

Intersectionality and Relational Psychoanalysis: New Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Sexuality

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In 2020, Routledge Press published *Intersectionality and Relational Psychoanalysis: New Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Sexuality*. Edited by Max Belkin and Cleonie White, this collection of articles is part of Donnel Stern's *Psychoanalysis in a New Key* series. This book brings together the writings that examine the links among race, gender, and sexuality through the dual lens of relational psychoanalysis and the theory of intersectionality. In her endorsement, Jessica Benjamin writes that

this volume represents an impressive work of vision, originality and depth that invites us, the readers, to immerse ourselves in the vital reflection on how we are formed by and express the social in our psychic lives and our clinical work.

The analysis of sameness and difference has always been at the core of the psychoanalytic approach to understanding individuals, families, and groups. In addition to acknowledging our shared humanity, relational psychoanalysts have emphasized variability in racial, gender, and sexual identities.

Furthermore, there is a growing interest in exploring the role of gender, sexual, and racial differences in psychotherapy. However, few psychoanalysts have investigated the interactions among gender, sexuality and race from the intersectional perspective.

At the same time, critical race theory, feminism, and queer studies have been examining cultural practices that maintain inequalities based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. While they have been drawing on the works of Freud, Klein, Lacan, and Laplanche, few intersectional studies employ the concepts of the relational school of psychoanalysis. As a result, there is currently a lack of synergy between relational psychoanalytic and intersectional approaches to race, sexuality, and gender.

The authors presented in this edited volume maintain that relational psychoanalysis offers several important insights into the links among gender, sexuality, and race. First, with its focus on the role of traumatic experiences in human development, relational psychoanalysis brings to light the psychological effects of microaggressions, microinvalidations, and microinsults facing racial and sexual minorities and women. Second, drawing on the notions of multiple self-states and dissociation, relational analysts examine people's gendered, racial, and sexual experiences in the context of their personal and professional relationships. Finally, the relational perspective can assist clinicians in reflecting on the gender, sexual, and racial similarities and differences in the psychotherapy office. In order to accomplish these goals, relational psychoanalysts need to approach race, gender, and sexuality from the intersectional vantage point.

Since the 1980s, Crenshaw (1989, 1991), a prominent legal scholar and activist, has made important contributions to both feminism and critical race theory by focusing on the intersection of sexism and racism in the professional and personal lives of women of color in the United States. For example, in 1989, Crenshaw critiqued the existing antidiscrimination law for its failure to recognize the cumulative effects of gender- and race-based oppression on the working African American women. In particular,

the law viewed Black women as similar either to Black men or to White women, thus overlooking Black women's particular experience of marginalization. In contrast, Crenshaw's intersectional analysis of legal cases of work discrimination revealed that many Black women had been excluded from the workforce 'both as women who are Black and as Blacks who are women (2013, p. 790).' Over the last thirty years, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality inspired a broad movement against gender, racial, and sexual discrimination in the workplace, housing, and the legal system.

Building on Crenshaw's insights, contemporary intersectional scholarship has been examining how individuals' race, gender, and sexuality influence one another in historically situated social practices. The intersectional approach to race, gender, and sexuality as historically and culturally contingent markers of identity has opened the door to exploring how our notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality, masculinity and femininity might inform and be shaped by our shifting representations of race. In the words of Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, (2013) what makes an analysis intersectional – whatever its field or discipline – is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power. This framing – conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power – emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is. (p. 795)

The papers presented in *Intersectionality and Relational Psychoanalysis* examine the interplay among race, gender, and sexual orientation in the lives of LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, and women of color from the combined perspectives of relational psychoanalysis and the theory of intersectionality. In Chapter One, 'Who Is Queer Around Here? Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation in Psychotherapy', Max Belkin explores the exchanges between a white gay male analyst and his straight female patient of color. The chapter describes the psychoanalytic process of moving beyond dissociated, binary modes of perceiving one's self and the other. This interpersonal process involves acknowledging the shame- and guilt-riddled aspects of patient's and analyst's experiences of privilege and marginalization. The author maintains that a playful, curious, and soul-searching engagement in enactments can lead to the emergence of a transitional space in which the similarities and differences between the patient's and analyst's gender, race, and sexual orientation can be acknowledged, challenged, and negotiated.

Chapter Two, 'Minding the Gap: Intersections between Gender, Race, and Class in Work with Psychotic Gender-Variant Children', by Avgi Saketopoulou, discusses the author's analytic work with a queer child. Her clinical material illustrates the centrality of thinking intersectionally and argues for the importance of considering the interactions between class, race and gender in inpatient settings. Theorizing gender as a category of experience that can be appropriated towards multiple psychic ends, the author focuses on how race and class were intertwined with gender. She proposes that adopting an intersectional approach to think about how one identity category can inflate others can help us navigate the space between pathology and difference.

Hannah Pocock, in Chapter Three, 'Subordinated Selves: Integrating Intersectional Oppression and the Unconscious Mind in Prostitution Discourse', brings intersectional theory into conversation with relational psychoanalytic thought to examine how the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender shape and sustain the commercial sexual exploitation of women. The author bridges the gap between structural and intrapsychic analyses of prostitution and highlights the interaction between structural oppression and intrapsychic processes that script multiply marginalized women for prostitution. In particular, she challenges the notion of the universal 'sex worker' subject and examines how the perpetuation of this narrative obscures the profoundly raced and classed aspects of commercial sexual exploitation. Furthermore, Pocock illuminates the ways in which contemporary

relational thought, in conjunction with intersectional analysis, inform nuanced theoretical conceptualizations of prostituted women seeking treatment, and psychotherapeutic approaches that honor women's experiences of oppression, internalized subordination, and complex trauma.

In Chapter Four, 'Skin Memories: On Race, Love, and Loss', Sue Grand argues that the ubiquitous rape of African-American slave women by their masters was intersectional at its core: greed, racism and sexism shaped the very origins of the U.S. economy, constructing a class system that continues to be marked by both racism and sexism. According to Grand, while this history is written into the skin of U.S. analysts it has not penetrated psychoanalytic theory, practice, or consciousness. The chapter traces the trans-generational effects of this exploitation through an intimate and intersectional analysis, in which the author, a Russian-Jewish patient, is treated by a light skinned African American analyst. In the transference, the history of slavery emerges: the analyst's apparent whiteness echoes with rape on the plantation. Racial guilt and conflict are threaded through issues of gender and class. These threads are worked through motifs of loss, forced separation, and internalized racism.

Chapter Five, 'Intersectionality in the Immigrant Context', by Pratyusha Tummala-Narra, describes the intersections between the intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences of immigrants and the children of immigrants. The author maintains that mourning of loss associated with immigration is closely connected with the intersections of multiple social locations and identities, privilege and marginalization, in pre-migration and post-migration contexts. This chapter underscores the importance of recognizing both sociopolitical and unconscious processes that underlie complex identifications concerning gender, race, and sexuality.

In Chapter Six, 'Strangers in Paradise: Trevor, Marley, and Me: Reggae Music and the Foreigner Other', Cleonie White examines the ways in which the analyst and patient negotiate mutual experiences of alienation in a shared culture of origin as they encounter experiences of foreignness in a foreign land. As with relational spaces, the construct, 'immigrant' is positioned as a thing in itself – a transitional space – in which Otherness might be interrogated. The work of crossing boundaries at the intersections of race and class is discussed, as two Jamaicans, embedded in the power of Reggae music, engage in psychoanalytic and socio-political dialogue.

Chapter Seven, by Lynne Layton, 'Intersectionality, Normative Unconscious Processes, and Racialized Enactments of Distinction', outlines the ways in which simultaneously interlocking local and global oppressions are subjectively and relationally lived in the clinic. The author articulates an intersectional analysis with her concept of normative unconscious process, which focuses on the ways that clinicians and patients unconsciously reproduce simultaneously interlocking oppressions in their work.

In Chapter Eight, 'Intersectionality Encountering Laplanche: Models of Otherness and the Incomprehensibility of Perpetration', Julie Leavitt and Adrienne Harris examine how the concept of intersectionality brings forward a consciousness of perpetration and difference. Furthermore, the chapter interweaves Crenshaw's ideas of intersectionality with the model of Laplanche, in which interpersonal relationships give rise to different aspects of subjectivity: gender, sexual desire, racial identity, class and cultural formation, and historical markers of trauma. To illustrate these ideas, the authors analyze clinical examples involving white female patients whose whiteness intersects with their gender and sexuality while at the same time obscuring the effects of their white privilege.

Finally, Chapter Nine, 'Intersectionality: From Politics to Identity', by Neil Altman, draws a distinction between the way racial, gender and sexual orientation are structured in language and the way they

are lived. In particular, Altman posits that whenever race, gender, and sexual orientation are viewed as isolated and polarized categories of identity, they turn into stereotypes and fail to do justice to the complexity of lived experience. In fact, he argues, a person's location on the racial, gender, and sexual orientation continuum changes over time along with shifts in the interpersonal context. When race, gender, and sexual orientation intersect, as they always do, the complexity of lived experience increases geometrically as each dimension interacts with the others.

References

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