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Intersectionality

Social analysts have long been interested in social unity and division, for it is on the basis of perceived similarities and differences that individuals align themselves with others to form social groups. Thus they have addressed themselves to the isolation of criteria that specify how, why, when and where group boundaries are drawn, as well as the conditions under which these boundaries change.

Canada's increasing diversity challenges our existing understanding of these identification processes. It necessarily directs our attention beyond mere consideration of a single type of identity to the rich plurality of identities used to socially sort each and every one of us. In so doing it readily dispels reductionist notions of identity that suggest that any given individual can be defined by a single identity marker at any particular point in time. It also undermines essentializing perspectives that view individuals' self-identities as the simple sum of group affiliations mechanically ascribed and internalized in accordance with culturally prescribed norms.

Instead, our experience with diversity teaches us that identification processes are inherently contextually driven. It points to the inherently intrinsically fluid and flexible nature of membership categories, and encourages us to examine the cultural, social, economic and political factors that inform them. These realizations prod us to explore the selection, salience and centrality of various types of identity in different social interactions, as well as the numerous ways in which identity processes may be used to actively maintain or contest the existing status quo. This in turn suggests that different types of identity and identification patterns cannot be viewed in simple isolation from each other. It also challenges us to consider the possibility of *interactive effects* between the various types of identity, and to explore the unique ramifications of ensuing identity constellations on individuals' life opportunities, challenges, experiences and outcomes.

This collection of articles focuses specifically on such *identity intersections* and addresses the respective impact of overlapping and intersecting identities on individuals' lived realities. It also examines the effect of *intersections of diversity,* namely the intersection of various types of identity with minority/majority status. Consideration of multiple overlapping identities is central to the recognition of the plural nature of identity. Examination of intersecting identities points to possible interaction effects that demarcate unique experiences and/or newly emergent identities. Attention to diversity addresses determinations of socially salient differences, as well as to the underlying power dynamics inherent in concomitant identification processes. The *key questions* addressed include the following. How might we best conceptualize, describe, and understand existing variations among individuals as well as among population categories and social groups? How might we best conceptualize, describe and understand identity, diversity, and identification processes in such a way as to examine inclusions and exclusions? How do intersections of identity and diversity directly impact on the lives of individuals and communities? What are the implications for the way in which we approach research as well as policy and program development?

Why is intersectionality important to consider? Identity intersections are significant not only because their interaction effects often translate into unique experiences and identities, but also because they point to both *inclusionary* and *exclusionary* 'membership' possibilities. While specific identity intersections frequently underwrite a lack of full incorporation into or even exclusion from each of the categories demarcated by the respective identifications, they hold the inherent potential for a bridging link among them. Similarly, identity overlaps can be exclusionary if they ignore a common super-ordinate identity shared by all parties. They become inclusionary when they facilitate the skip from one type of identity to another in a search for a shared overarching identity. In short, inclusive strategies might entail looking for an intersecting identity and appealing to a common identity, and/or calling on an overlapping identity and laying claim to it instead. Exclusionary strategies would of course entail the reverse.

None of this is, however, truly meaningful without explicit recognition of existing *power differentials* that regulate both individual and collective access to important social resources. Intersections of diversity are particularly important to examine because they direct more focused attention to *modes* of inclusion and exclusion that result in multiple privileges or multiple disadvantages respectively. Both have real life implications, particularly for marginalized groups who consequently face inequitable life experiences, challenges and opportunities. These multiple jeopardies not only translate into diminished personal and social outcomes, but also represent lost linking potential particularly with respect to social capital. More inclusive strategies might address existing differential valuations of specific identities and entail a revaluing of these identifications. More importantly, they might seek to make the power dynamics that underlie many exclusionary identification practices more explicit and thus transparent.

In brief, in and of themselves intersections can be understood as multiple exclusions that serve to marginalize individuals or collectivities, or as multiple inclusions that seek to more fully embrace them. The question is whether they are used to effectively exclude individuals from relevant reference groups in any given situation, or whether they are instead utilized to establish bridges among them.

Intersections are important for researchers, policy makers and programme developers alike. They challenge *researchers* to recognize and incorporate in their work the

wide variety of identities used by social actors in their daily interactions, as well as to examine their salient identity overlaps and intersections. The key task is to uncover patterns of inclusion versus exclusion. In the search for commonality and difference, which identity markers are used to include? Which are used to exclude? When, why and how? Are the various interstices used to marginalize or incorporate? What is the ensuing impact on personal and social outcomes? This increased knowledge base has direct practical applications for policy makers and programme developers with equality/equity mandates, particularly in the area of identity, social justice and/or civic participation. By providing a lens through which power relations are made more readily visible, a multi-dimensional intersectional approach to policy initiatives and programmatic practices helps to ensure that existing efforts do not inadvertently disadvantage or harm any particular individual or community, or alternatively complicit in the empowerment of another. This promises to assist *policy makers* and *programme developers* alike in more effective and efficient delivery of programs and services that best meet the needs of those individuals and groups most disadvantaged by social inequities.

The *first conceptual piece* in this volume provides a brief overview of the concepts of identity and diversity, distinguishes between overlapping and intersecting identities, presents a multidimensional intersectional perspective, and identifies three distinct identification processes that are key to understanding identity structures and dynamics.

The articles that follow examine how different identity intersections concretely affect the lives of individuals and their communities in different social domains. *Brotman and Ryan* explore the intersections of sex, sexual orientation and gender in the area of health. Their research examines the impact of multiple marginalization of 'two-spirited' gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender populations on health outcomes and points to a direct link between experiences of exclusion and personal well being. *Schissel* addresses the intersections of 'race' and class within the legal system and notes that the majority of people incarcerated in Canadian prisons are disproportionately drawn from marginalized, and thus relatively powerless, populations within our society. He thus calls for greater consideration of diversity within our systems of policing, justice and punishment. *Kuntz* examines the various intersections of gender, 'race,' ethnicity, socio-economic status and immigration status in labour markets. The data provided document existing inequities in labour market integration and readily establish that these identity markers have both individual and multiple effects on access to labour markets, training, employment and earnings. Suggested policy program responses include advising and equipping immigrants, changing employer attitudes, learning from existing interventions and social marketing. *Paré* explores in turn the impact of intersections of gender, immigrant status and ethnicity on access to capital markets. Her research demonstrates that the intersection of place of birth and gender has differential impact on both the desire to create businesses and on the sources of support and expertise upon on which entrepreneurs from minority ethnic groups can draw in order to make a new start-up successful. *Wood* similarly examines the impact of intersections of gender, 'race' and socio-economic status in securing capital within the oil sector, and provides a compelling, contrasting examination of the effective funnelling of venture capital to more privileged individuals from majority groups to the exclusion of other members of the population. *Mahtani* examines similar intersections of race, class and gender both in the media and in civil society. Drawing upon her experiences with a not-for-profit organization, she provides three examples of concrete project initiatives that clearly highlight the importance of considering these and other intersecting identity markers – including age, sexual orientation, culture, religion and ethnicity – in ensuring more equitable and effective outcomes.

The second set of articles explores how the concept of intersectionality might be fruitfully used in the areas of policy, program and research. *Curfoot-Mollington* begins with a reflection on the implications of identity intersections and issues of diversity for policy and programming initiatives. He suggests that since not all identity markers necessarily intersect with each other in every situation, a practical approach would be to first consider the full range of key identity markers, select those that relate directly to the issue, determine how they intersect, and only then proceed to develop policy and programming initiatives to address the specific needs identified. *Burstein* draws attention to both the exclusionary and inclusionary nature of identification processes and provides a detailed overview of concrete steps needed to build an overarching governmental policy framework that is both "inclusive of, and responsive to, the intersecting nature of diversity." *Donaldson* focuses directly on specific programmatic concerns and suggests that in the case of Multiculturalism the goal is perhaps not so much the search for unity per se but rather the bringing together of people from various backgrounds into a shared dialogue aimed at developing a common frame of reference that supports equity within diversity. The final article by *Frideres* concludes the discussion by addressing existing research concerns. It raises a number of methodological issues regarding identity intersections and points to the need to develop a conceptual framework or theory of intersections that would enable us to better understand the ways in which the various social attributes of individuals singly and jointly affect their lives.

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