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What is intersectionality and why do I need it?

"I'M SO SORRY," I SAID AS MY PHONE BUZZED AGAIN, "Can you excuse me for a minute? I have this—thing I need to take care of with my kids really quick."

My dinner companion graciously nodded in reply and I rushed upstairs to my hotel room, to my laptop. "Come on . . . come on . . . " I said to myself as I tried to quickly run the online program. I knew that every minute this took made me more and more rude, and more and more a liar. No, there was no issue with my kids, and yes, it's pretty shitty to use them as an excuse (hey, consider it a rare indulgence for single parents). But I was damned if I was going to say, "Sorry, I have to leave our dinner to go run a program to block thousands of Twitter trolls who think I hate black men before this

shit goes viral and I can never use Twitter again." There's no rescuing dinner after that.

It had started quietly enough weeks earlier. I had found out that a famous black male musician was coming to town to perform. This musician (who shall remain nameless) was long believed by many, including myself, to be a sexual predator of multiple young black women and teenage girls. How could a man so notorious for suspicion of such heinous offenses sell out an arena in liberal Seattle? How was this man still rich and famous? I tweeted out some of my frustration, expressing the desire that, if he'd never see jail time due to a society that did not value black womanhood, he would at least be forever reminded of his misdeeds in any venture he tried to undertake. Plus a lot of swear words. I was angry. I really care about the plight of black women and girls. The Tweets got some likes and a few retweets, but, as I said, society doesn't really value black womanhood, and the conversation didn't gain much traction.

That is, until, Hotep Twitter got hold of my Tweets. To Hotep Twitter (think black men's rights activists with the added fun of wildly inaccurate Egyptian origin mythology, on Twitter), the fact that I would use so many swear words on a black man accused of assaulting multiple young black women led them to only one conclusion: I hated black men.

Not only did I hate black men, but I was on the side of the lynch mobs, on the side of the school-to-prison pipeline. I was the house Negro, the high-yellow bed wench who'd spread her legs for her white master (for real, these are words that have been sent to me). And before I knew what was happening, I had thousands of angry black men (and some black

women) interrupting my dinner with buzzes on my phone notifying me that they were working as hard as possible to drown my Twitter feed in hatred.

To those clamoring to send me hateful messages, I had betrayed black people with my comments against a black musician. I had taken the side of white oppressors by speaking so publicly about a black man's crimes. But this is because their idea of blackness and the oppressions that black people face did not include black women and the specific oppressions we face from being both black *and* women. While they were fighting to defend this black man, they were giving little thought to his black female victims or the other black women who may have been harmed by seeing someone so widely known for harming black women lauded so publicly. This sort of hurtful denial of the various oppressions that I and many others have to navigate is something I'm often forced to confront—in office meetings, in social justice forums, in feminist activist groups, in government and social programs aimed at fighting inequality—and, most often, on the Internet.

I'd seen the consequences of this sort of anger at people who demand that their various identities be taken into account when discussing larger social groups and I'd seen how quickly this anger can turn into a full-scale online mob. I'd seen how these campaigns of harassment can take on a life of their own; lasting weeks, months—even years. I knew that it could lead to doxxing campaigns, where angry Internet vigilantes publish your home address and work info to the masses. I knew that there was a limited amount of time to contain this problem before there would be no saving my online presence and I'd have to leave my Twitter account for dead. Twitter

may seem to many like a frivolous thing to be in a panic over, but it is not just a fun online community for me. Twitter is a huge part of my job. As a black woman, it is very hard to build a platform for your writing in a white male–dominated industry that shows little interest in giving black women regular columns or placing them behind a news anchor's desk. Twitter is a huge tool in finding and maintaining my audience, and it is how many editors who want to commission the work of women of color find me. I simply could not afford to be pushed off of that platform. I scrambled to block as many of these attackers as I could in an attempt to stem this assault in as much time as I felt I could be away without worrying my very patient dinner companion too much or making her feel abandoned. Then I closed my laptop, said an atheist prayer for the best, and went back downstairs to apologize and finish dinner.

By the next day, the uproar had mostly died down. I'd been able to cut off access to my account to a large number of Twitter users that online instigators were hoping to send to my page to harass me. When the return on troll investment (the barrage of hate met with my frantic pleas and denials) had proved underwhelming, the bullies had moved on.

I breathed a sigh of relief at the crisis averted. But then I was almost as quickly overcome with sadness. All I had done was express anger at the abuse of black women, all I had done was ask people to care about us as they did about others. All I had done was ask for the fight for black lives to include black women, too, and for that, I had to block tens of thousands of black people—my people—who wanted me to pay for my audacity.

And I, like so many other prominent black women on social media, felt very alone and very abused. Because in our struggle for justice and equality, we are often exploited and discarded. White women will heap praise on my words calling for the destruction of the patriarchy, and then turn around and ask why I have to "be so divisive" or say dismissively that I "sound like Al Sharpton" when I dare bring up race. Black men will follow me by the dozens after each essay I write calling out White Supremacy, but will forget all of that and call me a "feminist tool of slave masters" when I demand that black women be treated with respect and dignity by everyone—even black men. And even though Black Lives Matter was founded by black women, even though black women have been at the heart of every feminist movement in this country's history—nobody marches for us when we are raped, when we are killed, when we are denied work and equal pay. Nobody marches for us.

Intersectionality, the belief that our social justice movements must consider all of the intersections of identity, privilege, and oppression that people face in order to be just and effective, is the number one requirement of all of the work that I do. When I first learned about intersectionality in college, I honestly had no idea what a huge part of my life it would later become. What was at first an interesting if not abstract theory I wrote about for college papers became a matter of my political, social, spiritual, and yes, even physical survival. Because I am not capable of cutting myself to pieces. I'm not capable of cutting away my blackness in order to support feminism that views the needs of women of color as divisive inconveniences. I'm not capable of cutting away womanhood in order to stand

by black men who prey on black women. I'm a black woman, each and every minute of every day—and I need you to march for me, too.

WHILE THIS BOOK IS ABOUT RACE, I'M SURE YOU KNOW that we as people are far more than just our race. But even further, our experience of race is shaped by far more than just our skin color and hair texture. And just as racial identity is not the only type of identity in our society, racial oppression is not the only form of oppression in our society. Racial privilege is not the only form of privilege in our society.

Each of us has a myriad of identities—our gender, class, race, sexuality, and so much more—that inform our experiences in life and our interactions with the world. As we saw when we were checking our privilege, the different hierarchies, privileges, and oppressions assigned to these identities affect our lives in many ways. These privileges and oppressions do not exist in a vacuum, however, and can combine with each other, compound each other, mitigate each other, and contradict each other.

We walk through the world with all our identities at once and therefore our day has an endless number of possible combinations of outcomes depending on how individual events and situations we encounter interact with our individual identities.

I'm a black, queer woman. If I'm harassed on the street, I don't know if it is because I'm black, if it's because I'm a woman, or if it's because I'm queer. In fact, it may be all three reasons at once. But many of our social justice movements would fail to consider the ways in which our multiple

identities interact, or intersect (for example, when feminist groups are discussing how to fight the street harassment of women).

As a black, queer, middle-class woman, my queer identity may often be overlooked by anti-racist or feminist movements; my female identity may be overlooked by anti-racist or queer movements; my black identity may be overlooked by feminist or queer movements; and my middle-class identity may well cause me to overlook poor people in all movements. And when that happens, none of them can really help me or many others.

This is very often the case in our movements, and our society at large. Feminist movements, for example, often fail to consider the different needs and challenges that many women of color face when they differ from what white women face. I've done a fair amount of work in support of reproductive rights, and I'm still surprised at how often reproductive rights groups claim that they are fighting for reproductive rights for all women, yet consistently ignore the documented racial bias in the medical field that keeps many women of color from accessing reproductive healthcare, regardless of law.

So how does this happen? How do our social justice efforts so often fail to help the most vulnerable in our populations? This is primarily a result of unexamined privilege. Because of how rarely our privilege is examined, even our social justice movements will tend to focus on the most privileged and most well represented people within those groups. Anti-racism groups will often tend to prioritize the needs of straight men of color, feminist groups will tend to prioritize the needs of white women, LGBTQ groups will tend to pri-

oritize the needs of white gay cisgender men, disability rights groups will tend to prioritize the needs of disabled white men. Imagine where this leaves a disabled Latinx trans woman on any group's priority list. Because the needs of the most privileged are usually the ones prioritized, they are often the only ones considered when discussing solutions to oppression and inequality. These solutions, not surprisingly, often leave the underprivileged populations in our movements behind.

The idea of intersectionality provides a more inclusive alternative to the status quo. Coined by the brilliant race theorist and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term "intersectionality" was born from Crenshaw's work to shed light on the ways in which experiences in both race and gender intertwine to uniquely impact the lives of black women and women of color. Crenshaw referred to those intersections of race and gender as intersectionality and stressed the need to consider intersectionality in our social justice movements.

Intersectionality as a theory and practice was quickly adopted by prominent black feminists to describe the need they saw for a more holistic view of race and gender. From there intersectionality spread to a large section of feminist scholarship and activism and was expanded to include class, ability, and sexuality as well.

Intersectionality, and the necessity of considering intersectionality, applies to more than just our social justice efforts. Our government, education system, economic system, and social systems all should consider intersectionality if they have any hope of effectively serving the public.

Intersectionality helps ensure that fewer people are left behind and that our efforts to do better for some do not make

things far worse for others. Intersectionality helps us stay true to our values of justice and equality by helping to keep our privilege from getting in our way. Intersectionality makes our systems more effective and more fair.

So if intersectionality makes all of our social justice efforts so much better, why isn't it a more prominent part of our social justice movements? I believe there are many reasons that may be why social justice movements have been slow to adopt intersectional practices:

- **Intersectionality slows things down.** The simple truth is, when you are only considering the needs of a select few, it's a lot easier to make what looks like progress than when you have to consider the needs of a diverse group of people. This is where you often hear people say things like, "Well, let's just work on what the majority needs first and we'll get to the rest later."
- **Intersectionality brings people face-to-face with their privilege.** People, in general, do not like to recognize the ways in which they may be unfairly advantaged over other people. To embrace intersectionality is to also embrace the knowledge of those advantages and to acknowledge that your advantages may have kept you from first seeing the disadvantages others face. This becomes even stickier in social justice movements where you are targeting oppression. When you are supposed to be fighting the evils of "the man" you don't want to realize that you've become "the man" within your own movement.
- **Intersectionality decentralizes people who are used to being the primary focus of the movements they**

are a part of. If your needs have always been among the prioritized in your social justice movements, that is going to feel like the natural order of things for you. It may well have not even occurred to you that others within your movement have never felt prioritized. While you may, in theory, want others to have equal priority within your movements, when put into practice, that does mean less time and attention for your specific needs—and that can feel really unfair, even if it isn't.
- **Intersectionality forces people to interact with, listen to, and consider people they don't usually interact with, listen to, or consider.** People like to form groups with people they consider "similar" to themselves. Many of us spend a lot of our days with "people like us"—people with similar backgrounds, goals, identities, and personalities. This is human nature. This also means that our social justice efforts often self-segregate in this way as well. Intersectionality requires that we break free from these divides and reach out to people we have not reached out to in the past. While many people would not consider this unpleasant, it is often uncomfortable—at least at first.

These challenges to intersectionality are not easy to overcome, but it is worth the effort. I strongly believe that the vast majority of people who set out to fight racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression do so because they really do want to make the world a better place for all people. But if you don't embrace intersectionality, even if you make progress for some, you will look around one day and find that you've become the oppressor of others.

So how do you increase the intersectionality in your discussions of race? Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- **How might race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, or sex impact this subject?** You don't have to have the exact answers to this question, but asking it of yourself will give you ideas of other viewpoints to seek out.
- **Could the identity differences between me and the person I'm talking with about race be contributing to our differences of opinion or perspective?**
- **Are the people in my racial justice conversations and the opinions being considered truly representing the diversity of identities that interact with the subject matter being addressed?**
- **Does my scholarship of racial justice reflect the diversity of identities impacted by racial oppression?** Who writes the books and articles I'm using to help inform my opinions?
- **Am I listening to people whose identities and experiences differ from mine?**
- **Am I looking for what I don't know?** Am I asking people if they notice anything missing from my racial justice efforts?
- **Am I shifting some focus and power away from the most privileged in the conversation?** Am I letting those we don't hear from very often speak first? Am I making conversation accessible to everyone who wants to participate? Am I prioritizing the opinions of those who are often overlooked?

- **Am I providing a safe space for marginalized people to speak out?** If you find yourself saying, "Well, disabled people never talk to me about this" or, "I just never hear from black women," then you need to ask yourself why and what you can do to make people feel safe to speak up around you. Privilege has been used to silence people for so long, that you will need to put out the effort to let people know that you will value and respect their input. Don't expect that trust to form immediately with your intentions.

It's not enough for you to personally believe in intersectionality. We need to start demanding intersectionality of all those who seek to join us in our social justice movements. If you want to call attention to the need for greater focus on intersectionality in your discussions of race and racial justice efforts, here are some things to remember:

- **Most people don't know what intersectionality is, and unknown words can put people on the defensive.** You may need to explain further, with examples of the intersecting identities not being considered, if you don't want people to just pretend like they understand but then never put intersectionality into practice.
- **It's often best to start first with real-life examples of how this conversation or project could be more intersectional.**
- **The concept of intersectionality is more easily understood when viewed as an opportunity to do better**

and do more, instead of just an examination of the ways in which these efforts are failing.

- **Intersectionality is absolutely always important to all discussions of race and social justice; do not let other people bully you out of prioritizing it.** It is important that our efforts to end oppression for some do not perpetuate oppression of others.

Remember, while embracing intersectionality is vital for our efforts of fighting racism and other oppression, it applies to all aspects of our lives, not just our movements. Who gets to speak at company meetings? Whom do you vote for? How is your child's school curriculum developed? Who is considered when developing environmental policy? Everything we do publicly can be made more inclusive and uplifting with intersectionality, and everything we do can become exclusionary and oppressive without it. Intersectionality, and the recognition and confrontation of our privilege, can make us better people with better lives.