

## Intersectionality

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*Publication date:*  
2016

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Shield, A. DJ. (2016, Aug). Intersectionality. <http://strategizingcommunication.dk/?p=35>

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From book to blog. And back.

## Intersectionality

By Andrew DJ Shield

Imagine that you're a black woman who wants to work for a major U.S. company with hundreds of employees. But you notice something strange: the company doesn't seem to hire black women. They're just not there. Seems like an obvious case of discrimination, right?

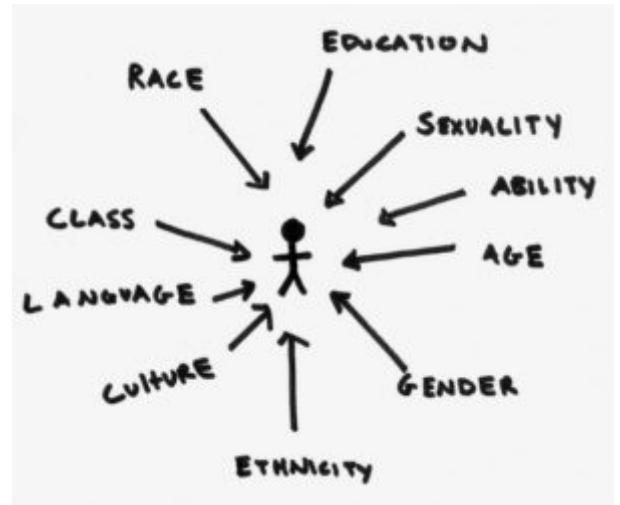
This was basically the situation at General Motors (GM) in 1976, when [a group of black women sued the company for discriminatory hiring practices](#). But they lost the case. After all, the court found that GM hired plenty of women, so there was no evidence of sexism. (It didn't matter that these were white women, did it?) And the court found that GM hired plenty of African-Americans, so there was no evidence of racism. (It didn't matter that these were all men, did it?) In short, the court decided that "black women" were not a unique group that needed protection.

Thirteen years later, in 1989, lawyer and law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, still grappling with the topic of discrimination across multiple axes (race, sex), introduced the term "[intersectionality](#)". The 1976 GM court case was central to her argument, as were the works in a 1981 anthology (by black feminist authors) entitled *All the Women Are White; All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*. Crenshaw was not the first to discuss discrimination across multiple axes: throughout the 1980s, black feminists—most notably in the U.S., but also in the U.K. and the Netherlands—addressed racism in the (predominantly white) feminist movement, and sexism within the (predominantly male) civil rights movement. So why, in 1989, was it still so hard for so many people to understand that black women—and others who experienced discrimination on multiple axes—faced unique obstacles? Intersectionality was there to help.

The concept of intersectionality relates to how we talk about multiple identities (e.g. black, female) that operate within multiple systems of power and oppression (e.g. racism, sexism). Beyond sex and race, the term "intersectionality" has been expanded to include issues related to class, age, religion, migration status, physical (dis)ability, body type/size, mental health, sexual orientation, (trans)gender identity, educational background, ethnic (minority) background, language skills, and much more.

The most common error that people make when talking about intersectionality is to describe discrimination or oppression as *additive*:  $1+1=2$ . In other words, they might talk about the discrimination that black women have faced in the U.S. as a matter of "double jeopardy" of sexism + racism. But discrimination can also be *synergistic*:  $1+1=3$ . In the case of GM, for instance, the black women were even more discriminated against than just sex and race put together.

How individuals experience their identity (e.g. sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic class) is always context-specific, as are the related systems of oppression (e.g. heterosexism/homophobia, ageism, class inequality). These identities and relations of power don't merely operate differently at the state-level, but also at the organizational level, or even within specific subcultures. In order to understand the ways a group might be marginalized in a specific context, one can begin by looking at the political discussions, media representations, cultural norms, laws, social movements, and histories of that specific state, organization, or subculture.



## Tariq Nasheed: The Intersectionality Hustle



For those studying strategic communication, intersectionality can be a useful concept when talking about target audiences. If an organization's key demographic is, say, "young people," how does the outward communication reflect this? Do the organization's communications include all young people, or are some groups invisible, perhaps even excluded? Does "young people" in fact refer to the much more specific segment of affluent, white, suburban youth? And if so, who might suffer as others are privileged? What different strategies might an organization use to reach out to marginalized groups of young people?

This entry was posted in Chapter 8, Culture, Identity, Sticker post, Theoretical concepts and tagged Andrew DJ Shield, Discrimination, Gender, Intersectionality, Race, Sexuality on August 10, 2016

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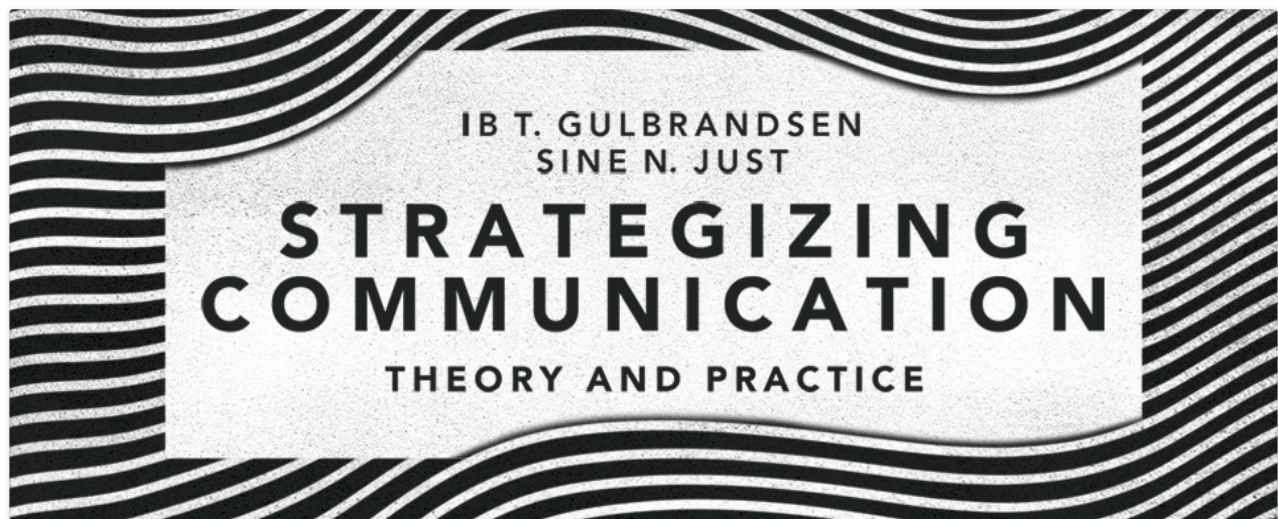
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