

# How does Intersectionality Relate to Indigenous and Western Linking Frameworks?

## What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality is a theory and practice that challenges reductive or simplistic ways of understanding difference.<sup>1</sup> It acknowledges that people's experiences can be shaped by their race, gender, class, and other dimensions, and cannot be understood well by examining any one dimension by itself. By considering how social relations and structures create differing experiences within and between people, intersectionality can help us to think about how people can have a variety of experiences within "Indigenous" and "Western" ways of knowing. It can also encourage us to be careful when we are linking "Indigenous" and "Western" knowledges so that we avoid being too simplistic.

Intersectionality is interested primarily in people and social relations whereas many Indigenous knowledges view all beings (not just human beings) and natural elements as interconnected and interdependent. However, both intersectionality and Indigenous ways of knowing help us to think about how to conduct research and how to understand experiences as multidimensional and constantly changing.<sup>2</sup>

## What does intersectionality offer to Indigenous and Western linking frameworks?

An intersectional analysis can help researchers to build common ground between Indigenous and Western worldviews, by examining how power works on both sides. This facilitates connections across difference, and opportunities for building coalitions of resistance. An intersectional perspective can also help us to link different worldviews without erasing differences between them, because it upholds the complexity and specificity of each.

"Intersectionality may provide a path forward to expand from the Western-Indigenous duality embedded in [some linking] frameworks. The tricky piece is how to respect that Indigenous knowledge systems are nation/culture-specific. Pan-Indigenous approaches are problematic."<sup>3</sup>

*This is one of a series of five fact sheets drawn from a research paper called Learning across Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and intersectionality: Reconciling social science research approaches (2018) by L. Levac, L. McMurtry, D. Stienstra, G. Baikie, C. Hanson and D. Mucina. The fact sheets were authored by J. Stinson, designed by Ellyn Lusia and Tiffany Murphy, and formatted by B. Ryan. The fact sheets, full research paper, and related resources are available at [www.criaw-icref.ca](http://www.criaw-icref.ca).*

## What do linking frameworks offer intersectionality?

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Linking frameworks can help researchers expand intersectionality theory, to better account for how colonialism affects all of the intersecting systems of power in colonized spaces such as North America.<sup>5</sup> “Red intersectionality” is an idea created by an Indigenous scholar to advance this kind of analysis.<sup>6</sup>

The linking frameworks also bring a more strengths-based approach to intersectionality’s understanding of peoples’ experiences. Whereas intersectionality often focuses on understanding experiences of disempowerment, the linking frameworks highlight the strength of Indigenous worldviews.

The following quotes come from scholars and wisdom keepers who reflect on the importance of considering Indigenous knowledge systems in discussions of intersectionality:

*“[Red Intersectionality] provides the tools to theorize not only the past but the current forces of colonialism.... [It] recognizes the importance of local and traditional tribal/nation teachings, and the intergenerational connection between the past and the present, while also recognizing the emergent diversity of Indigenous girlhood...and the construction of Indigenous girls through the Indian Act. A Red intersectional perspective of Indigenous girls and violence does not center the colonizer, nor replicate the erasure of Two-Spirit and trans peoples in our communities, but, instead...attends to the many intersecting factors...and a commitment to activism and Indigenous sovereignty.... Any social justice action or outcomes must be situated within a framework that holds onto tradition and intergenerational knowledge [and] modern Indigenous struggles...”<sup>7</sup>*

*“It has often struck me during the times I’ve worked in Indigenous perspective, let’s not come at this from a deficit perspective, let’s not look at all the things that are wrong. I think when we come at this asking what are the strengths we can move forward in ways that lead for everyone.”<sup>8</sup>*

*“Are two-spirit[ed people] understood as only marginalized or are they also understood as leaders, role-models and gifted with Indigenous teachings?... Although Indigenous cultures had, and continue to have, their own understandings of gender that are distinct from the binary of men and women, colonialism has entailed the imposition of Western gender norms through the Indian Act, residential schools and other colonial systems. How might intersectional frameworks account for these complex relationships to both colonial and Indigenous systems of gender?”<sup>9</sup>*

## Conclusion

Since intersectional thinking pays attention to the complexity of difference, it may help to prevent the assimilation, generalization, and loss of Indigenous ways of knowing that can be at risk when researchers attempt to link Indigenous and Western approaches to knowledge creation. In turn, intersectional theory gains insight into the effects of colonialism by paying attention to Indigenous ways of knowing.



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## References

- <sup>1</sup> See Hancock, A.-M. (2007). When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm. *Perspectives on Politics*, 5(1), 63-79. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20446350>; Collins, P. H. & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Cambridge UK & Malden MA: Polity; Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139-167; Collins, P. H. (1998). It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race and Nation. *Hypatia*, 13(3), 62-82; Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy. (2012). Summary of Themes: Dialogue on Intersectionality and Indigeneity. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. Coast Salish Territories, Vancouver, B.C.: Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy.
- <sup>2</sup> Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis. *Signs*, 38(4), 785-810. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/669608>
- <sup>3</sup> Lavoie, personal communication, March 10, 2017
- <sup>4</sup> Hancock, A.-M. (2007). When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm. *Perspectives on Politics*, 5(1), 63-79. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20446350>
- <sup>5</sup> Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy. (2012). Summary of Themes: Dialogue on Intersectionality and Indigeneity. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. Coast Salish Territories, Vancouver, B.C.: Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, 12.
- <sup>6</sup> Clark, N. (2016). Red Intersectionality and Violence-informed Witnessing Praxis with Indigenous Girls. *Girlhood Studies*, 9(2), 46-64. doi:10.3167/ghs.2016.090205
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 52.
- <sup>8</sup> Bartlett, personal communication, April 25.
- <sup>9</sup> Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy. (2012). Summary of Themes: Dialogue on Intersectionality and Indigeneity. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. Coast Salish Territories, Vancouver, B.C.: Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, 8-9.