

# Toward a Continuum of Intersectionality Theorizing for Feminist Social Work Scholarship

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## Abstract

In interdisciplinary feminist scholarship, intersectionality has been a primary framework for thinking about multiple identities and the interconnectedness of various systems of oppression in women's lives. This article suggests that to understand this multiplicity more effectively, feminist social work scholars need to develop and use a continuum of different theorizations of intersectionality, with various epistemological bases, that can be strategically applied, depending on the goals of a particular project or practice context. To articulate the experience of diverse groups of women throughout the world, these paradigms must go beyond the usual triumvirate of U.S.-based race, class, and gender to include migration, colonization, sexuality, ability, and other processes of oppression and identity. Drawing on postcolonial, queer, and transnational feminist perspectives, the article offers queer diasporic scholarship as an example of an interdisciplinary approach for conceptualizing the multiplicity of queer South Asian women's experiences.

## Keywords

feminist, intersectionality, queer, social work

In an increasingly global world in which the challenges to our analysis of oppression and privilege grow geometrically, we must attend with the greatest care to the lenses through which we view the complexity of the lived experiences of those we would call sister.

Samuels & Ross-Sheriff (2008, p. 9)

In contemporary interdisciplinary feminist scholarship, questions of how to understand issues of interlocking oppressions, multiple identities, and social inequality in women's lives are of utmost importance. Feminist social work scholars are likewise increasingly insisting on attention to this multiplicity of experience and social positionality. For example, Samuels and Ross-Sheriff (2008) argued that it is no longer possible to consider gender as an analytic category that is separate from other systems of oppression or without consideration of context (see also Hulko, 2009; Murphy,

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Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009). Feminists of color, in particular, have continually asserted that race, class, and gender are interlocking and interdependent oppressions that are simultaneously experienced (see, e.g., Hill-Collins, 1990, 2000; hooks, 1984; Razack, 1998). In terms of formal theorizing, intersectionality has been a primary theoretical lens for engaging with these issues across disciplines over the past 20 years.

Although intersectionality has been considered one of the most significant contributions to feminist theorizing in the past several decades, there has been ambiguity and inconsistency in how it has been conceptualized and applied in scholarship (Bowleg, 2008; Chang & Culp, 2002; Davis, 2008; Jordan-Zachery, 2007; McCall, 2005; Nash 2008). Feminist scholars have found it difficult to illustrate intersectionality and have thus relied on various metaphors to describe its complexity. Given that intersectionality grew out of black feminist perspectives, recent discussions have also questioned whether it is an integrated theory of identity that includes positions of privilege and power or if it is only a paradigm for understanding multiply marginalized identities (Hulko, 2009; Nash, 2008). Brown (1997), a poststructuralist feminist, also stated that the use of intersectionality as a lens signifies the presence of fixed identity categories, which raises questions about intersectionality's epistemological assumptions and underlying analyses of social inequality. As an eclectic, evolving body of scholarship that is committed to social justice and the empowerment of all women in diverse communities, feminist social work is well positioned to engage with questions regarding intersectionality theorizing and its relevance to social work scholarship and practice. Contemporary feminist scholars are at a critical juncture in which to explore the "contradictions, absences, and murkiness" of how multiple dimensions in women's lives are theorized (Nash, 2008, p. 3).

hooks (1994, p. 74) wrote that we theorize from pain and struggle to "recover and remember ourselves." One of the biggest challenges of studying intersectionality as a woman of color is the ways in which the intellectual work and personal experiences converge, including frustrations about not being able to intellectualize intersectionality adequately as an analytical tool because of the complex ways in which it is lived in one's own life (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). As a South Asian queer woman whose work is centered in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities of color and South Asian immigrant communities in the United States, I write, in part, to make myself theoretically legible. Although it is a contested and constructed term, for the purposes of the discussion presented here, I use the term *South Asian* to refer to an imagined community that consolidates people who trace their roots to the Indian subcontinent—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tibet (Hussein, 2005).

I also explore these ideas because of my investment in liberatory practice with multiply oppressed communities. In both practice and scholarship, I rely on the concept of intersectionality but also acknowledge its limitations as a theoretical paradigm. For example, my work with LGBTQ Asian American communities on issues of domestic violence has demonstrated that meeting the safety needs of this population requires an understanding of how multiple and transnational identities have a significant impact on experiences of intimate and familial relationships, dynamics of abuse, and perceived and actual access to services (Asian Women's Shelter, 2004; Chung & Lee, 1998). The difficulty of finding a way to articulate adequately the experiences of fluid and hybrid identities and multiplicity among women and queer people in these diasporic communities has contributed significantly to my desire to find more robust ways to articulate and address intersectionality.

Doing so, I suggest, requires not a singular intersectional framework but, rather, a continuum of different intersectional theories with potentially varying epistemological bases that social work scholars can draw upon, depending on the goals and needs of a particular community, practice setting, or project. To elaborate this argument, I first present a brief overview of intersectionality as it has been most often conceptualized by a number of different U.S. feminists. Following the work of McCall (2005), I propose a continuum of intersectionality theorizing across a range of perspectives that goes beyond the usual triumvirate of U.S. racial, class, and gender-based oppressions to include

sexuality, ability, nation, and other axes of diversity and social identity. Then, drawing from postcolonial, queer, and transnational feminist theorizing, I present queer diasporic scholarship as an example of one interdisciplinary way to conceptualize the interconnectedness of queer women's multiple identities and oppressions within the context of migration, which has not yet been applied in feminist social work scholarship. I conclude with a call to scholars to continue to interrogate how we think about multiplicity in women's lives to continue to guide empowering feminist scholarship and practice in the future.

Although this article's primary contribution is to pose questions regarding feminist social work theorizing, it is also directly relevant to contemporary social work practice. The Council on Social Work Education's (2008) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards*, for example, state that understanding issues of oppression and diversity is a core competence required of all social workers.

The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. Social workers appreciate that, as a consequence of difference, a person's life experiences may include oppression, poverty, marginalization, and alienation as well as privilege, power, and acclaim. (p. 5)

If social work is mandating this intersectional perspective on diversity, it is imperative to engage with theory and scholarship that can support greater understandings of how interconnected systems of inequality operate on multiple levels to affect marginalized people. Furthermore, because of feminist social work's specific dedication to gender-based social justice and working holistically with all women across diverse communities (see, e.g., Dominelli, 2002), being able to theorize multiple, intersecting oppressions and identities effectively in women's lives is paramount to expanding contemporary feminist scholarship and practice.

It is not the aim of this article to provide a comprehensive review of intersectional theorizing or a prescriptive solution for how to articulate or apply various intersectional theories per se. Rather, the aim is to think *within* and *beyond* prevailing frameworks of intersectionality to challenge feminist social work scholars to continue to develop and apply diverse frameworks for theorizing multiplicity in women's lives that can deepen scholarship and practice toward social justice. The questions raised here are thus presented as a way to provoke further thinking about paradigms of intersectionality by feminist social work scholars.

## Overview of Intersectionality

As one of the most significant theoretical contributions of feminist studies, intersectionality has become the "gold standard multi-disciplinary approach for analyzing . . . identity and oppression" among women (Nash, 2008, p. 2). Although a range of definitions of intersectionality has consistently emerged from feminist thought, intersectionality theorizing is concerned with articulating women's simultaneous experiences of gender, race, and class as interdependent identities and oppressions (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). In addition, Dill-Thornton and Zambrana (2009) stated that intersectional analyses are, and have historically been, characterized by four key theoretical interventions: (a) placing the lived lives and experiences of people of color and other marginalized groups at the center of the development of theory, (b) exploring the complexities of individual identities and group identities while making visible the ways in which diversity within groups is often ignored and essentialized, (c) demonstrating the ways in which social inequality and oppression in the interconnected domains of the power structure are manifest, and (d) promoting social justice and social change through research and practice.

Although intersectional frameworks began to emerge during the U.S.-based civil rights and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, women-of-color feminists more formally asserted intersectionality theorizing in the 1980s and 1990s as a significant critique of the essentialism of white feminist identity-based politics (Luft & Ward, 2009; Murphy et al., 2009). Women-of-color activist-scholars, such as Anzaldúa (1999), Crenshaw (1991), Hill-Collins (1990), hooks (1984), Hull (1982), and Lorde (1984), challenged white feminism's construction of "woman" as a monolithic identity category as they elucidated the inseparability of racial and gender oppressions and the unique sociopolitical location and standpoint of women of color. The Combahee River Collective (1981), a group of black lesbian feminists, was one of the first groups to promote an intersectionality framework when it called for an integrated analysis that incorporates an understanding of interlocking systems of oppression across race, sexuality, class, and gender.

Congruent with these earlier critiques by feminists of color, Crenshaw (1991) has been credited with coining the term *intersectionality* as a way to understand the diversity and multiplicity of the experiences of women of color in terms of identity, social location, and structural barriers that are based on multiple forms of oppression. Crenshaw's work emphasized the way in which identity politics does not attend to intragroup differences, leading to the marginalization of the experiences of women of color within both (white) feminist politics and racial justice efforts. Hill-Collins (1990, 2000) has also been influential in developing intersectional theorizing that is grounded in African American women's experiences, particularly through a framework of "interlocking systems of oppression" that demonstrates how interdependent forms of social inequality operate together to oppress women of color.

## How Is Intersectionality Generally Conceptualized?

Intersectionality has become a common buzzword to signify a general understanding that women are simultaneously positioned within patriarchy and gender identities, as well as within other systems of oppression, such as race and class (Davis, 2008; Nash, 2008; Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). However, while the language of intersectionality is commonly used in feminist projects, the idea of intersectionality has been conceptualized and applied inconsistently, differently, and often ambiguously in scholarship and practice (Chang & Culp, 2002; Davis, 2008; Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Knudsen, 2006; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008; Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). For example, intersectionality has been considered a theory, a paradigm, a framework, a method, a perspective, or a lens, depending on the context and/or scholar who is using it (Hulko, 2009). In addition, feminists have debated whether intersectionality should be centrally concerned with understanding individuals' multiple identities; interlocking systemic inequalities at the level of social structure; or multiplicity of social, historical, and cultural discourses (Davis, 2008; Dill-Thornton & Zambrana, 2009; Prins, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006). A review of the literature demonstrated that the most consistent basis for intersectional analyses across disciplines is that all approaches aspire to define race, class, and gender as simultaneously experienced identities and to critique (feminist) identity politics for its essentializing view of the subject of "woman" (see, e.g., Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Crenshaw, 1991; Dill-Thornton & Zambrana, 2009; Hill-Collins, 1990, 2000; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Murphy et al., 2009; Valentine, 2007).

## Metaphors of Intersectionality

Feminist scholars have also used a variety of images in attempting to capture the complexity of intersectionality, describing it as a crossroads (Crenshaw, 1991; Minow, 1997, cited in Valentine, 2007), axes of difference (Yuval-Davis, 2006), a matrix (Hill-Collins, 1990, 2000), and dynamic processes (Staunaes, 2003). Mathematical metaphors have been particularly common. For instance, intersectionality is frequently viewed as an additive model in which race and class are added to gender, but

gender is still viewed as the primary, essential identity (Valentine, 2007). Metaphors of multiplication, however, suggest that women's interconnected identities cannot be seen as additive, but, rather, that race, class, and gender combine and interact to create unique and simultaneous experiences (Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2004; Hancock, 2007b; Mullaly, 2002). Geometric metaphors, such as concentric circles, separate axes of power, or vectors of difference, have also been evoked in the effort to demonstrate dimensions of interconnected identities and oppressions (West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

The metaphors that feminist scholars have used to describe intersectionality also reflect different epistemological assumptions and understandings of how systems of oppression are related to one another (Ken, 2007). Addition, multiplication, and geometric images originate from mathematics—a linear, discrete, and traditionally masculinist domain (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). These mathematical images depict gender, race, and class as separable enough from one another that they can be understood and analyzed through calculation. In contrast, social constructionists have argued that systems of oppression, such as race, class, and gender, co-constitute one another in fluid, complex, and context-bound ways that cannot be captured by such fixed metaphorical images. Prins (2006, p. 279), for example, stated that in contrast to other models of understanding oppression,

Intersectionality . . . emphasizes that the complexity of processes of individual identification and social inequality cannot be captured by such arithmetical frameworks. Categories like gender, ethnicity and class co-construct each other, and they do so in myriad ways, dependent on social, historical and symbolic factors.

Such discussions of how to conceptualize and describe intersectionality clearly demonstrate that multiplicity in women's lives resists exact definitions, singular theorizations, or simple metaphors. Luft and Ward (2009) suggested that instead of enabling clarity about the ways in which identities and oppressions overlap, shift, and move, metaphors of intersectionality are often limited by our imaginations and by an orientation toward being able to know or classify experiences definitively. In addition, Davis (2008) contended that the ambiguity of intersectionality can contribute to its effectiveness as a feminist theory across disciplinary contexts because its open-endedness allows for diverse applications and meanings.

Because it is so difficult to capture the complexity of interconnected oppressions and the diverse ways in which intersectionality is already being illustrated and evoked, the ability to theorize multiplicity in women's lives effectively requires intentionally developing and articulating a range of conceptual "tools" to draw upon. Congruent with Davis's (2008) argument that the ambiguity of intersectionality can be useful in making it a widely applicable theoretical approach and given the interdisciplinary nature of feminist social work scholarship, feminist social work scholars can benefit from developing and applying a range of intersectional theories that can be used strategically and intentionally, depending on the goals of a particular project or setting. In addition, developing and using deliberate articulations of various metaphors and definitions can help delineate differences between various intersectional approaches and the assumptions undergirding their usage. In the section that follows, I draw on the work of McCall (2005) to provide support for the idea that intersectional theories fall along an "epistemological continuum" (McPhail, 2004, p. 17), all of which are useful in elucidating women's intersectional lives, identities, and experiences in deeper and more diverse ways.

## **Toward a Continuum of Intersectionality Theorizing for Feminist Social Work Scholarship**

Hill-Collins (1990) explicitly stated that to encompass the complexity of black women's experience and the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender oppressions, she rejected grounding her

analysis in a single theoretical tradition. Although her work is conceptually strong, Hill-Collins specifically pulled ideas from different theories at different times to illustrate her perspective on multiplicity in black women's lives. Similarly, social science and social work scholars have argued for a "critical pluralism" of theoretical perspectives that can be intentionally and rigorously applied, depending on the goals of a specific inquiry or practice need (Bohman, 1999; Borden, 2010; Orme, 2003). This approach to theoretical pluralism assumes that all paradigms are necessarily limited but that drawing on multiple frameworks can help deepen understandings of complex social phenomena and contribute to the development of diverse theories that can be applied to address critical issues (Borden, 2010; Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Specifically in relation to feminist social work, Orme (2003) also suggested that taking up multiple analyses can make a greater contribution to knowledge and practice than attaching oneself to a singular feminist analysis. Consistent with this view, I encourage feminist scholars to promote dialogue across diverse perspectives on intersectional theorizing to ensure that social work scholars have a range of paradigms to apply to their work to deepen analysis, inquiry, and practice with multiply marginalized groups of women.

This is not to dismiss the real philosophical, political, and practical challenges to thinking across the boundaries of different frameworks that may have conflicting ontological and epistemological underpinnings nor is it to imply that one should unintentionally or haphazardly combine theories that may be based on fundamentally conflicting assumptions. Rather, given the necessity of being able to theorize more effectively the interconnectedness of oppressions in women's lives across feminist social work projects, I urge the field to adopt a range of intersectional approaches, with varied epistemological foundations that feminist scholars can use, depending on the worldview, goals, and needs of a particular population or scholarly endeavor. Developing and applying such a continuum of approaches means that feminist social work scholars with various commitments and epistemological and ontological positions can find a way to articulate effectively the interconnection and interaction of women's multiple oppressions and identities in their scholarly work. More intentionally and strategically using a range of theoretical tools along an "epistemological continuum" can help the field acknowledge the strengths and limitations of various paradigms without privileging any of them as most authentic for feminist social work scholarship. In addition, developing a continuum with different viewpoints on multiplicity can both maintain the possibility of intersectional theorizing that critically questions essentialized constructions of social groups and pay attention to the ongoing pervasiveness and salience of structural inequalities. McCall's (2005) overview of intersectional approaches provides a useful framework for thinking about the differences between various theorizations of multiplicity in women's lives.

### *McCall's Typology of Intersectional Approaches*

In her work on intersectionality and research methodologies, McCall (2005) posited that many of the differences in how intersectionality frameworks are conceptualized and applied in research are based on the ways in which social categories are understood. Her overview assumes three primary types of intersectionality approaches that are used across various disciplines: intercategory (or category), intracategory, and anticategory. Although it is impossible to fit all intersectionality paradigms neatly into such a typology, McCall's approach provides a useful structure for considering how a spectrum of intersectionality theorizing, with diverse epistemologies, can be useful to diverse feminist social work scholarship.

*Intercategory (or category) approaches.* Intercategory (or category) approaches operate with an assumption of discrete social categories. In this view, social groupings, such as race, class, and gender, are understood to be an effect of structural inequalities, and individual identity is determined and shaped by the social structure. Intercategory approaches are often characterized

by a focus on relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories not on complexities within single social groups. Thus, these analyses are often presented as multigroup comparisons.

Intercategorical approaches are most often applied in social work research and other social sciences, such as sociology and political science. Such frameworks are consistent with the way in which social work has often relied on categories as a way to understand individuals and social groups, with an emphasis on recognizing their location within structures of oppression (McPhail, 2004). The primary goal of these theoretical perspectives and their accompanying methodologies is to demonstrate empirically relationships of inequality among social groups. For example, studies that articulate health or income disparities among different ethnic groups of women would be considered intercategorical in their approach. These paradigms are most closely associated with quantitative, postpositivist methodologies that are often applied in social work research. McCall (2005) noted that within the current climate of feminist scholarship, these approaches have frequently been questioned as to whether they adequately attend to the complexity of multiple oppressions. The emphasis of intercategorical approaches on understanding the significance and degree of social inequality between groups is particularly useful, however, given social work's commitment to social justice and structural understandings of social inequality.

*Intracategorical approaches.* Intracategorical approaches can be seen as most connected to early perspectives on intersectionality, since these paradigms challenge the nature of essentialized, homogeneous social categorizations of gender, race, class, and the like and simultaneously see the need for strategic essentializing of identities and communities to work toward particular political goals. These frameworks have historically been based on black feminist epistemology that assumes the unique standpoint of black women and/or other oppressed groups (Hill-Collins, 1990; Matsuda, 1991).

Focusing on diversity within social groups, these frameworks illuminate the lived experiences, multiple identities, and standpoints of people, such as women of color, who are situated at the intersections of numerous oppressions. Fraser (1998) stated that in the study of social difference, there are opposing perspectives: the deconstructionists and proponents of identity politics. Intracategorical approaches have taken a "middle ground" between these perspectives by interrogating essentialized social categories and acknowledging the political necessity of such identity-based groupings.

Methodologically, these paradigms often use narratives and single-case examples. In social work, intracategorical approaches have been used most in qualitative social work research that focuses on marginalized groups. For instance, many current texts on human behavior and the social environment refer to diversity within ethnic communities (Ronquillo, 2008). In addition, in social work classrooms, educators may illustrate the impacts of intersecting systems of inequality through the use of case studies of individuals, groups, or families who are facing multiple oppressions (see, e.g., Murphy et al., 2009).

*Anticategorical approaches.* Anticategorical approaches are generally aligned with and/or developed from poststructuralist feminist theories that fundamentally challenge the idea of social categories (such as race, class, and gender) as units of analysis and problematize the way in which categories are viewed as real, fixed, homogeneous, and bound by social structure (see, e.g., Butler, 1990; Weedon, 1996). These theoretical insights have provided feminists with new tools for thinking about difference in women's lives. Considered to be at the farthest end of McCall's (2005) continuum, these approaches propose that social categories are fundamentally suspect because they are seen as having no basis in reality but are instead constructed by language and discourse. Some scholars see these perspectives as having the greatest promise for holding the vast complexity of social locations. Anticategorical approaches have often been interdisciplinary across social science and

humanities scholarship and have drawn upon interpretive methodologies, such as genealogy, deconstruction, and critical ethnography (McCall, 2005).

In this range of intersectional approaches, anticategorical approaches have been used the least in social work, given disciplinary and professional commitments to practice, lived lives, and material realities that can be viewed as being in tension with such theoretical frameworks. Feminist social work has begun to adopt and demonstrate the utility of poststructural approaches (e.g., Fawcett, Featherstone, Fook, & Rossiter, 2000; Noble, 2004; Sands & Nuncio, 1992; Wendt & Boylan, 2008), although they have continued to be somewhat marginalized and critiqued within the discipline (Latting, 1995; McPhail, 2004). Healy (1999) proposed that considering poststructural views of identity and social positionalities does not mean that social work must abandon commitments to addressing structural oppression. As she noted:

[W]e cannot continue to ignore the extent to which single-oppression/categorical articulation of identities has not allowed us to hold the complexities of experiences or change in local practice contexts. Critical post-structural theory supports an articulation of the complex and contradictory interchange between the structural and local whilst resisting seeing one merely as an effect of the other. (p. 131)

I encourage feminist social work scholars to explore further the potential of anticategorical approaches to intersectionality to add to the range of theoretical tools that can be used within feminist social work scholarship and practice.

In addition to building theory across McCall's (2005) spectrum of intersectional approaches, feminist social work scholarship that focuses on multiplicity in women's lives must also attend to the specificity of oppressions that various communities face. Doing so requires the continuum of intersectional theorizing to broaden its scope beyond U.S.-based racial, class, and gender oppressions to incorporate other dimensions of inequality that affect women's identities and experiences.

## **Who Is Intersectional?**

Given the genealogy of intersectionality theorizing, it is not surprising that African American women have become the "prototypical intersectional subjects" (Nash, 2008, p. 8) or that prevailing intersectional paradigms emphasize the triumvirate of racial, class, and gender oppressions. Although the theoretical move to acknowledge these interdependent oppressions has been essential to naming the inequalities and lived realities of African American women, a number of subjectivities are continually invisible in this theorizing, including lived experiences of nation, colonialism, sexuality, class, religion, age, and ability.

In her review of intersectional scholarship from 2000 to 2008, Hulko (2009) found that the vast majority of studies focused on race, class, and gender but few included other identities, such as ability, age, religion, sexual orientation, and nationality. There has also been some debate about whether intersectionality theorizing should focus only on multiple marginalized identities (i.e., women of color) or if all identities can be considered intersectional (Hulko, 2009; Nash, 2008). Although there have been some attempts to broaden conceptions of intersectionality to encompass more axes of diversity, to begin to include positions of privilege and power, and to focus on the salience of context (see, e.g., Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Chang & Culp, 2002; Hulko, 2009; Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008), these approaches are still limited. Future scholarship in feminist social work can further explore these questions and assess the impact of various approaches to theorizing intersectionality on research and practice with diverse communities.

To illustrate the potential of being able to articulate innovatively the multiplicity of oppressions beyond systems of race, class, and gender, in the next section I briefly describe queer diaspora

studies, an anticategorical intersectional approach, as an example of a potentially useful approach to intersectional theorizing for feminist social work scholarship with particular communities.

## **Queer Diaspora: An Anticategorical Intersectional Approach**

Given the global context in which feminist social work scholars are working, the range of intersectional theorizations that are developed and implemented must include the ability to elucidate the experience of diaspora, nationality, and migration as salient oppressions, identities, and processes in women's lives. Here, I present a brief overview of the queer diasporic critique, an interdisciplinary lens that draws from queer theory, transnational feminisms, and postcolonial theory. It is important to note that it is not my intent to reify sexuality, gender, or migration status as social categories that must be added to a comprehensive list of interlocking oppressions. Rather, I use queer diasporic scholarship as one example of an additional theoretical construct that feminist social work scholars could add to a range of intersectionality frameworks that can be accessed to understand, study, and practice more effectively with multiply marginalized immigrant communities.

Queer diaspora studies aim to understand and interrogate gender, sexuality, race, class, and other processes of oppression in historical and contemporary contexts. This conceptual approach is most closely aligned with McCall's (2005) anticategorical approach, since processes of colonialism, globalization, racism, gender oppression, and other discourses are viewed as interlocking, fluid, and co-constitutive of identity and experience. Consistent with queer diasporic frameworks, Egeland and Gressgard (2007, p. 207) wrote:

Approaching complexity requires more than the mere adding up of such categories as race, class, and gender. It requires an approach presupposing that these categories intersect in mutually constitutive ways in and through socio-cultural hierarchies and power dimensions that produce complex relations of inclusion, exclusion, domination, and subordination.

Queer diaspora scholars insist on the mutually constitutive nature of colonial histories, migration, sexuality, gender, race, and class and assert that queer immigrant locations provide a unique site from which to theorize (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005; Gopinath, 2005; Manalansan, 2003). This view is parallel to that of earlier intersectional theorists, who elucidated the unique positionality from which multiply oppressed people can conceptualize the world (Matsuda, 1991; Hill-Collins, 1990, 2000). As is used by these scholars, queer diasporic critique proposes a space for interrogating the ways in which migrant communities are racialized, gendered, and sexualized, as well as to articulate how queer subjectivities are formed and negotiated across transnational experiences (Eng et al., 2005; Gopinath, 2005). In her ethnographic work with South Asian women, Badruddoja (2008) analyzed the narratives of two queer-identified participants to illustrate the processes of race, class, gender, sexuality, and transnational experience that occur through their experience of queerness. Through their stories, she elucidated the problems that are embedded in fixed social categories as the women's positionalities are in flux, and through their identities, they "selectively accept and maintain certain definitions while rupturing others" (p. 181).

The queer diasporic framework has the potential to make visible and theorize the dynamic interplay of discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and other positionalities as they are experienced in lived lives and to provide new ways of articulating these processes. In his work with Filipino gay men in New York City, Manalansan (2003, p. 191) demonstrated the ways in which these men are continually shifting their relationships to home, place, sexuality, race, class, religion, and self:

The Filipino gay immigrant is in fact multiply positioned between bakla and gay traditions, between notions of Filipinoness and Americanness, between memories of homeland and glaring realities of living

in another country. . . . Thus, the lives of Filipino gay men . . . are always mediated by experiences of travels, border crossings, and translations of class, race, gender, and sexuality.

Two key components contribute to the strength of a queer diasporic framework as an analytic for feminist social work scholarship. First, this paradigm is rooted in an understanding of transnational migration processes as they are linked to historical and contemporary oppression among diasporic communities. While intersectionality theories often center on a U.S. context, a queer diasporic perspective is centered on the movement of people and capital across borders and on how these migrations shift people's identities, relationships to home and community, and experiences of multiple oppressions (such as racism, sexism, and homophobia). This approach to intersectionality theorizing is useful in explicating the transnational, postcolonial hybrid, and shifting experiences of these individuals and groups.

Second, queer diaspora is an example of an anticategorical intersectional approach (McCall, 2005) because it draws from theoretical traditions, such as queer theory and postcolonial studies. This paradigm is concerned with the ways in which experiences of nation, gender, and race are enforced by discourses of heterosexuality (Gopinath, 2005). The anticategorical approach is an expansion from how intersectionality is most often applied in social work in that it moves away from discrete categories of difference and identity. Luft and Ward (2009) pointed to the potential of "queer-inflected intersectionality" that articulates the social and historical construction of all social identities while continuing to engage with the material consequences of inequality. As a theoretical tool for critically thinking about the multiplicity in women's lives, this approach can promote an understanding of the fluidity, hybridity, and contingency of oppressions and identities in varied historical and current contexts.

## **Conclusion**

Although U.S.-based feminists have been applying the concept of intersectionality for more than 20 years, it continues to be a challenge to articulate and operationalize this theorizing within contemporary feminist social work scholarship and practice in a global context. As I have argued in this article, a continuum of intersectionality theorizing that goes beyond U.S.-based racial, class, and gender oppressions is necessary to expand analytical and practical understanding of diverse populations of women through a broader range of paradigms that can be applied, depending on the goals and needs of the project or practice context in which they are being applied. Including frameworks that encompass a range of epistemological approaches to understanding social categories also has the potential to illuminate the multiplicity in women's lives and identities in new and complex ways. Analytics from other theoretical traditions and disciplines, such as the queer-of-color critique (see, e.g., Ferguson, 2003), postcolonial studies, and transnational feminisms, for example, have the potential to contribute valuable insights into intersectional frameworks that may be used in feminist social work.

Beyond the brief discussion presented here, there are many more questions to research so as to further thinking about intersectionality theorizing for feminist social work scholarship. For example, some writers have started to look at the relationship between intersectionality frameworks and both qualitative and quantitative research methods to gain a better understanding of how these theoretical paradigms can be applied (Bowleg, 2008; Hancock, 2007a; McCall, 2005; Prins, 2006; Shields, 2008; Simien, 2007; Warner, 2008). Chang and Culp (2002) reflected on the need to go beyond understanding that race, class, gender, and other oppressions are interconnected and to take the next step of imagining feminist interventions and applications of this theorizing. This next step is critical to furthering feminist social work inquiry and practice that is truly intersectional.

In addition, future work may examine the ways in which intersectionality frameworks are and can be used in social work education in regard to diversity issues, globalization, feminist practice, and social justice. As pedagogical tools, narratives from films and literature, along with critical discussions, can open up deeper understandings of intersectionality in lived lives. In addition, integrating studies into research and clinical course work that reflect intersectional theorizing and methodologies along an “epistemological continuum,” including postmodern and postpositivist approaches, can provide broader perspectives on how to understand and analyze the multiplicity in women’s experiences. Including discussions about how intersectionality plays out at the level of individual identities, structural inequality, and discursive constructions can also help students to consider the impacts of interlocking oppressions in more complicated, multifaceted ways.

As is true in all feminist inquiry, an exploration of diverse intersectional theorizing evokes the constant and delicate balance between holding varied experiences and perspectives through multiple paradigms and intentionally and strategically taking a strong political stance against social inequality. Because social justice has always been a core tenet of intersectionality theorizing, building and drawing on epistemologically diverse intersectional frameworks must remain grounded in a commitment to social change (Dill-Thornton & Zambrana, 2009; Luft & Ward, 2009). It is notable that the discourse of intersectionality is increasingly being used in broader studies of diversity and multiculturalism. However, given the political potential and roots of intersectional theorizing, feminist scholars must further question what the stakes are of these frameworks being applied outside feminist contexts (Luft & Ward, 2009). I urge feminist social work scholars to continue to engage with the ambiguity, difficulty, and potential of a range of intersectional theories to attend to the multiplicity in women’s lives. As Williams (2006, pp. 218-219) wrote: “Social work finds itself at a moment when there is no master theory but, instead, the space to entertain and experiment with many.” Hill-Collins (personal communication, 2001 as cited in Dill-Thornton & Zambrana, 2009) called for spaces to debate and clarify meanings of social justice while allowing for a framework that is broad enough to accommodate different positions within these discussions. I propose a similar approach to considering a range of approaches to intersectionality theorizing that feminist scholars can “entertain and experiment with.” Continuing to discuss what is meant by intersectionality while holding the necessity and value of different orientations within these debates can contribute to feminist scholarship in important ways. This dialogue and ongoing theory building are imperative if our aim is to continue to “take the greatest care with the lenses through which we view the complexity of the lived experiences of those we would call sister” (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008, p. 9).

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