The Vitality of an Intersectional Perspective When Considering the Social Identity and Oppression of African American Women

“Am I Blue?” is a personal essay written by Alice Walker in 1986, who is not only an author but also an activist for marginalized groups and participated in the Civil Rights Movement. The oppression experienced by African Americans inspired this movement to fight for racial equality and to end racial discrimination. But it did not include all types of oppression: sexism, animal oppression, and LGBTQ+ discrimination. In the essay “Am I Blue?” Alice Walker portrays the intersectional nature of various types of oppression, including racism and sexism, by claiming that the common cause of all oppression is the lack of empathy and communication of humans. Intersectionality refers to the overlaps between different social identities and emphasizes that the identities are not mutually exclusive of each other. When specifically examining the identities of African American women and the oppression they encounter, studies agree with Walker’s perspective on the essential nature of considering the intersectionality between race and gender when investigating the characteristics of identity, oppression, as well as legal and psychological consequences for African American women due to the combined oppression.

Since African American women are oppressed in terms of race and gender, their experiences with identity and oppression are unique. The concept of self-identity and types of oppression differs from individual-to-individual; however, there are overlaps and broad categories of how African American women view themselves, the oppression they face, and its long-term effects on their psychological health. The rationale behind the importance of recognizing the intersectional nature of race and gender to understand the social identities and oppression endured by African American women arises from the notion that viewing both social
groups as mutually exclusive results in policies or studies that do not include African American women. In other words, solely anti-racial policies result in the oppression of women and feminist policies result in the oppression of racial minorities. As African American women belong at the intersection of marginalization of race and gender, ignoring either social group in making policies or conducting studies results in the exclusion of African American women. This exclusion coupled with double oppression causes detrimental psychological effects on the women.

Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined the term “intersectionality” based on race and gender in 1989, highlights the specific disadvantages of African American women who fight in court cases for equality in their workplaces. The discrimination of African American women is complex in that some court cases like DeGraffenreid vs General Motors do not recognize the specific discrimination of employing African American women in the General Motors company since the plaintiff did not identify with either racially or gender disadvantaged (Crenshaw 141-147). Five African American women had filed a case against the employers of General Motors for having a seniority system job lay off that discriminated against African American women. The employers only hired African American women after 1964 and laid off all African American women that were hired after 1970. The court did not recognize this as marginalization because it was afraid that African American women would receive a “double advantage” by identifying with a combination of minorities (Crenshaw 142). However, this instance can only be a “double disadvantage” for them since the case was dismissed as the plaintiff did not conform to the mainstream oppression of either African Americans or women. Contrastingly, other cases such as Moore vs Hughes Helicopter Inc. and Payne vs. Travenol conceive the discrimination of African American women as completely exclusive and do not allow the plaintiffs to generalize
their discrimination to neither their race (to include African American men) nor their gender (to include white women) (Crenshaw 148).

In short, the experiences and prejudices dealt with by African American women are based on racism, sexism, and often a combination of both – which results in discrimination that is exclusive to Black women. The failure of courts or, in a broader sense, society to realize the uniqueness of African American women’s discrimination and prejudices arises from acceptances of “mainstream” discrimination. Basing gender oppression on white female prejudices and race oppression on the disadvantages of African American men excludes African American women in the question of studies. Although this study is based on cases in 1989, Crenshaw’s plea to broaden views on discrimination by acknowledging the intersectional nature of race and gender is still relevant in the 21st century. Prejudice against African American women persists, even decades after Crenshaw introduced the “intersectional” lens in viewing discrimination. Thus, her argument of utilizing intersectionality to identify and recognize the discrimination against Black women is valid.

Even in young African American adolescent females, an intersectional approach to determining their sense of identity and prejudice is crucial. In Lisa Harrison’s interview-based study of four young African American adolescents from the Southeastern region of America, one can observe the instances of a collection of racism and sexism endured by these females. For example, dress-coding is generally viewed as gender discrimination as more restrictions and regulations on clothing are placed on women than men. Interestingly, the four adolescent females in this study stated that they were dress coded more often and severely than their white counterparts. Jamila, one of the Black female adolescents in the study, had stated, “Jane be wearing those short skirts and then those leggings and she don’t even get warnings like a Black
person gets warnings”” (Harrison 1031). This statement clearly portrays Crenshaw’s point that the discrimination endured by African American women is unique compared to mainstream racism and sexism since the young African American girls are discriminated against their teachers because they are prejudiced in terms of race and gender. In other words, the specific identity of “African American women” places these girls in a position where they are dress coded more often than white females who violate the dress code. Likewise, this statement cannot be connected solely to racial or gender oppression as Black males and white females are not as affected in this circumstance.

Moreover, the girls in the study state that society, and sometimes even themselves, view African American female students as “loud” and “wild” with a negative connotation (Harrison 1031). This implication can be related to societal standards that place “white” “femaleness” and characteristics above those that are “black” (Harrison 1031). For instance, another girl in the study, Talia, had mentioned a club called “Ladies of Lewis”” which taught young girls the “proper etiquette” of eating, talking, and even sitting. The author, from Talia’s description of the program, could recognize the “Eurocentric middle-class perspectives of femininity” that were imposed on all the girls (Harrison 1030). In this instance, one can note racism embedded in gender as the “definition of a woman” is itself sexist since the teachers set down a specific doctrine of what a woman can or cannot do. Furthermore, there is a racist component to which only the white standards of being a woman is acceptable, excluding the cultural characteristics of African American women. This racism and the notion that black femininity is inferior to white femininity are rooted in history. In Alice Walker’s “Am I Blue,” she mentions how mammies, black women who nurse and aid in the upbringing of white children, were bought and sold as commodities (139). If the women themselves were treated like inanimate objects for sale, their
culture was not accepted by the white hegemonic society in the colonial era. This objectification of African American women and their culture, which is based in history, has evolved to become discrimination and suppression of Black women and culture in the forms of dress-coding and teaching white femininity as the “correct form” of femininity.

As Crenshaw had stated, when there is discrimination within a class of minorities, this “implicit” prejudice is often not recognized (151). Here, the subtle racism in teaching femininity results in discrimination and influence in the Black female adolescents’ minds that their culture or characteristics are not simply unique, but also subordinate to the hegemonic views in Southeastern society. Although these young girls did acknowledge that there were exceptions to the negative stereotypes of African American girls by considering their own values and behaviors that defy the norm, these girls were still severely influenced by the mainstream “loud” and ghetto” labels on Black females and seemed to accept these stereotypes to an extent. In stark contrast, a study of the “gendered racial identity” of older African American women by Martinque K. Jones and Susan X. Day reveals that many of the women in the study view Black womanhood as “strong” and “independent,” which are positive adjectives describing social identity. Perhaps, one could argue that this discrepancy between the views of young and older African Americans could stem from maturity. However, there is more nuanced reasoning behind this discrepancy.

It is evident in the research conducted by Jones and Day that African American women (between the ages of 19-29) have a more positive view on their social identity since they acknowledge the strength and resilience of Black women to fight and overcome the prejudices in society. In the study, the researchers determined that there are four main types of identities within African American women: intersectionally aware, intersectionally engaged, race
progressive, and gender expressive (Jones et al., 8-10). Intersectionally engaged women to emphasize the resilience and strength of Black women to overcome the double oppression of race and gender by working “two steps ahead” and fighting harder. This mentality of working hard and the ability to overcome severe adversities of oppression highlights the stronger and bolder view of African American women in this group. Intersectionally aware women, like the intersectionally engaged, realize the boldness of their social group to overcome prejudices but focus more on the compound discrimination of race and gender. They also realize their importance in the African American community as “nurturing females” and raising future generations. Racially progressive women feel that society views them as first Black, then female, and recognizes gender oppression in Black communities. Furthermore, gender expressive females place more importance on being a female and view themselves as “strong and beautiful,” as an attribute of Black womanhood (Jones et al. 8-10).

Regardless of the type of identity, one can clearly determine the combination of race and gender in influencing the social identities of African American women. Moreover, unlike the young African American girls who had an overall negative view on their “gendered racial identity,” the African American women in this study generally viewed themselves as strong and resilient. An interpretation of this discrepancy could be that in their earlier stages of life, younger African American girls tend to mostly agree passively to the negative societal norms placed on them. However, they also start to question and recognize society’s prejudiced views on African American women during their adolescence. For example, in Harrison’s study the adolescents, though called African American girls as generally “loud,” also started to acknowledge racism in dress coding policies and teaching of white feminine culture. The older women in the study conducted by Jones and Day seem to fully recognize the double prejudices dealt with by African
American women in terms of race and gender. However, their ability to overcome these prejudices have given them a more positive view of African American women, as being strong and resilient. Perhaps if the adolescent females in Harrison’s study become older and have experienced more such prejudice and their strength to overcome it, they will have a more positive view of their intersectional identity.

However, prejudice is still toxic and has negative impacts on African American women. In fact, African American women are more susceptible to experiencing psychological distress and negative effects on mental health since they are at the intersection of prejudiced racial and gender identities: African American and female. Thus, an intersectional approach of race and gender was taken by the authors in a survey-type study to determine the impact of racism and sexism on the mental health of African American females (Stevens-Walkins et al. 563-564). In the survey, the authors asked African American women about the scale of racist experiences, sexist experiences, employment and finances, personal injury or loss, social network loss, lifetime victimization, childhood victimization, childbirth, and motherhood, as well as psychological distress.

The study reveals why intersectionality is key in studying the prejudices and mental health of African American women because racist and sexist experiences had the highest correlation. This finding portrays that African American women are more likely to undergo more sexist experiences when there are more racist experiences and vice versa. According to the study, sexism is positively correlated with every type of stressor, and racism is positively correlated with almost every type of stressor, except childhood victimization as well as childbirth and motherhood. Also, there is a high correlation between racist and sexist experiences and the increased psychological distress of African American women (Stevens-Walkins et al., 565).
Although correlation does not mean causation, this article sheds light on the interconnectedness of racist and sexist oppression of African American women and the likelihood of more psychological distress due to the combination of both prejudices. As African American women, the minority group experiences a combination of sexist and racist experiences that may cause greater psychological distress.

Thus, an intersectional approach is a key to determining the social identities, prejudices, and their effects on African American women. The studies discussed portray the evolving identities of African American women, from viewing themselves with a negative connotation when they were young to a bolder and more positive view of themselves as they got older in response to the double, racist and sexist, prejudices against their identity. This compound marginalization also causes negative mental health effects on African American women, urging for more intersectional approaches to study the oppression and psychological well-being of African American women.


