Week Seven:
Third Wave Feminism and Intersectionality

Monday, October 8

Wednesday, October 10

Friday, October 12: Discussion Groups

Readings for this Week

Available on WyoCourse as:


You may consult related sources online in open access format by consulting the “Additional Resources” section of this document.

Context and Relevance

This week is unique in that we are focusing our reading attention solely on one lengthy and highly influential article that played a profound role in shaping third wave feminist thought by giving a name—intersectionality—to connections between gender, race, class, and other identity categories subject to discrimination. Beginning in the 1980s, third wave feminists sought to more meaningfully acknowledge and incorporate perspectives that account for important differences in culture, class, race, sexual orientation, and other identity categories that significantly shape individual lives. Third wave feminism actively worked to include those who previously had been excluded from leadership in both feminist movements and elsewhere due to discrimination.

Third wave feminism arose from a generation that had already reaped the benefits of their feminist predecessors’ hard work toward achieving significant progress toward workplace equality, reproductive rights, affirmative action, and socio-sexual freedoms. While third wave feminists still had much work to do in these areas, the fact that the first and second waves had already named and in some instances successfully implemented some of the central tenets of feminism into powerful institutions such as government and universities made space for furthering the scope of feminist action. Third wave feminism, in other words, is the product of hard-won freedoms gained in previous waves.

Third wave feminist ideologies still split into liberal and radical camps we discussed and read about in previous waves. Yet a central tenet of third wave feminism is that individuals should be able to choose elements of feminist ideologies that make sense to them and discard or ignore those that do not, much like people tend to do with almost any belief system. This tendency
makes third wave feminism somewhat difficult to define in contrast to its earlier iterations in the first and second waves. Third wave feminism’s relative flexibility in comparison with the first and second waves also occurred during a significant political shift from the revolutionary social movements of the 1960s and 1970s to the political conservatism of the 1980s and concomitant public health crisis as the HIV/AIDS pandemic emerged, prompting widespread activist calls for research and advocacy to combat the pandemic.

Yet three central tenets can generally be said to characterize third wave feminism and distinguish it from the prevailing ethos of the first and second waves. First, many third wave feminists concur with anthropologist Gayle Rubin that the sex/gender/sexuality system is a set of cultural processes that privilege masculinity, heterosexuality, and monogamy while stigmatizing other forms of gender and sexual expression. Second, third wave feminists understand that race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other forms of identity all impact the ways that individuals experience, and self-actualize in, the world. Finally, third wave feminists are conscious of various forms of privilege, oppose domination of the movement for gender equality solely by white, middle-class women, and actively support inclusion of the histories and experiences of women of color and all poor or working class women.

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality rose to prominence amidst and because of these significant debates and transformations taking place within the political climate that created third wave feminism. In this climate, critics began to denounce as divisive what came to be broadly defined as “identity politics,” a shorthand terms that captures the ways in which individuals may align themselves with particular political agendas or social causes because they have a particular shared characteristic. Crenshaw firmly rejected these critics. “The problem with identity politics,” she writes on page 1242 of this week’s assigned reading:

   ...is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite— that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference within groups contributes to tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that bears on efforts to politicize violence against women.

In other words and as she details through the article we read this week, Crenshaw argues that any efforts designed to meaningfully address the widespread social problem of violence against women must account for important differences in women’s lives. Doing so requires confronting issues that can be uncomfortable for some people to talk about, such as privilege, a key framing concept in third wave feminism. Privilege comes from the Latin prīvilēgium, which unites the Latin privus, meaning private, and lex/leg, meaning law, to refer to laws that exist against or in favor of a person. Third wave feminists use the term privilege to refer to the social and institutional structures that favor individuals with particular characteristics. As we see in Crenshaw’s work and in readings from previous weeks, often these social and institutional structures disproportionately confer privilege to members of dominant groups in ways that are naturalized by dominant cultural constructions of class, sexuality, race, gender, and other identity factors.
Third wave feminism uses privilege to critique unearned hereditary privileges conferred by birth, much as the feudal system of medieval Europe divided society into serfs, aristocrats, and other social categories on the basis of parentage. Acknowledging privilege means critiquing the social and institutional structures that support these inequalities, rather than critiquing the individuals who enjoy these advantages. For example, acknowledging that male privilege exists does not mean that all men enjoy advantages that all women do not; certainly no one would make the argument that a male inmate in a maximum security prison has advantages that a woman CEO of a Fortune 500 company does not. Male privilege refers to the social and institutional structures that disproportionately award political decision-making and economic power to men. Likewise, acknowledging white privilege does not infer that all white people enjoy advantages that all people of color do not. White privilege refers to the social and institutional structures that over-represent white people in positions of political and economic power. Acknowledging privilege allows us to question these unearned rewards and potentially change the exclusionary social and institutional structures that support them.

Crenshaw directly engages with questions related to privilege in her theory of intersectionality. She argues that race, class, gender, and other identity categories operate together to uniquely victimize women of color and prevent them from receiving help or legal recourse. Political strategies of the anti-racist and feminist movements, Crenshaw notes, have often silenced debate about the particular challenges women of color face with respect to violence. Crenshaw’s research found that intimate partner/domestic violence support services may disregard women of color’s needs and may be inaccessible to non-English speakers. These issues are compounded by anti-racist movements which may silence women’s concerns about violence in order to counter dominant cultural stereotypes about communities of color and protect family reputations among some migrant communities. In these multiple and complex ways, Crenshaw notes, racism makes women of color vulnerable to violence and excludes them from receiving assistance.

**Reading Questions**

1. Throughout the past six weeks we have read numerous texts that promote ideas quite similar to Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality. Michele Wallace, The Combahee River Collective, Frederick Douglass, and many others note how identity categories including gender, class, and race intersect in ways that disadvantage women and people of color. How might some of the authors we have read over the past six weeks respond to Crenshaw’s work? What points of commonality would they find, and where would they find something new and different in her argument?

2. Violence against women remains a significant global issue, as we read in the UN Women report in Week One. Crenshaw, like many feminists whose careers spanned the second and third waves, was concerned not only with violence against women but also with how women’s identities impacted their likelihood of experiencing violence, their abilities to leave violent relationships, and receive fair and equal treatment by the criminal justice system and other state or community agents. If we drew a diagram on the board identifying the barriers Crenshaw describes facing women of color, what would it look like? Would it be a set of intersecting lines, or something far more complex that includes
forms of discrimination, such as sexism, that take place within communities as well as those forms of discrimination to which entire communities are subjected?

3. Last week we read Elizabeth Kaminski’s work on the importance of building coalitions between and among communities in order to achieve feminist goals. Crenshaw writes at length about the intersectional forces that either prevent coalitions from forming or that encourage them to disband. What are some of the examples she provides of such coalitions’ experiences? How might they have succeeded?

4. Crenshaw notes that many feminists have chosen to address violence against women as a problem that impacts all women, with the goal of generating widespread social support among the general public for initiatives designed to end such violence and assist those who experience it. In her view, this approach fails to effectively build coalitions between communities because it takes a race-neutral approach that assumes socioeconomic conditions are the same across communities. What social changes are necessary in order to build a truly inclusive coalition of communities to end violence against women? What impediments exist to realizing these social changes?

Additional Resources

1. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s faculty profile and links to some of her other publications are available at her professional website at the University of California Los Angeles: https://law.ucla.edu/faculty/faculty-profiles/kimberle-w-crenshaw/

2. A 20 minute lecture by Crenshaw titled “The Urgency of Intersectionality” is available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality


Third Wave Feminism and Intersectionality

Week Seven

Introducing the third wave

- Beginning in the 1980s
- More meaningful inclusivity
- Perspectives that account for important identity differences
  - Culture
  - Race
  - Ethnicity
  - Sexual orientation
  - All shape individual lives in powerful ways
Focus on intersectionality

- Focus this week on one lengthy and highly influential article
- Intersectionality
  - Builds on long history of feminist engagement with how oppression operates
  - Describes compound disadvantages associated with particular race, gender, and class identities
  - Used today to articulate a wider range of identity-based oppressions

Third wave characteristics

- Arose from a generation that enjoyed progress established by the second wave toward
  - Workplace equality
  - Reproductive rights
  - Socio-sexual freedoms
- Third wave built on institutionalization of progress toward these goals in powerful entities
  - Government
  - Universities
  - Dominant culture
Third wave flexibility

- Split into liberal/radical camps as in previous waves
- Yet third wave feminism featured greater flexibility
  - Choose elements that make sense
  - Discard those that do not
  - Similar to how people adhere to most belief systems
- Occurred during significant socio-political shift
  - From second wave revolutionary social movements of 1960s and 1970s
  - To political conservatism of 1980s
  - Concomitant public health crisis of HIV/AIDS & subsequent activism

Central tenets: Sex/gender/sexuality

- Sex/gender/sexuality system is a set of cultural processes that privilege
  - Masculinity
  - Heterosexuality
  - Monogamy
- These cultural processes stigmatize other forms of gender and sexual expression
- Anthropologist Gayle Rubin
Central tenets: Diversity and privilege

- Race, ethnicity, sexual orientation & other forms of identity impact how individuals experience & self-actualize in the world
- Conscious of privilege
- Opposition to domination of feminist movement solely by white, middle-class women
- Actively support inclusion of the histories and experiences of women of color & poor or working class women

Context

- Intersectionality theory rose to prominence in the 1980s conservative political climate
- Critics began to denounce “identity politics”
  - Shorthand term
  - Captures how individuals align with particular political agendas/social causes based on identity
  - Yet all individuals do this; privilege renders the way they do so invisible/taken for granted
“The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference within groups contributes to tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that bears on efforts to politicize violence against women.” (p. 1242)

- Crenshaw developed intersectionality theory from her research with groups providing services to battered women
- Argues that
  - Violence against women is a pervasive social problem
  - Important differences impact violence & responses to it
  - Need to confront these differences to solve the problem
Privilege

- Latin *privilégium*
- Unites *privus* [private] and *lex/leg* [law]
- Laws/dominant norms that exist in favor or against a person
- Refers to socio-institutional structures that favor individuals with particular characteristics
- Disproportionately conferred to dominant group members
- Naturalized by dominant cultural constructions of class, race, gender, sexuality & other identity factors

Privilege: Third wave critiques

- Uses privilege to critique unearned hereditary privileges conferred by birth
- Akin to feudal system
- Critique of socio-institutional structures that support these inequalities
Critiques of privilege are not...

- Critiques of individuals who enjoy unearned advantages
  - Male privilege does not mean that all men enjoy advantages that all women do not
    - Refers to socio-institutional structures that disproportionately award political decision-making & economic power to men
  - White privilege does not infer that all white people enjoy advantages that all people of color do not
    - Refers to the socio-institutional structures that overrepresent white people in positions of political and economic power

Intersectionality and privilege

- Social constructions of race, class, and gender victimize women of color and exclude them from support/legal services
- Inaccessibility of support/legal services to women of color and non-English speakers
- Anti-racist movements may silence women’s experiences with violence to
  - avoid reifying stereotypes about communities of color
  - protect family reputations among migrant communities
Throughout the past six weeks we have read numerous texts that promote ideas quite similar to Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality. Michele Wallace, The Combahee River Collective, Frederick Douglass, and many others note how identity categories including gender, class, and race intersect in ways that disadvantage women and people of color. How might some of the authors we have read over the past six weeks respond to Crenshaw’s work? What points of commonality would they find, and where would they find something new and different in her argument?

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Learn more about the “sex wars” of the 1980s at OutHistory: http://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/lesbians-20th-century/sex-wars and more about the birth of HIV/AIDS activism at the websites of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (http://www.gmhc.org) and ActUp (http://www.actupny.org)