critique of store operations, which he threatened to write up and submit for publication to a business journal unless we sold him the sippy cup.

The sense of entitlement I experienced with these men customers was different from that which I encountered with white women customers. Perhaps the expectation that shopping was “women’s work” made these men feel entitled to make me do their shopping for them or reorganize the store to make it more convenient for them. To assert masculinity while engaging in this otherwise feminine activity seemed to require them to disrupt the routinized clerk-customer relationship.

Some customers were considered more demanding and harder to control than others, in particular, black men and white women. But no one ever threatened to call the police on an angry white woman. In general, only white women could count on being appeased; for them, acting out seemed to get the results they desired.

The fact that police were called to control only black men customers reveals underlying cultural assumptions about gender and race. Toy stores catered to white mothers, who were believed to be behaving virtuously—if not civilly—on behalf of their children. Black men, in contrast, were assumed to be violent by nature; their anger was seen as evidence of an underlying animal nature that had to be controlled (Ferguson 2000).

Thus white women’s demands were satisfied because, from a corporate perspective, their anger was assumed to serve a legitimate end. They also were appeased because it was assumed that they had economic resources ($20,000 for each child!), an assumption that was almost never invoked in the case of black men. White women were immediately seen as potential spenders; black men, as potential thieves. In the overall retail environment, these racialized assumptions might extend to white and black people in general (Chin 2001), but in a toy store that catered to women in particular, we might predict this polarized race/gender dynamic to emerge. Thus a shouting white woman got whatever she wanted and a shouting black man got threatened with arrest. (Other groups of
customers, in my experience, didn’t shout, with the notable exception of children.)

Some have argued that stealing and scamming in stores can be understood as a form of resistance to racism toward black consumers. This has certainly been the case in the past, when organized looting by African Americans expressed their collective anger at being excluded, mistreated, and/or overcharged by white merchants (Cohen 2003). Some of the customers caught stealing may have been motivated by such social and economic protest, but I don’t have any way to know this. What I do know is that African Americans were typically assumed to be scamming whenever they complained, returned merchandise, or made special requests. Whites were given the benefit of the doubt.

**Conclusion**

As a nation of consumers, we spend a great deal of time in stores interacting with sales workers. In this chapter I have tried to make a case for paying attention to these interactions as sites for the reproduction of social inequality. I argue that where we shop and how we shop are shaped by and bolster race, class, and gender inequalities.

Corporations script the customer-server interaction in ways that are designed to appeal to a particular kind of customer. The fun, child-centered Toy Warehouse aimed to attract middle-class mothers who were looking for a wide assortment of toys at discount prices, while the sophisticated Diamond Toys catered to a more discriminating, upper-class clientele. These corporate driven agendas influenced who entered the stores as customers and also shaped the labor practices of the two stores. The Toy Warehouse attracted a dazzling mix of customers who were served by a mostly African American staff. At that store, my job was to swiftly and cheerfully process customer requests and check them out at the register. At Diamond Toys, in contrast, the service encounter was considered a more central part of my job. I was expected to provide “professional” advice to the well-to-do, mostly white clientele. It was not a coincidence that the majority of salesclerks at that store were white. Stores like Diamond Toys that marketed their “expert” staff might prefer to hire whites instead of African Americans because of the (presumed) racism of wealthy shoppers and a culture that associates professionalism with whiteness.

When interactions broke down, the ability to repair them depended on the characteristics of the customer and worker. As a white woman, I had a different repertoire of control strategies than my African American women coworkers. They had to reckon with racist as well as sexist assumptions from irate white customers, while most of my difficulties were due to customer sexism. White men had more power in the stores, but they seemed to have difficulty managing and controlling black customers. Control was an achievement that had to be negotiated anew with each service interaction.

I realize that most of my examples of conflict are from the Toy Warehouse. I believe that conflict was more common there than at Diamond Toys. The unusually diverse mix of people in the Toy Warehouse often provoked misunderstandings, as when Gail shouted at the customer that she didn’t have sons. Diamond Toys protected itself from conflict by catering to an upper-class clientele, thereby functioning much like a gated community. This is not to say that diversity always results in conflict, but it did at the Toy Warehouse because race, class, and gender differences were overlain by power differences within the store. Interactions between clerks and customers took place within a context where these differences had been used to shape marketing agendas, hiring practices, and labor policies—all of which benefited some groups (especially middle-class white women and men) over others.

From a sociological perspective, there is nothing inevitable about these categories or their meanings. Race, class, and gender are not inherent properties of individuals; they are socially constructed categories that derive their significance through human interactions. On rare instances, I experienced interactions with customers that transcended their ritualized forms and momentarily broke through the matrix of domination. . . .
Introduction to Reading 7

Patricia Hill Collins is a sociologist and a leader in the efforts to explain and understand the interaction of gender with race and social class. She has worked toward an understanding of gender that moves beyond theories that narrowly apply to White, middle- and upper-class women. This paper was an address to faculty attending a workshop on integrating race and social class into courses on gender. Although it is not intended for a student audience, it provides many ways that we can eliminate racism and sexism in our daily lives. She also challenges us to think more critically about the meaning of oppression and how we might apply it to social categories of difference and inequality.

1. What is wrong with an additive analysis of oppression?
2. What does Collins mean by institutional oppression?
3. How does Collins’s discussion of privilege relate to Williams’s discussion of women in toy stores in the previous article?
 Audre Lorde’s statement raises a troublesome issue for scholars and activists working for social change. While many of us have little difficulty assessing our own victimization within some major system of oppression, whether it be by race, social class, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or gender, we typically fail to see how our thoughts and actions uphold someone else’s subordination. Thus, white feminists routinely point with confidence to their oppression as women but resist seeing how much their white skin privileges them. African-Americans who possess eloquent analyses of racism often persist in viewing poor White women as symbols of White power. The radical left fares little better. “If only people of color and women could see their true class interests,” they argue, “class solidarity would eliminate racism and sexism.” In essence, each group identifies the type of oppression with which it feels most comfortable as being fundamental and classifies all other types as being of lesser importance.

Oppression is full of such contradictions. Errors in political judgment that we make concerning how we teach our courses, what we tell our children, and which organizations are worthy of our time, talents and financial support flow smoothly from errors in theoretical analysis about the nature of oppression and activism. Once we realize that there are few pure victims or oppressors, and that each one of us derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression that frame our lives, then we will be in a position to see the need for new ways of thought and action.

To get at that “piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us,” we need at least two things. First, we need new visions of what oppression is, new categories of analysis that are inclusive of race, class, and gender as distinctive yet interlocking structures of oppression. Adhering to a stance of comparing and ranking oppressions—the proverbial, “I’m more oppressed than you”—locks us all into a dangerous dance of competing for attention, resources, and theoretical supremacy. Instead, I suggest that we examine our different experiences within the more fundamental relationship of domination and subordination. To focus on the particular arrangements that race or class or gender take in our time and place without seeing these structures as sometimes parallel and sometimes interlocking dimensions of the more fundamental relationship of domination and subordination may temporarily ease our consciences. But while such thinking may lead to short-term social reforms, it is simply inadequate for the task of bringing about long-term social transformation.

While race, class and gender as categories of analysis are essential in helping us understand

From Patricia Hill Collins, “Toward a new vision: Race, class and gender as categories of analysis and connection” in Race, Class, and Gender, Copyright © 1993. Reprinted with permission.
the structural bases of domination and subordi-
ination, new ways of thinking that are not accom-
panied by new ways of acting offer incomplete
prospects for change. To get at that “piece of the
oppressor which is planted deep within each of
us,” we also need to change our daily behavior.
Currently, we are all enmeshed in a complex web
of problematic relationships that grant our mirror
images full human subjectivity while stereotyp-
ing and objectifying those most different than
ourselves. We often assume that the people we
work with, teach, send our children to school
with, and sit next to, will act and feel in pre-
scribed ways because they belong to given race,
social class or gender categories. These judg-
ments by category must be replaced with fully
human relationships that transcend the legitimate
differences created by race, class and gender as
categories of analysis. We require new categories
of connection, new visions of what our relation-
ships with one another can be.

Our task is immense. We must first recognize
race, class and gender as interlocking categories
of analysis that together cultivate profound dif-
fences in our personal biographies. But then
we must transcend those very differences by
reconceptualizing race, class and gender in order
to create new categories of connection.

How can we reconceptualize race, class and gender as
categories of analysis?

To me, we must shift our discourse away from
additive analyses of oppression (Spelman 1982;
Collins 1989). Such approaches are typically
based on two key premises. First, they depend on
either/or, dichotomous thinking. Persons, things
and ideas are conceptualized in terms of their
opposites. For example, Black/White, man/
woman, thought/feeling, and fact/opinion are
defined in oppositional terms. Thought and feel-
ing are not seen as two different and intercon-
nected ways of approaching truth that can coexist
in scholarship and teaching. Instead, feeling is
defined as antithetical to reason, as its opposite.
In spite of the fact that we all have “both/and”
identities (I am both a college professor and a
mother—I don’t stop being a mother when I drop
my child off at school, or forget everything I
learned while scrubbing the toilet), we persist in
trying to classify each other in either/or catego-
ries. I live each day as an African-American
woman—a race/gender specific experience. And
I am not alone. Everyone has a race/gender/
class specific identity. Either/or, dichotomous
thinking is especially troublesome when applied
to theories of oppression because every indi-
vidual must be classified as being either
oppressed or not oppressed. The both/and posi-
tion of simultaneously being oppressed and
oppressor becomes conceptually impossible.

A second premise of additive analyses of
oppression is that these dichotomous differences
must be ranked. One side of the dichotomy is
typically labeled dominant and the other subordi-
nate. Thus, Whites rule Blacks, men are deemed
superior to women, and reason is seen as being
preferable to emotion. Applying this premise to
discussions of oppression leads to the assump-
tion that oppression can be quantified, and that
some groups are oppressed more than others.
I am frequently asked, “Which has been most
oppressive to you, your status as a Black person
or your status as a woman?” What I am really being
asked to do is divide myself into little boxes and rank my various statuses. If I experience oppression as a both/and phenomenon, why should I analyze it any differently?

Additive analyses of oppression rest squarely on the twin pillars of either/or thinking and the necessity to quantify and rank all relationships in order to know where one stands. Such approaches typically see African-American women as being more oppressed than everyone else because the majority of Black women experience the negative effects of race, class and gender oppression simultaneously. In essence, if you add together separate oppressions, you are left with a grand oppression greater than the sum of its parts.

I am not denying that specific groups experience oppression more harshly than others—lynching is certainly objectively worse than being held up as a sex object. But we must be careful not to confuse this issue of the saliency of one type of oppression in people’s lives with a theoretical stance positing the interlocking nature of oppression. Race, class and gender may all structure a situation but may not be equally visible and/or important in people’s self-definitions. . . . This recognition that one category may have salience over another for a given time and place does not minimize the theoretical importance of assuming that race, class and gender as categories of analysis structure all relationships.

In order to move toward new visions of what oppression is, I think that we need to ask new questions. How are relationships of domination and subordination structured and maintained in the American political economy? How do race, class and gender function as parallel and interlocking systems that shape this basic relationship of domination and subordination? Questions such as these promise to move us away from futile theoretical struggles concerned with ranking oppressions and towards analyses that assume race, class and gender are all present in any given setting, even if one appears more visible and salient than the others. Our task becomes redefined as one of reconceptualizing oppression by uncovering the connections among race, class and gender as categories of analysis.

1. Institutional Dimension of Oppression

Sandra Harding’s contention that gender oppression is structured along three main dimensions—the institutional, the symbolic, and the individual—offers a useful model for a more comprehensive analysis encompassing race, class and gender oppression (Harding 1986). Systemic relationships of domination and subordination structured through social institutions such as schools, businesses, hospitals, the work place, and government agencies represent the institutional dimension of oppression. Racism, sexism and elitism all have concrete institutional locations. Even though the workings of the institutional dimension of oppression are often obscured with ideologies claiming equality of opportunity, in actuality, race, class and gender place Asian-American women, Native American men, White men, African-American women, and other groups in distinct institutional niches with varying degrees of penalty and privilege.

Even though I realize that many . . . would not share this assumption, let us assume that the institutions of American society discriminate, whether by design or by accident. While many of us are familiar with how race, gender and class operate separately to structure inequality, I want to focus on how these three systems interlock in structuring the institutional dimension of oppression. To get at the interlocking nature of race, class and gender, I want you to think about the antebellum plantation as a guiding metaphor for a variety of American social institutions. Even though slavery is typically analyzed as a racist institution, and occasionally as a class institution, I suggest that slavery was a race, class, gender specific institution. Removing any one piece from our analysis diminishes our understanding of the true nature of relations of domination and subordination under slavery.
Slavery was a profoundly patriarchal institution. It rested on the dual tenets of White male authority and White male property, a joining of the political and the economic within the institution of the family. Heterosexism was assumed and all Whites were expected to marry. Control over affluent White women’s sexuality remained key to slavery’s survival because property was to be passed on to the legitimate heirs of the slave owner. Ensuring affluent White women’s virginity and chastity was deeply intertwined with maintenance of property relations.

Under slavery, we see varying levels of institutional protection given to affluent White women, working-class and poor White women, and enslaved African women. Poor White women enjoyed few of the protections held out to their upper class sisters. Moreover, the devalued status of Black women was key in keeping all White women in their assigned places. Controlling Black women’s fertility was also key to the continuation of slavery, for children born to slave mothers themselves were slaves.

African-American women shared the devalued status of chattel with their husbands, fathers and sons. Racism stripped Blacks as a group of legal rights, education, and control over their own persons. African-Americans could be whipped, branded, sold, or killed, not because they were poor, or because they were women, but because they were Black. Racism ensured that Blacks would continue to serve Whites and suffer economic exploitation at the hands of all Whites.

So we have a very interesting chain of command on the plantation—the affluent White master as the reigning patriarch, his White wife helpmate to serve him, help him manage his property and bring up his heirs, his faithful servants whose production and reproduction were tied to the requirements of the capitalist political economy, and largely property-less, working class White men and women watching from afar. In essence, the foundations for the contemporary roles of elite White women, poor Black women, working class White men, and a series of other groups can be seen in stark relief in this fundamental American social institution. While Blacks experienced the most harsh treatment under slavery, and thus made slavery clearly visible as a racist institution, race, class and gender interlocked in structuring slavery’s systemic organization of domination and subordination.

Even today, the plantation remains a compelling metaphor for institutional oppression. Certainly the actual conditions of oppression are not as severe now as they were then. To argue, as some do, that things have not changed all that much denigrates the achievements of those who struggled for social change before us. But the basic relationships among Black men, Black women, elite White women, elite White men, working class White men and working class White women as groups remain essentially intact.

A brief analysis of key American social institutions most controlled by elite White men should convince us of the interlocking nature of race, class and gender in structuring the institutional dimension of oppression. For example, if you are from an American college or university, is your campus a modern plantation? Who controls your university’s political economy? Are elite White men overrepresented among the upper administrators and trustees controlling your university’s finances and policies? Are elite White men being joined by growing numbers of elite White women helpmates? What kinds of people are in your classrooms grooming the next generation who will occupy these and other decision-making positions? Who are the support staff that produce the mass mailings, order the supplies, fix the leaky pipes? Do African-Americans, Hispanics or other people of color form the majority of the invisible workers who feed you, wash your dishes, and clean up your offices and libraries after everyone else has gone home? 

2. THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF OPPRESSION

Widespread, societally-sanctioned ideologies used to justify relations of domination and subordination comprise the symbolic dimension of oppression. Central to this process is the use of
stereotypical or controlling images of diverse race, class and gender groups. In order to assess the power of this dimension of oppression, I want you to make a list, either on paper or in your head, of “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics. If your list is anything like that compiled by most people, it reflects some variation of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>masculine</th>
<th>feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aggressive</td>
<td>passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leader</td>
<td>follower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rational</td>
<td>emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong</td>
<td>weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intellectual</td>
<td>physical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not only does this list reflect either/or dichotomous thinking and the need to rank both sides of the dichotomy, but ask yourself exactly which men and women you had in mind when compiling these characteristics. This list applies almost exclusively to middle-class White men and women. The allegedly “masculine” qualities that you probably listed are only acceptable when exhibited by elite White men, or when used by Black and Hispanic men against each other or against women of color. Aggressive Black and Hispanic men are seen as dangerous, not powerful, and are often penalized when they exhibit any of the allegedly “masculine” characteristics. Working-class and poor White men fare slightly better and are also denied the allegedly “masculine” symbols of leadership, intellectual competence, and human rationality. Women of color and working class and poor White women are also not represented on this list, for they have never had the luxury of being “ladies.” What appear to be universal categories representing all men and women instead are unmasked as being applicable to only a small group.

It is important to see how the symbolic images applied to different race, class and gender groups interact in maintaining systems of domination and subordination. If I were to ask you to repeat the same assignment, only this time, by making separate lists for Black men, Black women, Hispanic women and Hispanic men, I suspect that your gender symbolism would be quite different. In comparing all of the lists, you might begin to see the interdependence of symbols applied to all groups. For example, the elevated images of White womanhood need devalued images of Black womanhood in order to maintain credibility.

While the above exercise reveals the interlocking nature of race, class and gender in structuring the symbolic dimension of oppression, part of its importance lies in demonstrating how race, class and gender pervade a wide range of what appears to be universal language. Attending to diversity . . . in our daily lives provides a new angle of vision on interpretations of reality thought to be natural, normal and “true.” Moreover, viewing images of masculinity and femininity as universal gender symbolism, rather than as symbolic images that are race, class and gender specific, renders the experiences of people of color and of non-privileged White women and men invisible. One way to dehumanize an individual or a group is to deny the reality of their experiences. So when we refuse to deal with race or class because they do not appear to be directly relevant to gender, we are actually becoming part of some one else’s problem.

Assuming that everyone is affected differently by the same interlocking set of symbolic images allows us to move forward toward new analyses. Women of color and White women have different relationships to White male authority and this difference explains the distinct gender symbolism applied to both groups. Black women encounter controlling images such as the mammy, the matriarch, the mule and the whore, that encourage others to reject us as fully human people. Ironically, the negative nature of these images simultaneously encourages us to reject them. In contrast, White women are offered seductive images, those that promise to reward them for supporting the status quo. And yet seductive images can be equally controlling. Consider, for example, the views of Nancy White, a 73-year-old Black woman, concerning images of rejection and seduction:
My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man’s mule and the white woman is his dog. Now, she said that to say this: we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do it well or not. But the white woman is closer to the master and he pats them on the head and lets them sleep in the house, but he ain’t gon’ treat neither one like he was dealing with a person. (Gwalatney 1980, 148)

Both sets of images stimulate particular political stances. By broadening the analysis beyond the confines of race, we can see the varying levels of rejection and seduction available to each of us due to our race, class and gender identity. Each of us lives with an allotted portion of institutional privilege and penalty, and with varying levels of rejection and seduction inherent in the symbolic images applied to us. This is the context in which we make our choices. Taken together, the institutional and symbolic dimensions of oppression create a structural backdrop against which all of us live our lives.

3. THE INDIVIDUAL DIMENSION OF OPPRESSION

Whether we benefit or not, we all live within institutions that reproduce race, class and gender oppression. Even if we never have any contact with members of other race, class and gender groups, we all encounter images of these groups and are exposed to the symbolic meanings attached to those images. On this dimension of oppression, our individual biographies vary tremendously. As a result of our institutional and symbolic statuses, all of our choices become political acts.

Each of us must come to terms with the multiple ways in which race, class and gender as categories of analysis frame our individual biographies. I have lived my entire life as an African-American woman from a working-class family and this basic fact has had a profound impact on my personal biography. Imagine how different your life might be if you had been born Black, or White, or poor, or of a different race/class/gender group than the one with which you are most familiar. The institutional treatment you would have received and the symbolic meanings attached to your very existence might differ dramatically from what you now consider to be natural, normal and part of everyday life. You might be the same, but your personal biography might have been quite different.

I believe that each of us carries around the cumulative effect of our lives within multiple structures of oppression. If you want to see how much you have been affected by this whole thing, I ask you one simple question—who are your close friends? Who are the people with whom you can share your hopes, dreams, vulnerabilities, fears and victories? Do they look like you? If they are all the same, circumstance may be the cause. For the first seven years of my life I saw only low-income Black people. My friends from those years reflected the composition of my community. But now that I am an adult, can the defense of circumstance explain the patterns of people that I trust as my friends and colleagues? When given other alternatives, if my friends and colleagues reflect the homogeneity of one race, class and gender group, then these categories of analysis have indeed become barriers to connection.

I am not suggesting that people are doomed to follow the paths laid out for them by race, class and gender as categories of analysis. While these three structures certainly frame my opportunity structure, I as an individual always have the choice of accepting things as they are, or trying to change them. As Nikki Giovanni points out, “we’ve got to live in the real world. If we don’t like the world we’re living in, change it. And if we can’t change it, we change ourselves. We can do something” (Tate 1983, 68). While a piece of the oppressor may be planted deep within each of us, we each have the choice of accepting that piece or challenging it as part of the “true focus of revolutionary change.”

Since I opened with the words of Audre Lorde, it seems appropriate to close with another of her ideas...
Each of us is called upon to take a stand. So in these
days ahead, as we examine ourselves and each other,
our works, our fears, our differences, our sisterhood
and survivals, I urge you to tackle what is most diffi-
cult for us all, self-scrutiny of our complacencies, the
idea that since each of us believes she is on the side
of right, she need not examine her position. (1985)

I urge you to examine your position.

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Introduction to Reading 8

In this article, Karen Pyke and Denise Johnson use both the social construction of gender and
intersectional analysis to examine the experiences of second-generation Asian American
women. They interviewed 100 daughters of Korean American (KA) and Vietnamese American
(VA) immigrants to better understand how gender, ethnicity, and culture influenced the meaning
respondents gave to their experiences. By living in two worlds, the Asian American women were
acutely aware of the social construction of gender within culture, as they had to move between
two cultural constructions of femininity. Thus, ethnicity and gender interact in ways that made
the women conscious of their decision to “do gender” based upon the culturally defined, situ-
atutional expectations for femininity.

1. Using this article as an example, explain what it means to “do gender.”

2. Why don’t these women just be “who they are” across situations?

3. How do these women’s struggles between cultural definitions of femininity reinforce,
and make dominant, White femininity?
The study of gender in recent years has been largely guided by two orienting approaches: (1) a social constructionist emphasis on the day-to-day production or doing of gender (Coltrane 1989; West and Zimmerman 1987), and (2) attention to the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender (Espiritu 1997; Hill Collins 2000). Despite the prominence of these approaches, little empirical work has been done that integrates the doing of gender with the study of race. A contributing factor is the more expansive incorporation of social constructionism in the study of gender than in race scholarship where biological markers are still given importance despite widespread acknowledgment that racial oppression is rooted in social arrangements and not biology (Glenn 1999). In addition, attempts to theoretically integrate the doing of gender, race, and class around the concept of “doing difference” (West and Fenstermaker 1995) tended to downplay historical macro-structures of power and domination and to privilege gender over race and class (Hill Collins et al. 1995). Work is still needed that integrates systems of oppression in a social constructionist framework without granting primacy to any one form of inequality or ignoring larger structures of domination.

The integration of gender and race within a social constructionist approach directs attention to issues that have been overlooked. Little research has examined how racially and ethnically subordinated women, especially Asian American women, mediate cross-pressures in the production of femininity as they move between mainstream and ethnic arenas, such as family, work, and school, and whether distinct and even contradictory gender displays and strategies are enacted across different arenas. Many, if not most, individuals move in social worlds that do not require dramatic inversions of their gender performances, thereby enabling them to maintain stable and seemingly unified gender strategies. However, members of communities that are racially and ethnically marginalized and who regularly traverse interactional arenas with conflicting gender expectations might engage different gender performances depending on the local context in which they are interacting. Examining the ways that such individuals mediate conflicting expectations would address several unanswered questions. Do marginalized women shift their gender performances across mainstream and subcultural settings in response to different gender norms? If so, how do they experience and negotiate such transitions? What meaning do they assign to the different forms of femininities that they engage across settings? Do racially subordinated women experience their production of femininity as inferior to those forms engaged by privileged white women and glorified in the dominant culture?

We address these issues by examining how second-generation Asian American women experience and think about the shifting dynamics involved in the doing of femininity in Asian ethnic and mainstream cultural worlds. We look specifically at their assumptions about gender dynamics in the Euro-centric mainstream and Asian ethnic social settings, the way they think about their gendered selves, and their strategies in doing gender. Our analysis draws on and elaborates the theoretical

literature concerning the construction of femininities across race, paying particular attention to how controlling images and ideologies shape the subjective experiences of women of color. This is the first study to our knowledge that examines how intersecting racial and gender hierarchies affect the everyday construction of gender among Asian American women.

**Constructing Femininities**

Current theorizing emphasizes gender as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than an innate and stable attribute (Lorber 1994; Lucal 1999; West and Zimmerman 1987). Informed by symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, gender is regarded as something people do in social interaction. Gender is manufactured out of the fabric of culture and social structure and has little, if any, causal relationship to biology (Kessler and McKenna 1978; Lorber 1994). Gender displays are “culturally established sets of behaviors, appearances, mannerisms, and other cues that we have learned to associate with members of a particular gender” (Lucal 1999, 784). These displays “cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 126). The doing of gender involves its display as a seemingly innate component of an individual.

The social construction of gender provides a theoretical backdrop for notions of multiple masculinities put forth in the masculinities literature (Coltrane 1994; Connell 1987, 1995; Pyke 1996). We draw on this notion in conceptualizing a plurality of femininities in the social production of women. According to this work, gender is not a unitary process. Rather, it is splintered by overlapping layers of inequality into multiple forms of masculinities (and femininities) that are both internally and externally relational and hierarchical. The concepts of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities are a major contribution of this literature.

The concept of femininities has served mostly as a placeholder in the theory of masculinities where it remains undertheorized and unexamined. Connell (1987, 1995) has written extensively about hegemonic masculinity but offers only a fleeting discussion of the role of femininities. He suggested that the traits of femininity in a patriarchal society are tremendously diverse, with no one form emerging as hegemonic. Hegemonic masculinity is centered on men’s global domination of women, and because there is no configuration of femininity organized around women’s domination of men, Connell (1987, 183) suggested the notion of a hegemonic femininity is inappropriate. He further argued that women have few opportunities for institutionalized power relations over other women. However, this discounts how other axes of domination, such as race, class, sexuality, and age, mold a hegemonic femininity that is venerated and extolled in the dominant culture, and that emphasizes the superiority of some women over others, thereby privileging white upper-class women. To conceptualize forms of femininities that are subordinated as “problematic” and “abnormal,” it is necessary to refer to an oppositional category of femininity that is dominant, ascendant, and “normal” (Glenn 1999, 10). We use the notion of hegemonic and subordinated femininities in framing our analysis.

Ideas of hegemonic and subordinated femininities resonate in the work of feminist scholars of color who emphasize the multiplicity of women’s experiences. Much of this research has focused on racial and class variations in the material and (re)productive conditions of women’s lives. More recently, scholarship that draws on cultural studies, race and ethnic studies, and women’s studies centers the cultural as well as material processes by which gender and race are constructed, although this work has been mostly theoretical (Espiritu 1997; Hill Collins 2000; St. Jean and Feagin 1998). Hill Collins (2000) discussed “controlling images” that denigrate and objectify women of color and justify their racial and gender subordination. Controlling images are part of the process of “othering,” whereby a dominant group defines into existence a subordinate group through the creation of
categories and ideas that mark the group as inferior (Schwalbe et al. 2000, 422). Controlling images reaffirm whiteness as normal and privilege white women by casting them as superior.

White society uses the image of the Black matriarch to objectify Black women as overly aggressive, domineering, and unfeminine. This imagery serves to blame Black women for the emasculation of Black men, low marriage rates, and poverty and to control their social behavior by undermining their assertiveness (Hill Collins 2000). While Black women are masculinized as aggressive and overpowering, Asian women are rendered hyperfeminine: passive, weak, quiet, excessively submissive, slavishly dutiful, sexually exotic, and available for white men (Espiritu 1997; Tajima 1989). This Lotus Blossom imagery obscures the internal variation of Asian American femininity and sexuality, making it difficult, for example, for others to “see” Asian lesbians and bisexuals (Lee 1996). Controlling images of Asian women also make them especially vulnerable to mistreatment from men who view them as easy targets. By casting Black women as not feminine enough and Asian women as too feminine, white forms of gender are racialized as normal and superior. In this way, white women are accorded racial privilege.

The dominant culture’s dissemination of controlling imagery that derogates nonwhite forms of femininity (and masculinity) is part of a complex ideological system of “psychosocial dominance” (Baker 1983, 37) that imposes elite definitions of subordinates, denying them the power of self-identification. In this way, subordinates internalize “commonsense” notions of their inferiority to whites (Espiritu 1997; Hill Collins 2000). Once internalized, controlling images provide the template by which subordinates make meaning of their everyday lives (Pyke 2000), develop a sense of self, form racial and gender identities, and organize social relations (Osajima 1993; Pyke and Dang in press). For example, Chen (1998) found that Asian American women who joined predominately white sororities often did so to distance themselves from images of Asian femininity.

In contrast, those who joined Asian sororities were often surprised to find their ideas of Asian women as passive and childlike challenged by the assertive, independent women they met. By internalizing the racial and gendered myth making that circumscribes their social existence, subordinates do not pose a threat to the dominant order. As Audre Lorde (1984, 123) described, “the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within us.”

Hegemonies are rarely without sites of resistance (Espiritu 2001; Gramsci 1971; Hill Collins 2000). Espiritu (1997) described Asian American writers and filmmakers whose portraits of Asians defy the gender caricatures disseminated in the white-dominated society. However, such images are often forged around the contours of the one-dimensional stereotypes against which the struggle emerges. Thus, controlling images penetrate all aspects of the experience of subordinates, whether in a relationship of compliance or in one of resistance (Osajima 1993; Pyke and Dang in press).

The work concerning the effects of controlling images and the relational construction of subordinated and hegemonic femininities has mostly been theoretical. The little research that has examined how Asian American women do gender in the context of racialized images and ideologies that construct their gender as “naturally” inferior to white femininity provides only a brief look at these issues (Chen 1998; Lee 1996). Many of the Asian American women whom we study here do not construct their gender in one cultural field but are constantly moving between sites that are guided by ethnic immigrant cultural norms and those of the Eurocentric mainstream. A comparison of how gender is enacted and understood across such sites brings the construction of racialized gender and the dynamics of hegemonic and subordinated femininities into bold relief. We examine how respondents employ cultural symbols, controlling images, and gender and racial ideologies in giving meanings to their experiences.
Gender in Ethnic and Mainstream Cultural Worlds

We study Korean and Vietnamese Americans, who form two of the largest Asian ethnic groups in southern California, the site of this research. We focus on the daughters of immigrants as they are more involved in both ethnic and mainstream cultures than are members of the first generation. The second generation, who are still mostly children and young adults, must juggle the cross-pressures of ethnic and mainstream cultures without the groundwork that a longstanding ethnic enclave might provide. This is not easy. Disparities between ethnic and mainstream worlds can generate substantial conflict for children of immigrants, including conflict around issues of gender (Kibria 1993; Zhou and Bankston 1998).

Respondents dichotomized the interactional settings they occupy as ethnic, involving their immigrant family and other coethnics, and mainstream, involving non-Asian Americans in peer groups and at work and school. They grew up juggling different cultural expectations as they moved from home to school and often felt a pressure to behave differently when among Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans. Although there is no set of monolithic, stable norms in either setting, there are certain pressures, expectations, and structural arrangements that can affect different gender displays (Lee 1996). Definitions of gender and the constraints that patriarchy imposes on women’s gender production can vary from culture to culture. The Confucian moral code, which accords male superiority, authority, and power over women in family and social relations, has influenced the patriarchal systems of Korea and Vietnam (Kibria 1993; Min 1998). Women are granted little decision-making power and are not accorded an individual identity apart from their family role, which emphasizes their service to male members. A woman who violates her role brings shame to herself and her family. Despite Western observers’ tendency to regard Asian families as uniformly and rigidly patriarchal, variations exist (Ishii-Kuntz 2000). Women’s resistance strategies, like the exchange of information in informal social groups, provide pockets of power (Kibria 1990). Women’s growing educational and economic opportunities and the rise of women’s rights groups in Korea and Vietnam challenge gender inequality (Palley 1994). Thus, actual gender dynamics are not in strict compliance with the prescribed moral code.

As they immigrate to the United States, Koreans and Vietnamese experience a shift in gender arrangements centering on men’s loss of economic power and increased dependency on their wives’ wages (Kibria 1993; Lim 1997; Min 1998). Immigrant women find their labor in demand by employers who regard them as a cheap labor source. With their employment, immigrant women experience more decision-making power, autonomy, and assistance with domestic chores from their husbands. However, such shifts are not total, and male dominance remains a common feature of family life (Kibria 1993; Min 1998). Furthermore, immigrant women tend to stay committed to the ethnic patriarchal structure as it provides resources for maintaining their parental authority and resisting the economic insecurities, racism, and cultural impositions of the new society (Kibria 1990, 1993; Lim 1997). The gender hierarchy is evident in parenting practices. Daughters are typically required to be home and performing household chores when not in school, while sons are given greater freedom.

Native-born American women, on the other hand, are perceived as having more equality, power, and independence than women in Asian societies, reflecting differences in gender attitudes. A recent study of Korean and American women found that 82 percent of Korean women agreed that “women should have only a family-oriented life, devoted to bringing up the children and looking after the husband,” compared to 19 percent of U.S. women (Kim 1994). However, the fit between egalitarian gender attitudes and actual behavior in the United States is rather poor. Patriarchal arrangements that accord higher status to men at home and work are still the norm, with women experiencing lower job
status and pay, greater responsibility for family work even when employed, and high rates of male violence. Indeed, the belief that gender equality is the norm in U.S. society obscures the day-to-day materiality of American patriarchy. Despite cultural differences in the ideological justification of patriarchy, gender inequality is the reality in both Asian and mainstream cultural worlds.

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**Gender Across Cultural Terrains: “I’m Like a Chameleon, I Change My Personality”**

The 44 respondents who were aware of modifying their gender displays or being treated differently across cultural settings framed their accounts in terms of an oppressive ethnic world and an egalitarian mainstream. They reaffirmed the ideological constructions of the white-dominated society by casting ethnic and mainstream worlds as monolithic opposites, with internal variations largely ignored. Controlling images that denigrate Asian femininity and glorify white femininity were reiterated in many of the narratives. Women’s behavior in ethnic realms was described as submissive and controlled, and that in white-dominated settings as freer and more self-expressive.

Some respondents suggested they made complete personality reversals as they moved across realms. They used the behavior of the mainstream as the standard by which they judged their behavior in ethnic settings. As Elizabeth (19, VA) said,

> I feel like when I’m amongst other Asians... I’m much more reserved and I hold back what I think. But when I’m among other people like at school, I’m much more outspoken. I’ll say whatever’s on my mind. It’s like a diametric character altogether... I feel like when I’m with other Asians that I’m the *typical* passive [Asian] person and I feel like that’s what’s expected of me and if I do say something and if I’m the *normal* person that I am, I’d stick out like a sore thumb. So I just blend in with the situation. (emphasis added)

Elizabeth juxtaposes the “typical passive [Asian] person” and the “normal,” outspoken person of the mainstream culture, whom she claims to be. In so doing, she reaffirms the stereotypical image of Asians as passive while glorifying Americanized behavior, such as verbal expressiveness, as “normal.” This implies that Asian ethnic behavior is aberrant and inferior compared to white behavior, which is rendered normal. This juxtaposition was a recurring theme in these data (Pyke 2000). It contributed to respondents’ attempts to distance themselves from racialized notions of the typical Asian woman who is hyperfeminine and submissive by claiming to possess those traits associated with white femininity, such as assertiveness, self-possession, confidence, and independence. Respondents often described a pressure to blend in and conform with the form of gender that they felt was expected in ethnic settings and that conflicted with the white standard of femininity. Thus, they often described such behavior with disgust and self-loathing. For example, Min-Jung (24, KA) said she feels “like an idiot” when talking with Korean adults:

> With Korean adults, I act more shy and more timid. I don’t talk until spoken to and just act shy. I kind of speak in a higher tone of voice than I usually do. But then when I’m with white people and white adults, I joke around, I laugh, I talk, and I communicate about how I feel. And then my voice gets stronger. But then when I’m with Korean adults, my voice gets really high. ... I just sound like an idiot and sometimes when I catch myself I’m like, “Why can’t you just make conversation like you normally do?”

Many respondents distanced themselves from the compliant femininity associated with their Asianness by casting their behavior in ethnic realms as a mere act not reflective of their true nature. Repeatedly, they said they cannot be who they really are in ethnic settings and the enactment
of an authentic self takes place only in mainstream settings.

Wilma (21, VA) states, “Like some Asian guys expect me to be passive and let them decide on everything. Non-Asians don’t expect anything from me. They just expect me to be me” (emphasis added). Gendered behavior engaged in Asian ethnic settings was largely described as performative, fake, and unnatural, while that in white-dominated settings was cast as a reflection of one’s true self. The femininity of the white mainstream is glorified as authentic, natural, and normal, and Asian ethnic femininity is denigrated as coerced, contrived, and artificial. The “white is right” mantra is reiterated in this view of white femininity as the right way of doing gender.

The glorification of white femininity and controlling images of Asian women can lead Asian American women to believe that freedom and equity can be acquired only in the white-dominated world. For not only is white behavior glorified as superior and more authentic, but gender relations among whites are constructed as more egalitarian.

Controlling images of Asian men as hypermasculine further feed presumptions that whites are more egalitarian. Asian males were often cast as uniformly domineering in these accounts. Racialized images and the construction of hegemonic (white) and subordinated (Asian) forms of gender set up a situation where Asian American women feel they must choose between white worlds of gender equity and Asian worlds of gender oppression. Such images encourage them to reject their ethnic culture and Asian men and embrace the white world and white men so as to enhance their power (Espiritu 1997).

In these accounts, we can see the construction of ethnic and mainstream cultural worlds—and Asians and whites—as diametrically opposed. The perception that whites are more egalitarian than Asian-origin individuals and thus preferred partners in social interaction further reinforces anti-Asian racism and white superiority. The cultural dominance of whiteness is reaffirmed through the co-construction of race and gender in these narratives. The perception that the production of gender in the mainstream is more authentic and superior to that in Asian ethnic arenas further reinforces the racialized categories of gender that define white forms of femininity as ascendant. In the next section, we describe variations in gender performances within ethnic and mainstream settings that respondents typically overlooked or discounted as atypical.

**Gender Variations Within Cultural Worlds**

Several respondents described variations in gender dynamics within mainstream and ethnic settings that challenge notions of Asian and American worlds as monolithic opposites. Some talked of mothers who make all the decisions or fathers who do the cooking. These accounts were framed as exceptions to Asian male dominance. For example, after Vietnamese women were described in a group interview as confined to domesticity, Ngâ (22, WA), who immigrated at 14 and spoke in Vietnamese-accented English, defined her family as gender egalitarian. She related,

I guess I grow[ic] up in a different family. All my sisters don’t have to cook, her husbands[ic] cooking all the time. Even my oldest sister. Even my mom—my dad is cooking... My sisters and brothers are all very strong. (emphasis added)

Ngâ does not try to challenge stereotypical notions of Vietnamese families but rather reinforces such notions by suggesting that her family is different. Similarly, Heidi (21, KA) said, “Our family was kind of different because... my dad cooks and cleans and does dishes. He cleans house” (emphasis added). Respondents often framed accounts of gender egalitarianism in their families by stating they do not belong to the typical Asian family, with “typical” understood to mean male dominated. This variation in gender dynamics within the ethnic community was largely unconsidered in these accounts.

Other respondents described how they enacted widely disparate forms of gender across sites
within ethnic realms, suggesting that gender behavior is more variable than generally framed. Take, for example, the case of Gin (29, KA), a law student married to a Korean American from a more traditional family than her own. When she is with her husband’s kin, Gin assumes the traditional obligations of a daughter-in-law and does all the cooking, cleaning, and serving. The role exhausts her and she resents having to perform it. When Gin and her husband return home, the gender hierarchy is reversed.

Controlling images of Asian men as hyperdomineering in their relations with women obscures how they can be called on to compensate for the subservience exacted from their female partners in some settings. Although respondents typically offered such stories as evidence of the patriarchy of ethnic arenas, these examples reveal that ethnic worlds are far more variable than generally described. Viewing Asian ethnic worlds through a lens of racialized gender stereotypes renders such variation invisible or, when acknowledged, atypical.

Gender expectations in the white-dominated mainstream also varied, with respondents sometimes expected to assume a subservient stance as Asian women. These examples reveal that the mainstream is not a site of unwavering gender equality as often depicted in these accounts and made less so for Asian American women by racial images that construct them as compliant. Many respondents described encounters with non-Asians, usually whites, who expected them to be passive, quiet, and yielding. Several described non-Asian (mostly white) men who brought such expectations to their dating relationships. Indeed, the servile Lotus Blossom image bolsters white men’s preference for Asian women (Espiritu 1997). As Thanh (22, VA) recounted,

Like the white guy that I dated, he expected me to be the submissive one—the one that was dependent on him. Kind of like the “Asian persuasion,” that’s what he’d call it when he was dating me. And when he found out that I had a spirit, kind of a wild side to me, he didn’t like it at all. Period. And when I spoke up—my opinions—he got kind of scared.

So racialized images can cause Asian American women to believe they will find greater gender equality with white men and can cause white men to believe they will find greater subservience with Asian women. This dynamic promotes Asian American women’s availability to white men and makes them particularly vulnerable to mistreatment.

There were other sites in the mainstream, besides dating relationships, where Asian American women encountered racialized gender expectations. Several described white employers and coworkers who expected them to be more passive and deferential than other employees and were surprised when they spoke up and resisted unfair treatment. Some described similar assumptions among non-Asian teachers and professors. Diane (26, KA) related,

At first one of my teachers told me it was okay if I didn’t want to talk in front of the class. I think she thought I was quiet or shy because I’m Asian... [Laughing.] I am very outspoken, but that semester I just kept my mouth shut. I figured she won’t make me talk anyway, so why try. I kind of went along with her.

Diane’s example illustrates how racialized expectations can exert a pressure to display stereotyped behavior in mainstream interactions. Such expectations can subtly coerce behavioral displays that confirm the stereotypes, suggesting a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Furthermore, as submissiveness and passivity are denigrated traits in the mainstream, and often judged to be indicators of incompetence, compliance with such expectations can deny Asian American women personal opportunities and success. Not only is passivity unrewarded in the mainstream; it is also subordinated. The association of extreme passivity with Asian women serves to emphasize their otherness. Some respondents resist this subordination by enacting a more assertive femininity associated with whiteness. Lisa (18, KA) described being quiet with her relatives out of respect, but in mainstream scenes, she consciously resists
the stereotype of Asian women as passive by adjusting her behavior. . . .

To act Asian by being reserved and quiet would be to “stand out in a negative way” and to be regarded as “not cool.” It means one will be denigrated and cast aside. Katie consciously engages loud and gregarious behavior to prove she is not the typical Asian and to be welcomed by white friends. Whereas many respondents describe their behavior in mainstream settings as an authentic reflection of their personality, these examples suggest otherwise. Racial expectations exert pressure on these women’s gender performances among whites. Some go to great lengths to defy racial assumptions and be accepted into white-dominated social groups by engaging a white standard of femininity. As they are forced to work against racial stereotypes, they must exert extra effort at being outspoken and socially gregarious. Contrary to the claim of respondents, gender production in the mainstream is also coerced and contrived. The failure of some respondents to recognize variations in gender behavior within mainstream and ethnic settings probably has much to do with the essentialization of gender and race. That is, as we discuss next, the racialization of gender renders variations in behavior within racial groups invisible.

The Racialization of Gender: Believing Is Seeing

In this section, we discuss how respondents differentiate femininity by race rather than shifting situational contexts, even when they were consciously aware of altering their own gender performance to conform with shifting expectations. Racialized gender was discursively constructed as natural and essential. Gender and race were essentialized as interrelated biological facts that determine social behavior.

Among our 100 respondents, there was a tendency to rely on binary categories of American (code for white) and Asian femininity in describing a wide range of topics, including gender identities, personality traits, and orientations toward domesticity or career. Racialized gender categories were deployed as an interpretive template in giving meaning to experiences and organizing a worldview. Internal variation was again ignored, downplayed, or regarded as exceptional. White femininity, which was glorified in accounts of gender behavior across cultural settings, was also accorded superiority in the more general discussions of gender.

Respondents’ narratives were structured by assumptions about Asian women as submissive, quiet, and diffident and of American women as independent, self-assured, outspoken, and powerful. That is, specific behaviors and traits were racialized. As Ha (19, VA) explained, “sometimes I’m quiet and passive and shy. That’s a Vietnamese part of me.” Similarly, domesticity was linked with Asian femininity and domestic incompetence or disinterest, along with success in the work world, with American femininity. Several women framed their internal struggles between career and domesticity in racialized terms. Min-Jung said,

I kind of think my Korean side wants to stay home and do the cooking and cleaning and take care of the kids whereas my American side would want to go out and make a difference and become a strong woman and become head of companies and stuff like that.

This racialized dichotomy was central to respondents’ self-identities. Amy (21, VA) said, “I’m not Vietnamese in the way I act. I’m American because I’m not a good cook and I’m not totally ladylike.” In fact, one’s ethnic identity could be challenged if one did not comply with notions of racialized gender. In a group interview, Kimberly (21, VA) described “joking around” with coethnic dates who asked if she cooked by responding that she did not. . . . Similarly, coethnic friends tell Hien (21, VA), “You should be able to cook, you are Vietnamese, you are a girl.” To be submissive and oriented toward family and domesticity marks Asian ethnicity. Conformity to stereotypes of Asian femininity serves to symbolically construct and affirm an Asian ethnic identity. Herein lies the pressure
that some respondents feel to comply with racialized expectations in ethnic settings, as Lisa (18, KA) illustrates in explaining why she would feel uncomfortable speaking up in a class that has a lot of Asians:

I think they would think that I’m not really Asian. Like I’m whitewashed . . . like I’m forgetting my race. I’m going against my roots and adapting to the American way. And I’m just neglecting my race.

American (white) women and Asian American women are constructed as diametric opposites. Although many respondents were aware that they contradicted racialized notions of gender in their day-to-day lives, they nonetheless view gender as an essential component of race. Variation is ignored or recategorized so that an Asian American woman who does not comply is no longer Asian. This was also evident among respondents who regard themselves as egalitarian or engage the behavioral traits associated with white femininity. There was the presumption that one cannot be Asian and have gender-egalitarian attitudes. Asian American women can engage those traits associated with ascendant femininity to enhance their status in the mainstream, but this requires a rejection of their racial/ethnic identity. This is evident by the use of words such as “American,” “whitewashed,” or “white”—but not Asian—to describe such women. Star (22, KA) explained, “I look Korean but I don’t act Korean. I’m whitewashed. [Interviewer asks, ‘How do you mean you don’t act Korean?’] I’m loud. I’m not quiet and reserved.”

As a result, struggles about gender identity and women’s work/family trajectories become superimposed over racial/ethnic identity. The question is not simply whether Asian American women like Min-Jung want to be outspoken and career oriented or quiet and family oriented but whether they want to be American (whitewashed) or Asian. Those who do not conform to racialized expectations risk challenges to their racial identity and charges that they are not really Asian, as occurs with Lisa when she interacts with her non-Asian peers. She said,

They think I’m really different from other Asian girls because I’m so outgoing. They feel that Asian girls have to be the shy type who is very passive and sometimes I’m not like that so they think, “Lisa, are you Asian?”

These data illustrate how the line drawn in the struggle for gender equality is superimposed over the cultural and racial boundaries dividing whites and Asians. At play is the presumption that the only path to gender equality and assertive womanhood is via assimilation to the white mainstream. This assumption was shared by Asian American research assistants who referred to respondents’ gender egalitarian viewpoints as evidence of assimilation. The assumption is that Asian American women can be advocates of gender equality or strong and assertive in their interactions only as a result of assimilation, evident by the display of traits associated with hegemonic femininity, and a rejection of their ethnic culture and identity. This construction obscures gender inequality in mainstream U.S. society and constructs that sphere as the only place where Asian American women can be free. Hence, the diversity of gender arrangements practiced among those of Asian origin, as well as the potential for social change within Asian cultures, is ignored. Indeed, there were no references in these accounts to the rise in recent years of women’s movements in Korea and Vietnam. Rather, Asian ethnic worlds are regarded as unchanging sites of male dominance and female submissiveness.

**Discussion and Summary**

Our analysis reveals dynamics of internalized oppression and the reproduction of inequality that revolve around the relational construction of hegemonic and subordinated femininities. Respondents’ descriptions of gender performances in ethnic settings were marked by self-disgust and referred to as a mere act not reflective of one’s true gendered nature. In mainstream settings, on the other hand, respondents often felt a
pressure to comply with caricatured notions of Asian femininity or, conversely, to distance one’s self from derogatory images of Asian femininity to be accepted. In both cases, the subordination of Asian femininity is reproduced.

In general, respondents depicted women of Asian descent as uniformly engaged in subordinated femininity marked by submissiveness and white women as universally assertive and gender egalitarian. Race, rather than culture, situational dynamics, or individual personalities, emerged as the primary basis by which respondents gave meaning to variations in femininity. That is, despite their own situational variation in doing gender, they treat gender as a racialized feature of bodies rather than a sociocultural product. Specific gender displays, such as a submissive demeanor, are required to confirm an Asian identity. Several respondents face challenges to their ethnic identity when they behave in ways that do not conform with racialized images. Indeed, some claimed that because they are assertive or career oriented, they are not really Asian. That is, because they do not conform to the racialized stereotypes of Asian women but identify with a hegemonic femininity that is the white standard, they are different from other women of Asian origin. In this way, they manipulate the racialized categories of gender in attempting to craft identities that are empowering. However, this is accomplished by denying their ethnicity and connections to other Asian American women and through the adoption and replication of controlling images of Asian women.

Respondents who claim that they are not really Asian because they do not conform with essentialized notions of Asian femininity suggest similarities to transgressed individuals who feel that underneath, they really belong to the gender category that is opposite from the one to which they are assigned. The notion that deep down they are really white implies a kind of transracialized gender identity. In claiming that they are not innately Asian, they reaffirm racialized categories of gender just as transgressed individuals reaffirm the gender dichotomy (Kessler and McKenna 1978; Lorber 1994).

However, there are limitations to notions of a transracialized identity as racial barriers do not permit these women to socially pass into the white world, even though they might feel themselves to be more white than Asian. Due to such barriers, they use terms that are suggestive of a racial crossover, such as “whitewashed” or “American” rather than “white” in describing themselves. Such terms are frequently used among Asian Americans to describe those who are regarded as assimilated to the white world and no longer ethnic, further underscoring how racial categories are essentialized (Pyke and Dang in press). Blocked from a white identity, these terms capture a marginalized space that is neither truly white nor Asian. As racial categories are dynamic, it remains to be seen whether these marginalized identities are the site for new identities marked by hybridity (Lowe 1991) or whether Asian Americans will eventually be incorporated into whiteness. This process may be hastened by outmarriage to whites and high rates of biracial Asian Americans who can more easily pass into the white world, thereby leading the way for other Asian Americans. While we cannot ascertain the direction of such changes, our data highlight the contradictions that strain the existing racial and gender order as it applies to second-generation Asian American women.

While respondents construct a world in which Asian American women can experience a kind of transracial gender identity, they do not consider the same possibility for women of other races. A white woman who is submissive does not become Asian. In fact, there was no reference in these accounts to submissive white women who are rendered invisible by racialized categories of gender. Instead, white women are constructed as monolithically self-confident, independent, assertive, and successful—characteristics of white hegemonic femininity. That these are the same ruling traits associated with hegemonic masculinity, albeit in a less exaggerated, feminine form, underscores the imitative structure of hegemonic femininity. That is, the supremacy of white femininity over Asian femininity mimics hegemonic masculinity. We are not arguing that
hegemonic femininity and masculinity are equivalent structures. They are not. Whereas hegemonic masculinity is a superstructure of domination, hegemonic femininity is confined to power relations among women. However, the two structures are interrelated with hegemonic femininity constructed to serve hegemonic masculinity, from which it is granted legitimacy.

Our findings illustrate the powerful interplay of controlling images and hegemonic femininity in promoting internalized oppression. Respondents draw on racial images and assumptions in their narrative construction of Asian cultures as innately oppressive of women and fully resistant to change against which the white-dominated mainstream is framed as a paradigm of gender equality. This serves a proassimilation function by suggesting that Asian American women will find gender equality in exchange for rejecting their ethnicity and adopting white standards of gender. The construction of a hegemonic femininity not only (re)creates a hierarchy that privileges white women over Asian American women but also makes Asian American women available for white men. In this way, hegemonic femininity serves as a handmaiden to hegemonic masculinity.

By constructing ethnic culture as impervious to social change and as a site where resistance to gender oppression is impossible, our respondents accommodate and reinforce rather than resist the gender hierarchal arrangements of such locales. This can contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy as Asian American women who hold gender egalitarian views feel compelled to retreat from interactions in ethnic settings, thus (re)creating Asian ethnic cultures as strongholds of patriarchy and reinforcing the maintenance of a rigid gender hierarchy as a primary mechanism by which ethnicity and ethnic identity are constructed. This marking of ethnic culture as a symbolic repository of patriarchy obscures variations in ethnic gender practices as well as the gender inequality in the mainstream. Thus, compliance with the dominant order is secured.

Our study attempts to bring a racialized examination of gender to a constructionist framework without decentering either race or gender. By examining the racialized meaning systems that inform the construction of gender, our findings illustrate how the resistance of gender oppression among our respondents draws ideologically on the denigration and rejection of ethnic Asian culture, thereby reinforcing white dominance. Conversely, we found that mechanisms used to construct ethnic identity in resistance to the proassimilation forces of the white-dominated mainstream rest on narrow definitions of Asian women that emphasize gender subordination. These findings underscore the crosscutting ways that gender and racial oppression operates such that strategies and ideologies focused on the resistance of one form of domination can reproduce another form. A social constructionist approach that examines the simultaneous production of gender and race within the matrix of oppression, and considers the relational construction of hegemonic and subordinated femininities, holds much promise in uncovering the micro-level structures and complicated features of oppression, including the processes by which oppression infiltrates the meanings individuals give to their experiences.

References


Collins, Patricia Hill, Lionel A. Maldonado, Dana Y. Takagi, Barrie Thorne, Lynn Weber, and Howard.


Introduction to Reading 9

In this reading, Leslie McCall describes the “complexity” of studying intersectionality. She discusses three ways of defining categories of difference and inequality. In this short excerpt from a much larger article, we focus on her discussion of using quantitative analyses to examine what she describes as “intercategorical complexity.” McCall recognizes inherent problems in using categories of difference and inequality such as “sex” and “race,” but also argues that such categorization can develop a deeper understanding of intersectionality. McCall uses her own research to illustrate how quantitative methods can help us to explore the complexities of intersections across categories of difference and inequality.

1. How does McCall differentiate the three approaches for defining complexity when studying intersectionality?
2. Why does the way we define categories affect the methods we use to study intersectionality?
3. Do you think that her study of inequality by race, class, and gender in the four U.S. cities adequately addresses the complexity of intersectionality?
Since critics first alleged that feminism claimed to speak universally for all women, feminist researchers have been acutely aware of the limitations of gender as a single analytical category. In fact, feminists are perhaps alone in the academy in the extent to which they have embraced intersectionality—the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations—as itself a central category of analysis. One could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far.

Yet despite the emergence of intersectionality as a major paradigm of research in women’s studies and elsewhere, there has been little discussion of how to study intersectionality, that is, of its methodology. This would not be worrisome if studies of intersectionality were already wide ranging in terms of methodology or if the methodological issues were fairly straightforward and consistent with past practice. I suggest, however, that intersectionality has introduced new methodological problems and, partly as an unintended consequence, has limited the range of methodological approaches used to study intersectionality. Further, both developments can be traced to what arguably has been a defining characteristic of research in this area: the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis. In a nutshell, research practice mirrors the complexity of social life, calling up unique methodological demands. Such demands are challenging, as anyone who has undertaken the study of intersectionality can attest. Not surprisingly, researchers favor methodologies that more naturally lend themselves to the study of complexity and reject methodologies that are considered too simplistic or reductionist. This in turn restricts the scope of knowledge that can be produced on intersectionality, assuming that different methodologies produce different kinds of knowledge. Note that this is equally a problem outside and inside women’s studies, though I mainly address the field of women’s studies here in order to simplify the argument.

But are these assumptions about the capacity of different methodologies to handle complexity warranted? Scholars have not left a clear record on which to base a reply to this question. Feminists have written widely on methodology but have either tended to focus on a particular methodology (e.g., ethnography, deconstruction, genealogy, ethnomethodology) or have failed to pinpoint the particular issue of complexity. Although it is impossible to be exhaustive, my intention is to delineate a wide range of methodological approaches to the study of multiple, intersecting, and complex social relations and to clarify and critically engage certain features of the most common approaches. In total, I describe three approaches. All three attempt to satisfy the demand for complexity and, as a result, face the need to manage complexity, if for no other reason than to attain intelligibility. . . .

The three approaches, in brief, are defined principally in terms of their stance toward categories, that is, how they understand and use analytical categories to explore the complexity of intersectionality in social life. The first approach is called ant categorical complexity because it is
based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories. Social life is considered too irreducibly complex—overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures—to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences. Of the three approaches, this approach appears to have been the most successful in satisfying the demand for complexity, judging by the fact that there is now great skepticism about the possibility of using categories in anything but a simplistic way. The association of the anticategorical approach with the kind of complexity introduced by studies of intersectionality may have also resulted from the tendency to conflate this approach with the second one, which I will discuss momentarily, despite the fact that the two have distinct methodologies, origins, and implications for research on intersectionality.

Jumping to the other end of the continuum next, the third approach is neither widely known nor widely used, making its introduction a key purpose of this article. This approach, *intercategorical complexity*, requires that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions. I describe my own research methodology as an example of the intercategorical approach.

Finally, although the approach I call *intracategorical complexity* inaugurated the study of intersectionality, I discuss it as the second approach because it falls conceptually in the middle of the continuum between the first approach, which rejects categories, and the third approach, which uses them strategically. Like the first approach, it interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself, though that is not its raison d’être. Like the third approach, it acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, though it also maintains a critical stance toward categories. This approach is called *intracategorical complexity* because authors working in this vein tend to focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection—“people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups” (Dill 2002, 5)—in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups.

### Intercategorical Complexity

The intercategorical approach (also referred to as the *categorical approach*) begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of analysis. The main task of the categorical approach is to explicate those relationships, and doing so requires the provisional use of categories. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn writes, in advocating for a greater emphasis on relationality in studies of intersectionality, scholars can treat race and gender categories as “‘anchor’ points—though these points are not static” (2002, 14). The concern is with the nature of the relationships among social groups and, importantly, how they are changing, rather than with the definition or representation of such groups per se, though some scholars like Glenn (2002) engage in both practices to great effect. Finally, the type of categorical approach I am developing here goes further in exploring whether meaningful inequalities among groups even exist in the first place. Perhaps inequalities were once large but now they are small, or in one place they are large but in another they are small. This perspective leaves open the possibility that broad social groupings more or less reflect the empirical realities of more detailed social groupings, thus minimizing the extent of complexity.

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1. I want to be clear, however, that both relational and representational forms of inquiry have empirical aspects, so that is not the relevant distinction. Changes in representation can be documented in empirical terms just as well as changes in relationships of inequality can be.
groups within and across analytical categories and not on complexities within single social groups, single categories, or both. The subject is multigroup, and the method is systematically comparative. What is the source of complexity in such designs? The categorial space can become very complicated with the addition of any one analytical category to the analysis because it requires an investigation of the multiple groups that constitute the category. For example, the incorporation of gender as an analytical category into such an analysis assumes that two groups will be compared systematically—men and women. If the category of class is incorporated, then gender must be crossclassified with class, which is composed (for simplicity) of three categories (working, middle, and upper), thus creating six groups. If race-ethnicity is incorporated into the analysis, and it consists of only two groups, then the number of groups expands to twelve. And this example makes use of only the most simplistic definitions. If researchers want to examine more detailed ethnic groups within racial groups—say, Cubans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans within the broader category of Latino/as—it becomes necessary to limit other dimensions of the analysis, such as the gender or class dimensions, for the sake of comprehension. In this respect, intercategorical researchers face some of the same trade-offs between scale and coherence or difference and sameness that intracategorical researchers face in determining the appropriate level of detail for their studies.

Unlike single-group studies, which analyze the intersection of a subset of dimensions of multiple categories, however, multigroup studies analyze the intersection of the full set of dimensions of multiple categories and thus examine both advantage and disadvantage explicitly and simultaneously. It is not the intersection of race, class, and gender in a single social group that is of interest but the relationships among the social groups defined by the entire set of groups constituting each category. The categorical approach formally compares—say, in terms of income or education—each of the groups constituting a category: men and women, blacks and whites, working and middle classes, and so on. Moreover, the categorial approach takes as its point of departure that these categories form more detailed social groups: white women and black women, working and middle-class men, and so on.

The comparative and multigroup characteristics of such designs create a form of complexity that differs significantly from the anticategorical and intracategorical forms. Complexity is managed in comparative, multigroup studies of this kind by what at first appears to be a reductionist process—reducing the analysis to one or two between-group relationships at a time—but what in the end is a synthetic and holistic process that brings the various pieces of the analysis together. Whereas the intracategorical approach begins with a unified intersectional core—a single social group, event, or concept—and works its way outward to analytically unravel one by one the influences of gender, race, class, and so on, the categorial approach begins with an analysis of the elements first because each of these is a sizable project in its own right.

In fact, the size and significance of each element is perhaps why current quantitative social scientific research is divided, regrettably, into separate specialties on gender, race, and class, with little overlap among them. It is also why it is nearly impossible to publish grandly intersectional studies in top peer-reviewed journals using the categorial approach: the size and complexity of such a project is too great to contain in a single article. Indeed, there is much hostility toward such complexity; most journals are devoted to additive linear models and incremental improvements in already well-developed bodies of research. In the language of statistics, the analysis of intersectionality usually requires the use of “interaction effects”—or “multilevel,” “hierarchical,” “ecological,” or “contextual” modeling—all of which introduce more complexity in estimation and interpretation than the additive linear model. Such models ask not simply about the

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2 In practice, the number of social groups within categories can also be limited by the available data. As new racial and ethnic categories have become available in the U.S. census, researchers have incorporated increasing numbers and combinations of racial, ethnic, and national groups in their analyses.
effect of race on income but how that effect differs for men versus women, or for highly educated men versus poorly educated men, and so forth.

My own research provides a concrete example of how the methodology of categorical complexity is informed by feminist work on intersectionality and yet applicable in other interdisciplinary sites (McCall 2000, 2001a, 2001b). In terms of subject matter, I took the emphasis on differences among women as a call to examine structural inequalities among women, especially among different classes of women, since much less attention is devoted to class than to race in the new literature on intersectionality. At the same time, a major new social issue was becoming the subject of intense research and political debate. Beginning in the late 1970s, earnings inequality between the rich and poor, and also between the college educated and non–college educated, rose significantly (see, e.g., Wilson 1997). Since gender inequality was virtually the only type of inequality to have declined during the same period, men were often seen as the primary victims of the new economy and women as the beneficiaries. Since the new inequality was seen as afflicting mainly white men, there was a revolt against gender-based and race-based forms of redistribution (Kahlenberg 1996).

In such an environment, there was a clear need to supplement the focus on inequality among men with a detailed analysis of the changing structure of class and racial inequality among women. Were all women better off and all men worse off in the new economy? What was happening to class inequality among women? Was it as high and growing as much as it was among men? Had greater equality between men and women come at the price of greater inequality among women? Were the causes and thus solutions the same for rising class inequality among women and among men? If the causes were the same, did this mean that gender and racial differences were no longer important? Not only were the answers to these questions unknown, but this line of inquiry had natural affinities with the emphasis in women’s studies on differences among women. Such an inquiry would also answer criticisms of feminist and multicultural scholarship for seeming to valorize differences among women without interrogating systemic inequalities among women, while at the same time intervening in an arena of political and public policy importance.

In keeping with the multigroup and comparative nature of the categorical approach, and to add a further contextual component, my analysis examined the roots of several different dimensions of wage inequality in regional economies in the United States. I examined each dimension of inequality first (between men and women; between the college educated and non–college educated; among blacks, Asians, Latino/as, and whites; and among intersections of these groups) and then synthesized this information into a configuration of inequality—a set of relationships among multiple forms of inequality, the underlying economic structure that fosters them, and the anti-inequality politics that would make most sense under such conditions. Four different configurations of inequality emerged from the analysis and are summarized in Table 2.1. The main finding to note is that patterns of racial, gender, and class inequality are not the same across the configurations. For example, heavily unionized blue-collar cities with a recent history of deindustrialization such as Detroit exhibit relatively modest class and racial wage inequality among employed men but elevated gender wage inequality and class inequality among employed women (relative to average levels of wage inequality in the United States as a whole). In contrast, a postindustrial city such as Dallas exhibits the opposite structure of inequality—it is marked more by class and racial inequality than gender inequality.

If we dig a little deeper into the complexity of these configurations, we find that the average levels of gender inequality that I just reported are somewhat misleading. If gender inequality is broken down by class, we find that it is higher among the college educated and lower among the non–college educated in Dallas, and vice versa in Detroit. This indicates
that the same economic environment creates advantage for some groups of women and disadvantage for other groups of women relative to similarly situated men. This conclusion can also be reached by looking at the configuration of inequality in immigrant-rich cities such as Miami, where gender inequality is lower for both college-educated and non-college-educated groups, but racial and class inequality among both men and women is much higher. Based on such systematic comparisons of levels of gender, racial, and class wage inequality across hundreds of cities, these configurations suggest that deindustrialized regions are ripe for comparable worth and affirmative action approaches to reducing earnings inequality, whereas in postindustrial and immigrant-rich regions, more universal or non-gender-specific strategies (e.g., minimum- and living-wage campaigns) may be more appropriate.

Although configurations of inequality illustrate how the sources and structures of economic inequality are multiple and conflicting, I would not want to go so far as to say that the resulting complexity is inherent to the subject, unless one takes the social ontological position that social relations are always by nature complex, or that gender inequalities always conflict with class inequalities and with racial inequalities. Rather, the complexity derives from the fact that different contexts reveal different configurations of inequality in this particular social formation. The point is not to assume this outcome a priori but to explore the nature and extent of such differences and inequalities.

In short, having used traditional analytical categories as a starting point, classified individuals into those categories, and examined relationships of wage inequality among such groups of individuals, I arrived at the complex outcome that no single dimension of overall inequality can adequately describe the full structure of multiple, intersecting, and conflicting dimensions of inequality. Indeed, in the spirit of the anticalsurgical approach, I question whether so-called general indicators of inequality, such as family income inequality and male earnings inequality, can be used as the standard indicators of the new inequality. My findings suggest not only that no single form of inequality can represent the rest but that some forms of inequality seem to arise from the same

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Wage Inequality</th>
<th>St. Louis (High-Tech Manufacturing)</th>
<th>Miami (Immigrant)</th>
<th>Dallas (Postindustrial)</th>
<th>Detroit (Industrial)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class inequality among men</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class inequality among women</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial inequality among men</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial inequality among women</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender inequality (average level)</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender inequality among college educated</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender inequality among non–college educated</td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
conditions that might reduce other forms, including, potentially, a conflict between reducing gender inequality and reducing inequality among women.

If the underlying contributions of feminist scholarship to this project are (I hope) obvious by now, then the question remains: Why is this methodology not the primary one in the study of intersectionality in women’s studies? Since this type of research falls outside the core of current feminist theory and research practice in women’s studies, it can be used to explore many of the more general issues involved in the establishment of any new intellectual field . . . hopefully, it can also diffuse at least some of the reasons why women’s studies has not embraced this type of approach to the study of intersectionality.

Even though many of the central concepts, modes of explanation, methods, and philosophies of science and social science may develop and evolve in welcome ways (e.g., critical realism), many of their core features nevertheless remain rooted in particular disciplines. This is because the disciplines have been and continue to be well suited to the study of particular subject matters, not because they are stuck in an antiquated era (i.e., of positivism). In order to be wide-ranging and effective, feminist analysis requires “extensive knowledge in aspects of a person’s home discipline that appear to have little to do with women,” and this is as true of deconstruction as it is of statistics (Friedman 1998, 314–15).

**Conclusion: A First Step in Defining Interdisciplinarity**

Both the new and old fields are inadequate to the task of studying intersectionality in all its complexity. Older fields in the social sciences, from which I have been drawing examples throughout this article, have yet to deal fully with the complexity inherent in intersectional studies, while women’s studies has yet to fully open up to the kinds of complex intersectionalities that are so much a part of systemic inequality in contemporary society. There is a disconnect between theory and social reality in both fields, with current theories unable to fully grasp the current context of complex inequality. Each field (i.e., the old and new) has changed and developed without insights from the other, and the upshot is that little feminist or mainstream work is being done on new and important topics at the intersection of both fields. In my mind, both fields suffer from not being interdisciplinary enough, even though women’s studies is the only one of the two that makes strong claims to interdisciplinarity. It is appropriate, then, to hold women’s studies to a higher standard.

The pressing issue then is to overcome the disciplinary boundaries based on the use of different methods in order to embrace multiple approaches to the study of intersectionality.

**References**


Topics for Further Examination

- Using an academic database, look up the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Bonnie Thornton Dill, Maxinne Baca Zinn, Raewyn Connell (formerly R. W. Connell), or others mentioned in the Introduction to Chapter 2 to find out what is currently being done on intersectionality. (Use parentheses around their names and ask for referred journals only.)
- Do a Web search using “feminist theory” and another category of difference and inequality (i.e., “feminist theory” and “race”).
- Using the Web, locate information on those cited in the Introduction to Chapter 2: Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Gloria Anzaldua, or Sojourner Truth. When doing so, try to find the names of others who challenged the whiteness of the women’s movement.