

Intersectionality in Criminology: Enhancing Research and Practice through a Feminist Lens

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Abstract

This essay explores the profound impact of integrating an intersectional feminist approach into criminological research and practice. Intersectionality, as a framework, offers a nuanced understanding of how overlapping identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality affect individuals' experiences with crime and the criminal justice system. By applying this approach, criminology can move beyond traditional analyses that often overlook the complex realities faced by marginalized communities. The essay argues that incorporating intersectional feminist perspectives enriches criminological research by providing deeper insights into the social and structural factors influencing crime and justice. Furthermore, it discusses the potential for intersectional approaches to inform more equitable and just criminal justice policies and practices, thereby addressing disparities and promoting inclusivity. Through a review of literature and case studies, the essay highlights examples where intersectional feminist approaches have led to significant advancements in understanding and addressing issues within law enforcement interactions, judicial processes, and corrections and rehabilitation. It addresses the methodological challenges and institutional barriers to integrating intersectionality into criminology, emphasizing the need for innovative research methods and systemic changes within criminal justice institutions. The conclusion underscores the transformative potential of an intersectional feminist framework in criminology, advocating for its adoption to enhance the discipline's relevance and impact on creating a more equitable and just society. This essay contributes to the ongoing discourse on the importance of intersectionality in criminological research and practice, calling for continued efforts to incorporate these perspectives in the pursuit of comprehensive and inclusive approaches to understanding and addressing crime and justice.

Keywords: *Gender, Fear of crime, Intersectionality, Quality of life, Sustainable development*

Introduction

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, has become foundational within feminist theory and social science research. Crenshaw's seminal work highlighted intersectionality as a critical lens through which to view the overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). This perspective is essential for understanding the complex realities of individuals who navigate multiple marginalized identities, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Intersectionality challenges the notion of universal experiences of oppression, arguing instead

that people experience discrimination differently based on their unique identity combinations. This framework has significantly influenced feminist scholarship, prompting a shift towards more inclusive and reflective analyses of social issues.

Traditional criminology has often focused on crime and deviance as isolated phenomena, primarily through quantitative methodologies that may overlook the nuanced experiences of diverse populations (Potter, 2015). This approach has led to a limited understanding of the complexities of crime, its causes, and its impacts on various communities. The traditional lens has frequently ignored how systemic inequalities and intersecting identities contribute to patterns of criminalization, victimization, and justice administration. As a result, there has been a growing recognition of the need for more inclusive and nuanced approaches within the field. An intersectional feminist perspective can illuminate the ways in which race, class, gender, and other identity markers intersect to shape individuals' interactions with the criminal justice system, offering a more comprehensive understanding of crime and justice.

Incorporating an intersectional feminist approach in criminology can provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of crime and justice. By examining how intersecting identities influence individuals' experiences with crime and the criminal justice system, criminologists can uncover the complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors that contribute to criminal behavior and justice outcomes. This perspective not only enriches criminological research but also guides the development of more equitable policies and practices, ensuring that justice administration is responsive to the needs of all communities, particularly those at the intersections of multiple forms of marginalization.

Theoretical Framework

Definition of Key Terms

Intersectionality: Originally articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality serves as an analytical paradigm to comprehend how facets of an individual's social and political identities—such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability—intersect to produce various experiences of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). This framework critiques prior analytical models that primarily addressed single categories of identity in isolation, thereby neglecting the complex experiences of those with multiple intersecting marginalized identities. Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality emerged from critical legal studies and Black feminist critique, offering a foundational shift in understanding the multidimensional aspects of identity and oppression.

Criminology: Defined as the scientific study of crime, criminal behavior, and the criminal justice system, criminology encompasses the examination of crime's causes, prevention, and rehabilitation. It also scrutinizes the social impacts and regulatory mechanisms of crime control (Sutherland, Cressey, & Luckenbill, 1992). Criminology aims to develop a thorough understanding of crime and justice issues, drawing on theories and methodologies from various disciplines to analyze crime patterns, the effectiveness of different justice policies, and the societal response to crime.

The development of intersectional theory within feminist scholarship marks a critical evolution in addressing the complexities of identity and oppression. Prior to the formal introduction of intersectionality, feminist and anti-racist discourses often addressed gender

and race in mutually exclusive terms, failing to account for the nuanced experiences of individuals at the intersection of these and other identities. The emergence of intersectionality as a key theoretical framework in the late 20th century highlighted the limitations of single-axis analyses and underscored the importance of examining the interconnectedness of various social categories and systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000).

Applying intersectionality to criminological research and practice involves recognizing and analyzing the ways in which intersecting identities impact individuals' experiences with crime, criminalization, and the criminal justice system. This approach challenges criminology to move beyond one-dimensional analyses of crime and to consider the complex interplay of factors that contribute to criminal behavior and justice outcomes. By incorporating intersectional analyses, criminologists can uncover the differential impacts of crime and justice policies on diverse populations, thereby facilitating the development of more equitable and effective interventions (Potter, 2015; Richie, 2012).

Intersectional approaches in criminology have the potential to illuminate the specific vulnerabilities and injustices faced by individuals at the intersections of race, gender, class, and other identities. For instance, studies employing an intersectional framework can reveal how systemic inequalities and biases within the criminal justice system disproportionately affect women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized groups (Richie, 2012; Ranaweera, 2022). Such insights are crucial for informing policy reforms and practices that address the root causes of crime and enhance the fairness and responsiveness of the justice system to the needs of all communities.

Intersectionality in Crime and Victimization

The concept of intersectionality is pivotal in understanding how intersecting identities—such as race, class, gender, and sexuality—affect individuals' risk of victimization, their experiences with crime, and their access to support services. The framework suggests that people with multiple marginalized identities may experience higher rates of victimization and unique forms of crime that are not adequately addressed by existing support systems (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, women of color may face a compounded risk of violence due to both gender and racial discrimination, making it difficult for them to seek help due to distrust in law enforcement or services that do not cater to their specific needs (Richie, 2012). Similarly, LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly transgender people, are at an increased risk of hate crimes and other forms of violence, yet they often encounter barriers to accessing victim services that are inclusive and understanding of their identities (Grant et al., 2011; Ranaweera, 2020).

A study by Richie (2012) focuses on African American women's experiences with domestic violence, highlighting how their attempts to seek help are complicated by systemic racism and sexism. The research illustrates how Black women are often hesitant to report abuse to the police, fearing racialized repercussions for their partners and themselves. This case study underscores the need for domestic violence services that are sensitive to the intersecting oppressions faced by women of color.

Potter's (2015) analysis of sexual assault on college campuses reveals how women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face unique challenges in accessing support and justice. These women may lack the financial resources to navigate legal systems or may not have

access to campus-based support services, illustrating the crucial role of class alongside gender in shaping victims' experiences.

Research by Herek, Gillis, and Cogan (2009) examines the prevalence of hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals, demonstrating how these acts of violence are influenced by both sexual orientation and gender identity. The study highlights the additional challenges LGBTQ+ victims face in reporting crimes and finding supportive services, often due to fear of further discrimination or lack of trust in institutions.

Intersectionality and the Justice System

Intersecting identities significantly influence individuals' interactions with law enforcement, often determining the nature and outcome of these encounters. Research has shown that people at the intersections of marginalized identities, such as Black women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, face disproportionate scrutiny and criminalization (Richie, 2012). For instance, Crenshaw's (1991) exploration into the intersection of race and gender in policing practices reveals that Black women are uniquely vulnerable to both racial profiling and gendered violence, which are often overlooked in broader discussions of police brutality. These dynamics underscore the need for law enforcement training and policies that are informed by an intersectional understanding of identity and oppression.

Disparities in legal proceedings and sentencing are starkly evident when examining the impact of intersecting identities. Studies have found that racial and gender biases significantly affect judicial outcomes, with people of color, and particularly women of color, receiving harsher sentences for similar offenses compared to their white counterparts (Spohn & Holleran, 2000). Moreover, LGBTQ+ individuals often face discrimination and misunderstanding in the legal system, impacting their representation and the fairness of proceedings (Mogul, Ritchie, & Whitlock, 2011). These disparities highlight the crucial role of intersectionality in identifying and addressing the biases embedded within judicial processes.

The treatment of individuals with complex identities within correctional systems further illustrates the challenges and disparities shaped by intersecting identities. Prisons and jails often fail to accommodate the unique needs of women, particularly those of color, and do not adequately address issues such as pregnancy, healthcare, and protection from sexual assault (Richie, 2012). Additionally, transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals face significant risks of violence and discrimination in correctional facilities, with policies and practices inadequately addressing their safety and health needs (Jenness & Fenstermaker, 2014). These issues underscore the importance of applying an intersectional lens to correctional policies and rehabilitation programs to ensure they are inclusive and equitable.

Challenges in Integrating Intersectionality into Criminology

Methodological Issues

Applying an intersectional approach in criminological research presents several methodological challenges, primarily related to data collection and analysis. Traditional research methods often fail to capture the complexity of experiences of individuals with intersecting marginalized identities. For instance, quantitative methods that rely on large

datasets may not adequately account for the nuanced ways in which race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect to influence experiences of crime and justice (Bowleg, 2008). Moreover, the categorization and operationalization of intersectional identities in research can be challenging, as it requires moving beyond binary and simplistic classifications to embrace more fluid and complex understandings of identity (McCall, 2005). These methodological complexities necessitate innovative approaches that can accurately reflect the lived realities of diverse populations.

Institutional Barriers

The integration of intersectionality into criminal justice policies and practices is hindered by institutional barriers that stem from deeply entrenched systems of oppression and discrimination. Many criminal justice institutions operate within frameworks that are resistant to change and that perpetuate inequalities through standardized practices and policies (Potter, 2015). For example, the legal system's reliance on precedent and the bureaucratic nature of law enforcement agencies can impede the adoption of intersectional approaches that require a more nuanced and responsive understanding of crime and victimization (Goodmark, 2011; Ranaweera, 2023). Additionally, the lack of diversity among decision-makers in criminal justice institutions often results in a limited awareness of or commitment to addressing the complex needs of marginalized communities (Sudbury, 2005). Overcoming these institutional barriers requires systemic changes that prioritize inclusivity, equity, and the recognition of intersecting identities in all aspects of criminal justice.

Benefits of an Intersectional Feminist Approach in Criminology

Enhanced Understanding of Crime and Justice

Incorporating an intersectional feminist approach into criminology significantly enriches the field by providing a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the social and structural factors that influence crime and justice. Intersectionality allows researchers to examine how overlapping identities and systems of oppression impact individuals' experiences with crime, policing, and the criminal justice system (Potter, 2015). For instance, Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectionality elucidates the complex ways in which race and gender intersect to shape the experiences of women of color with violence and discrimination, challenging criminology to consider these overlapping identities in research and theory. This enhanced understanding facilitates a more accurate and comprehensive analysis of crime, acknowledging the diverse realities of individuals affected by the criminal justice system.

Equitable Policies and Practices

An intersectional approach holds significant promise for informing more equitable and just criminal justice policies and practices. By recognizing the varied experiences and needs of individuals with intersecting marginalized identities, policymakers and practitioners can develop interventions and reforms that more effectively address disparities in the justice system. Richie's (2012) examination of the treatment of Black women in the criminal justice system illustrates how intersectional insights can guide the development of policies that better protect and support marginalized populations. Additionally, the work by Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock (2011) on the criminalization of LGBTQ+ individuals highlights the potential for

intersectional approaches to challenge discriminatory laws and practices, advocating for legal reforms that respect the rights and dignity of all individuals.

A study by Richie (2012) on the New York City Police Department's stop-and-frisk practices revealed that Black and Latina women were disproportionately targeted, reflecting both racial and gender biases. The findings from this research contributed to a broader critique of stop-and-frisk policies and ultimately informed efforts to reform policing practices, emphasizing the need for law enforcement strategies that do not disproportionately impact marginalized communities.

Owen and Bloom (1995) advocated for gender-responsive strategies in women's correctional facilities, taking into account the unique pathways to crime for women, many of which are influenced by experiences of abuse, poverty, and substance abuse. Their work led to the development of programs that address the specific needs of women in prison, such as trauma-informed care and family reunification efforts, demonstrating how an intersectional lens can improve correctional practices and support rehabilitation.

Conclusion

The adoption of an intersectional feminist approach within criminology offers a transformative pathway toward understanding and addressing the complexities of crime, victimization, and justice. By integrating the principles of intersectionality, criminological research and practice can more accurately reflect the diverse experiences of individuals who navigate multiple layers of identity and oppression. This approach not only enhances our understanding of the social and structural factors influencing crime but also guides the development of equitable policies and practices that recognize and address the specific needs of marginalized communities.

The case studies and examples discussed herein underscore the significant potential of intersectional feminist approaches to drive positive changes in criminological research and justice system reforms. From policing and judicial processes to corrections and rehabilitation, the application of an intersectional lens has illuminated the nuanced challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. These insights are crucial for crafting interventions that are both effective and just, ensuring that the criminal justice system serves all members of society equitably.

As criminology continues to evolve, it is imperative that scholars, policymakers, and practitioners embrace the complexity and richness of intersectional feminist perspectives. Doing so will not only advance the discipline but also contribute to a more just and inclusive society. The journey toward integrating intersectionality into criminology is fraught with challenges, including methodological issues and institutional barriers. However, the benefits of such an approach—namely, a deeper understanding of crime and justice and the promotion of equitable policies—are invaluable. By committing to an intersectional feminist framework, the field of criminology can better address the intricate dynamics of crime and justice in an increasingly diverse and complex world.

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