Introduction to intersectionality

My name is Elizabeth Wynn, I'm the Equality and Diversity Manager at the Babraham Institute, and today I'm going to be giving you an introduction to intersectionality. I'm going to cover the origin and development of this term and idea as well as explain how it can be used to better understand and challenge inequality.

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberl é Crenshaw. She first used it in a paper she published in 1989: Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.

So you'll notice that this was published in a legal journal and Crenshaw was, and still is, a legal scholar, so she was talking about discrimination in the legal context in the United States. She had come across a lot of cases in the 70s and 80s where black women were bringing discrimination cases that the courts were unable or unwilling to prosecute.

(Sorry, we ve got the cat joining us now.)

So I'm not, she references three specific cases in this paper, and I'm not going to go into them in any detail, but just to give a summary of the type of thing that she was observing. At in this time in the States, there were a lot of automotive plants, manufacturing plants that would have jobs for women, so secretarial and admin jobs, but they would only hire white women in them, and they'd have jobs for Black people that were manufacturing, floor work jobs, but they would only hire Black men.

So this left black women who wanted to work there in a very difficult position because they found it very difficult to get jobs and if they did get jobs at these types of factories then it would be difficult for them to get promotions. But when they brought discrimination cases against their employers, the courts would say, well, this isn't an issue of gender discrimination because women as a whole aren't affected, and it's not an issue of race discrimination because Black people as a whole aren't discriminated against. So Crenshaw felt that there was dearly a gap in the legal system that meant that these cases of discrimination weren't being understood and therefore they

The Combahee River Collective Statement which waspublished in 1977, I'm just going to read this highlighted part here. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.

Both of these groups, they're not using the word intersectionality but they're dearly talking about the same issues: the fact that there's no way to combat discrimination by focusing on individual categories, because that's not the reality of people's lived experiences.

And the reason that a lot of people were thinking about this at this time, Black women in America in the 70s and 80s, is because this was a development of Black women's experiences in the 60s with the divil rights and women's liberation. So when black women were involved in the divil rights movement, they found that they experienced sexism. When they were involved in women's liberation movements, they found they experienced racism. And they also found that in both cases, the issues that those movements were focusing on weren't necessarily the ones that were most important and relevant to them.

So this is the context in which Kimberlé Crenshaw developed her theory of intersectionality. As I said it wasn't a new thing, a new idea. She just came up with this word which described the phenomenon quite well. And as I said she came up with this word in 1989, over 30 years ago now, and it was quickly picked up in academic legal circles and I think it's important to also note that all three of these movements are led by Black women and women of colour. Black women and women of colour have absolutely been leading the way on this, on this issue.

So Crenshaw did not give a single definition of intersectionality in her paper. One milestone, I guess, in intersectionality becoming more mainstream wasit being added to dictionaries. It was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015 and they define it as: The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, dass, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

So this is the definition. It hink it's quite dense and I also don't know how good of an explanation it is so I'm going to try to give more of an explanation, and I hope that, I hope that you find it useful. So in defining what intersectionality is:

It's acknowledging the fact that people experience the world differently based on their combination of characteristics. So that's our Venn diagram. Intersectionality is also a lensfor understanding the ways different forms of inequality work together. And in fact, they can often make each other worse. It's also a framework for challenging discrimination and inequality.

So it is a very complex idea and the fact that it has these different facets, it can be quite confusing if someone doesn't specify when they're talking about intersectionality how they mean it. So I don't think it's strange that there is a lot of confusion around what exactly intersectionality means.

I'm going to move on now to talking about intersectionality as a lens and a framework, but before I do I want to quickly talk about what intersectionality isn't because intersectionality is often misunderstood and mischaracterised. So intersectionality is not about a new hierarchy of victimhood, identity politics on steroids, or oppression Olympics. There's sometimes this misconception around intersectionality that it's about, Oh, that person has six marginalised identities and you only have two so they are more important and worthy person than you, or something. T

Another thing is that we can notice is that within ethnic groups, the average difference between men and women scalaries also varies. So, for example, for white and Black people, the gender pay gap is more pronounced than it is for Chinese and East Asian or Arab people.

I have another example, and this one's from America so the ethnic categories used here are different than the ones we use in the UK. And this is about reasons women with STEM degrees take jobs outside of their field. This is something that EDI work in STEM focuses on quite often. Women tend to leave STEM and leave academia at higher rates than men and figuring out why and how we can bring those rates more in line is a major focus of a lot of EDI work in STEM. But this data shows that the reasons women leave them can vary a lot depending on their ethnicity.

Native Hawai ian Pacific Islanders overwhelmingly leave because of family reasons, whereas Black women are primarily leaving STEM because they can't find jobs and Hispanic women cite working conditions