

Comment: “Bringing Intersectionality into Stratification Economics

Louise Seamster, December 2025

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on this paper, “Intersectionality and Stratification Economics: Converging Approaches to Complex Identities.” The paper authors, Imari Smith and Mark Paul, argue for the explicit incorporation of intersectionality into stratification economics, arguing that it can illuminate “the nuanced ways in which groups’ access to (dis)advantage may fluctuate across time, space, and social context” (7). While, in their opinion, intersectionality is already “woven into the fabric of stratification economics” (10), the authors call for stratification economics scholars to consider utilizing an intersectional framework more intentionally, specifically expressing a need for scholars to “reconcile methodological approaches with conceptual understandings of intersectionality” (16). Their paper draws on the strengths of both paradigms to illustrate their relevance to one another. In addition to areas of overlap, here I also observe some possible tensions between these frameworks. The tensions point to conflicts between intersectionality’s complexity as it was conceived, and some contemporary adaptations of the theoretical framework. These differences may be generative for understanding the reproduction of hierarchal inequality, even if they are less simple to implement in empirical applications.

As Smith and Paul note, intersectionality and stratification economics share some key propositions, including interdisciplinarity; the consideration of multiple dimensions of inequality; an understanding that processes of advantage and disadvantage are connected; and a focus on how these processes are animated through mechanisms of power and oppression, rather

than attributable to individual choices. Bringing these frameworks together can remind people that holding a position in a matrix is not just a property of an individual but a property of oppression, and specifically part of what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls an “interlocking matrix of domination.” Drawing on those principles, one of the paper’s main focal points is how both traditions reject “additive” models of cumulative inequality, arguing instead that “facets of social identity...produce a singular multiplicative effect” rather than “effects that can be parsed from one another in a straightforward manner” (3). These differences matter in practical terms when we construct analytic models: standard multivariate regression implicitly presumes component parts are additive, not interactive or multiplicative. We could challenge ourselves to consider how models could account for the ways inequalities compound across an individual, across a group, and over time—and whether regression models are even the right approach.

Smith and Paul also offer methodological applications for incorporating an intersectional framework more explicitly into stratification economics. (They note that, while scholars’ analysis may already be accounting for multiple axes of difference, intersectional approaches tend to differ in their presentation of results: whether aspects of identity are presented as “sensitivity checks” or as core components of interest.) The authors draw heavily from Leslie McCall’s (2005) typology of intersectionality methods to recommend researchers consider both intercategorical and intracategorical comparisons, accounting for potential differences within and across groups. However, the authors warn against simply adding in a jumble of variables without consideration. They also warn against treating each marker of social disadvantage as interchangeable, “counting” an individual’s marginalized identities to come up with a total for comparison.

I wondered whether some aspects of each framework align less easily, but this is not to argue against combining them: although there may be more differences than are noted in the paper, exploring these tensions could be generative for both sides. One possible difference is in the framework's *primary unit of analysis*. Intersectionality focuses on the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, but especially in its more mainstreamed treatments, the deployment of that framework in statistical models tends to frame that intersection as occurring within an individual. How do we reconcile this with stratification economics' tendency to focus on the level of the family, where many economic processes play out and where wealth is usually held, or at the level of the group to compare outcomes? Resolving this question could require some creative, concrete thinking about what processes we want to understand and how they play out differently across people and family configurations.

To some degree, this discrepancy between approaches represents a conflict between intersectionality's early concerns, and how key elements have been simplified, or even depoliticized, as the theory has "traveled" into new areas (Carbado et al. 2013, Collins 2015, Nash 2011, Mohanty 2013). Scholars have warned about the adaptation (or cooptation) of intersectionality into an individualized paradigm, where intersectionality is subsumed into a "proliferation of depoliticized multiplicities," a "hallmark of neoliberal intellectual landscapes" (Mohanty 2013, 968). These iterations tend to sidestep many feminist scholars' commitments to analyses of colonialism, militarism and state power, especially in related research strands like transnational feminism (Mohanty 2013; see also Patil 2013 for a review of linkages across intersectionality and intersectional feminism).

These deeper traditions of intersectionality not only illuminate other axes of stratification, but provide an extra dimension for understanding and exploring the world. In her 2015 overview,

Hill Collins emphasizes intersectionality as a way of seeing, not just a method, noting how intersectionality has been variously conceptualized as a perspective, a concept, a type of analysis, a “nodal point,” methodological approach, research paradigm and a measurable variable.¹ This shifting role is not necessarily a hallmark of confusion but can indicate its multiplicity (perhaps analogous to how, in quantum physics, light can operate as a ray or particle depending how it is observed). Intersectionality does not always neatly stand alongside existing paradigms, explanations or methodologies, thanks in large part to its commitment to bringing attention to what lies outside those frames.

Taking these paradigms seriously can help researchers think about how subgroup-based differences in outcomes are not just variation to be explained as representing intersectionality, but can point to a need to restructure our research designs and theory. Feminist standpoint theory, which shares overlapping origins with intersectionality, brings our attention to epistemology in how we conceive our projects and the theories and worldviews undergirding them. As Sweet explains in a recent review, “social positions of exclusion, necessary for epistemic privilege in feminist standpoint theory, provide improved possibilities for “seeing” the social world” (2020, 926). A major contribution of intersectionality is to illustrate how people’s experiences (most frequently, those of women of color) are left out by our standard cross-cuts of social groups—*and* to point out these are structured absences that distort our understanding of the social world.

It’s also worth noting the framework’s origins in and adjacent to social movements, and its persisting utility to activists, as Mohanty (2013) and others have observed. When considering official policy interventions, there may be opportunities, for instance, to consider how grassroots

¹ Moradi and Grzanka theorize intersectionality simultaneously as a “field of study, as analytic strategy or disposition, and as critical praxis for social justice” (2017, 501).

groups using intersectional frames may approach the same policy problem differently than those working either within or against mainstream economics debates. Those alternative modes may be more likely to escape the trap, observed by Crenshaw (1991), that anti-racist and anti-sexist projects often fail to benefit women of color because of limitations in their conceptualization of social problems and their solutions.

Another potential point of divergence is how these respective traditions *incorporate historical/structural context as explanatory*. Some research deploying intersectionality prioritizes attention to “unexpected differences,” while remaining relatively agnostic as to the expected direction of variation within and across groups. A simplistic takeup of intersectional thinking (which Smith and Paul warn against) could incorporate an array of variables in the name of accounting for group and subgroup variation, without theoretically-driven reasons for those variables. Careful attention to historic and social processes from both stratification economics and intersectionality scholars can provide insight into which components of social identity might be theoretically significant in a given setting. Since stratification economics is already well-versed in interdisciplinary scholarship on racial dynamics, it would be helpful to draw on intersectionality scholarship, and gender scholarship more broadly, to consider how relationships structure opportunity, how wealth “works” differently for different family structures and arrangements, the interplay of family and state, etc. (see, e.g., Hill Collins 2015).

A few examples from gender scholarship, both focusing on social reproduction and white women’s investment in gendered and racialized subordination, may help illustrate these points about how structures are simultaneously raced and gendered, relational, and grounded in a particular historic moment. For instance, Stephanie Jones-Rogers’ book *They Were Her Property* provides a visceral account of how white women in antebellum America played a more active

role in slavery than previously assumed. Jones-Rogers shows how white women were often allowed to hold personal wealth in the form of slaves: a prominent exception where assets usually became marital property. In this setting, white women's empowerment as economic agents came at Black enslaved people's direct expense, commodifying black women's reproductive capacity to increase their "investment" or to free themselves from reproductive labor through practices like wet nursing (2019). As another example relevant to stratification economists, Fraser's "Capitalism's Crisis of Care" (2016) illustrates how US capitalist crises around social reproduction (rendering "women's work" in the home both necessary and incompatible with paid work) are often reconciled for white women and their families at the cost of women of color. These studies incorporate new angles to stratification economics' focus on how advantaged groups are invested in maintaining advantage, and the salience of wealth, institutions and power in reproducing inequality.

Taking seriously the multiplicative nature of these component parts, to my mind, should transcend questions about model specification to our working model of the world. That shift may go beyond thinking multiplicatively about variables to a more holistic understanding about power dynamics and their expression. Because there is more than one way of using intersectionality, here I have focused on modes that tap into the tradition's roots. These modes align with stratification economics' intellectual commitments, perhaps more than its empirical methodologies. Scholars in the tradition of stratification economics may gain not only from altering models to fit an intersectional lens, but from reading and engaging with the literature on intersectionality, past and present, to broaden theorizing about stratification.

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