

Research on the Interactive Mechanism between Identity Categories and Power Relations in Intersectionality Theory

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Abstract. Intersectionality theory is an important component of critical theory today and is of great value for understanding complex personal identities and the operation of power. Based on the theory of intersectionality, this paper discusses the relationship between identity and power in order to better understand the varying degrees of power influence an individual experiences at the intersection of multiple identities. By examining the relevant literature and summarizing the theory, we first review the development of the intersectionality theory, starting with the research of Kimberly Krenshaw, and analyze his contributions to the analysis of identities in terms of gender, race, class, etc. The study suggests that identity is not a fixed label but varies according to the specific social and cultural context, and there are relationships of interweaving, overlapping and interacting among different identities. Power plays a significant role in this, being the basis for the formation of identity and also through which it is realized and strengthened. By analyzing some examples, it shows the multiple oppressities that marginalized people suffer at various identity intersections and how they are maintained by institutionalized power. It also focuses on the power of people themselves and how they resist or change under the given power. The research in this paper helps to further understand the complexity of identity politics and power relations, and has some reference significance for the formulation of relevant policies and the realization of social equity.

Keywords: Intersectionality Theory; Identity category; Power relations; Social inequality; Identity politics.

1. Introduction

Intersectionality theory, which was proposed by Kimberly Krenshaw in the late 1980s, has become an important theoretical perspective in today's social science research on complex identity composition and power relations. This theory goes beyond a simple one-dimensional identity analysis model and holds that a person has multiple identity characteristics at the same time, and in a certain social and cultural context, there are intersections and overlaps among these identities, resulting in different power perceptions and social statuses. In today's globalized and diverse society, the problem of identity is becoming increasingly complex, and the simple dichotomy can no longer well account for the various inequalities in the real society.

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on intersectionality theory in social science research, and related achievements have been widely applied in policy-making, social work, educational reform and other fields. According to incomplete statistics, the number of articles on intersectionality theory published in internationally renowned social science journals increased by 47% from 2019 to 2023, indicating that the academic community is paying increasing attention to this theory [1]. However, the current research on the interaction between identity categories and power relations still has flaws such as insufficient theoretical explanations and single analytical methods, and further theoretical construction and mechanism exploration are needed.

2. The Basic Content and Development Context of the Intersectionality Theory

2.1. Connotation and Development History of F Regulation

The basic position of the intersectionality theory is that a person's social identity is not determined by a single factor, but is a complex of factors such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, and

religious belief. And these factors interact with each other under certain historical conditions and social circumstances, resulting in different power distributions and feelings of inequality. Intersectionality theory holds that it is not acceptable to simply add up various forms of oppression or privilege, but rather to see how these oppressions or privileges interweave, reinforce each other, or counteract each other in specific social practices. Intersectionality theory has three fundamental characteristics: multiplicity, where a person can have multiple identities at the same time [2]. The second is intersectionality, where there are complex connections among different identities. Third, contextuality, where the meaning and power of identity vary in different contexts. This provides us with a more nuanced and flexible methodology for understanding complex social inequalities.



Figure 1. Intersectionality Theory: The interaction mechanism between Identity categories and power relations

2.2. Historical Development and Theoretical Evolution of Intersectionality Theory

The origin of intersectionality theory can be traced back to the thinking of black feminists in the early 20th century, but the true sense of intersectionality theory was proposed by Kimberly Krenshaw in the legal field in 1989. Through her study of court cases, Crenshaw found that the discrimination

against black women was not simply racial or gender discrimination, but a combination [3] of both. The intersectionality theory was later widely applied in fields such as sociology, politics, and psychology. In the 21st century, intersectionality theory has seen new developments, giving rise to various intersectionality theories such as institutional intersectionality, structural intersectionality, and political intersectionality. With the development of information technology, people are paying more and more attention to identity and power relations in the network environment, which brings new opportunities for the study of intersectionality theory. The development of intersectionality theory is a process of gradual evolution from descriptive analysis to explanatory theory and from static framework to dynamic process.

2.3. The Position of Intersectionality Theory in Contemporary Social Sciences

Intersectionality theory is playing an increasingly important role in contemporary social science research, serving as a bridge [4] between micro personal experiences and macro social structures. Intersectionality theory not only injects new perspectives into traditional social stratification studies, but is also of great significance for the design and evaluation of social policies. In the era of globalization, issues such as immigration, urbanization, and cultural diversity have made people's identities increasingly complex, and the role of intersectionality theory has become more prominent. Intersectionality has been widely applied to the study of issues such as educational inequality, employment discrimination, medical and health care, and judicial fairness. However, intersectionality theory also has some problems, such as how to maintain the complexity of the theory without losing its practicality, how to deal with the importance of different identity categories, how to coordinate the relationship between the universality and particularity of the theory, etc. These are all problems that future researchers need to think about and solve.

3. Construction Mechanism and Characteristic Analysis of Identity Categories

3.1. The Formation Process of Multiple Identity Categories

The formation of multiple identities is the result of social construction, including personal cognition, social interaction, and institutionalized distribution of power [5]. People are born with certain identity labels, such as gender, race, class origin, etc. These identity labels are further strengthened, changed, or redefined as they grow up. Social organizations, such as families, schools, media, etc., play a very significant role in this process, influencing people's perception and sense of identity through different symbolic systems and language activities. But people do not passively accept these identities, but actively choose, negotiate and construct their own identities in the process of contact with society. In this process, power relations play a crucial role. The mainstream holds the right to define the scope of identity, while the marginalized can only find their place within this established framework of identity. With the development and change of society, more and more new identity categories have emerged, such as digital natives, environmentalists, etc. These new identities interweave with the old ones to form a more diverse identity map [6].

3.2. Overlap and Ambiguity of Boundaries in Identity Categories

The overlapping of identity categories is an issue that intersectionality theory focuses on. This overlap is not a simple addition but a complex interwoven relationship. The boundaries of various identity categories are vague and fluid, and at a certain moment one person can be a member of different identity groups, such as a middle-class minority woman who is influenced by multiple identities including gender, race and class, and these influences may be strengthened or weakened in different situations. The uncertainty of these identity boundaries raises questions about traditional ways of identity division and gives people more opportunities to choose their identities. In the era of globalization and cultural integration, new types of identities such as cross-cultural identities and mixed identities are emerging, making the scope of identities more diverse. This ambiguity, on the one hand, gives people freedom of identity, and on the other hand, it causes a lack of a sense of

belonging and an identity crisis [7]. Therefore, recognizing this complexity plays a crucial role in formulating inclusive social policies and achieving social harmony.

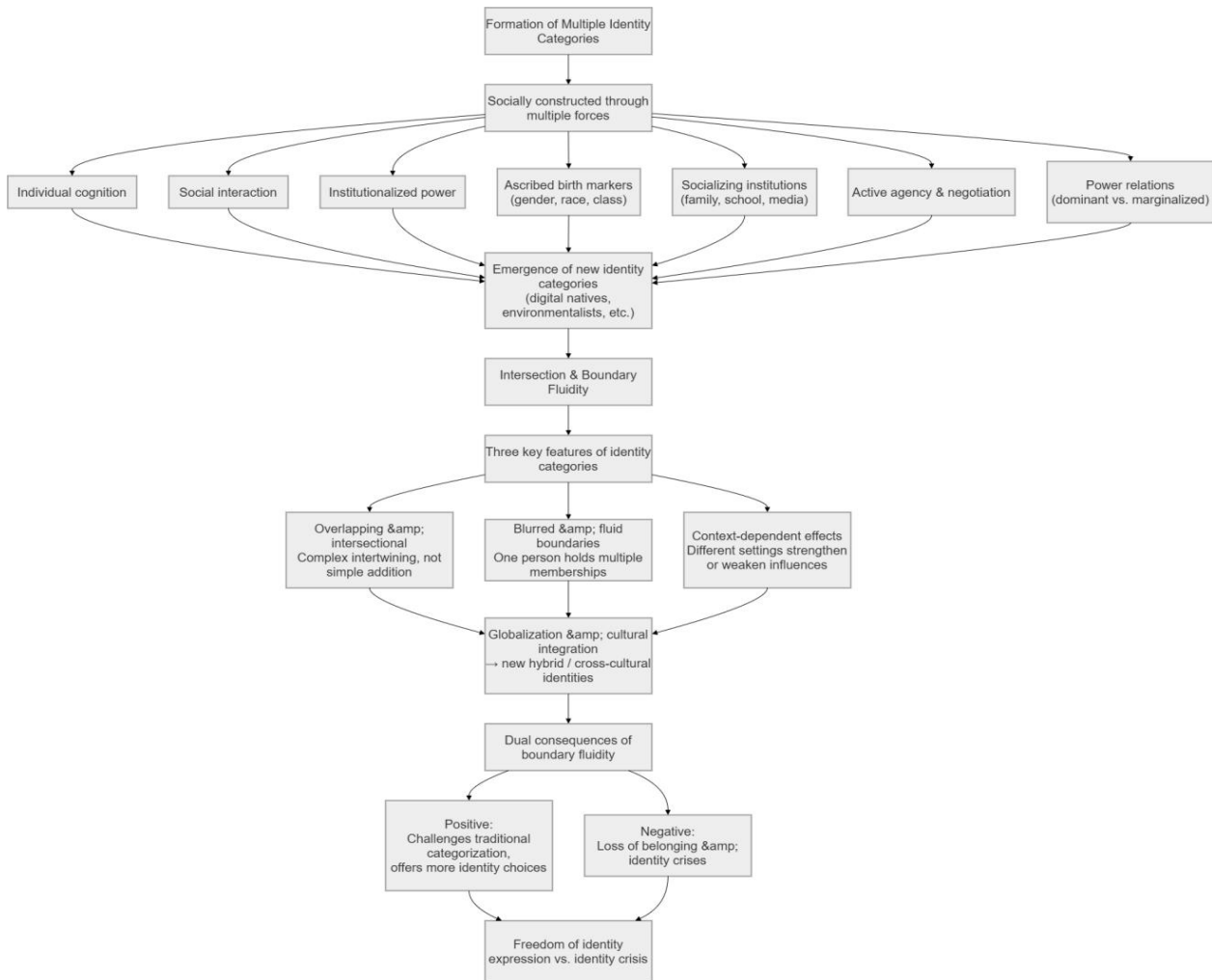


Figure 2. Overlap and ambiguity of the boundaries of identity categories

3.3. Dynamics and Contextual Dependence of Identity

Identity is changing, dynamic and contextual. The fact that the same person emphasizes different identities in different social situations indicates that people respond consciously and strategically to power relations in social situations. For example, a person with multiple cultural backgrounds may emphasize his professional identity more prominently at work and his ethnic identity more prominently at cultural festivals. This shows that identity is not an inherent, fixed nature of the individual, but a process [8] that is constantly redefined and shaped through social interaction. Time is also a factor influencing identity. Personal life experiences and the development and changes of society play a crucial role in identity. Recently, with the development of the Internet, especially social media, people have more opportunities to show their identities, and identity has also become more flexible and changeable. This reflects people's own initiative as well as the limitations of the social system, which is of great significance for further study of identity politics.

4. The Logic of The Operation of Power Relations Within The Intersectionality Framework

4.1. The Hierarchy and Complexity of the Power Structure

From the perspective of intersectionality theory, power is not a simple one-dimensional linear existence, but a complex, interwoven multi-level, multi-dimensional power network. This complexity is first manifested in the space of power, where power exists [9] in different forms and intensities at

the macro institutional level and at the micro level of daily life. At the institutional level, formal institutions such as the legal system, the education system, and the job market are the basis for the operation of power, which are ostensibly neutral but actually conceal a certain logic of power and have different effects on people of different identities. For example, in the job market, the intersection of gender and race puts women of color at a disadvantage, and their career development is more hindered. At the cultural level, informal institutions such as mainstream values, media presentation, and social customs also contain power relations that influence people's identity and social status in a symbolic violent way. The various types of power interact to form a three-dimensional network of power, and people experience different kinds of power in different situations.

The complexity of the power structure is also reflected in its fluidity and contextual relevance [10]. A person's position varies in different situations, and so does his identity and the power he possesses, which leads to the fluidity of power. And the mobility of power also negates the previous either-or view of power, and requires us to look at how power works with a more nuanced and flexible perspective. And sociological studies in recent years have shown that in the context of the digital age, the power structure has become more complex, and the distribution of power in cyberspace has taken on new characteristics, with traditional power boundaries being redrawn and discussed in cyberspace.

4.2. The Mutual Construction of Identity Categories and Power Hierarchies

There is a profound mutual construction relationship between identity categories and power hierarchies, and this construction is both a historical process and an ongoing social practice. Power relations determine which identities are important or neglected, and also define the meaning [11] of those identities. For example, the formation of the category of "female" is influenced by patriarchal power, which defines the role that women should play and how they are expected, and also maintains and replicates this gender order through a series of institutions. On the other hand, the existence and development of identity categories in turn affect the formation and change of power hierarchies, and when new identities emerge, they often disrupt the existing power structure and lead to a new distribution of power. The increasing visibility of the LGBTQ+ community in recent years is a good example. The process by which these new identity categories gain social recognition is accompanied by changes in power relations. On the one hand, they encounter opposition from the mainstream society; on the other hand, they are gradually changing the traditional hierarchical order of gender and sexual orientation. This interwoven relationship is more complex from an intersecting perspective, as a person often has multiple identities that combine in different ways on different occasions to produce different power effects, which can either exacerbate inequality or become a force of resistance and change.

4.3. Specific Manifestations of Intersectionalized Power Relations

Intersecting power relations exist in reality in various forms that go beyond the discussion [12] of a single dimension of identity. In the labor market, intersecting power relations manifest as complex employment discrimination and occupational segregation, with women of color, older women, people with disabilities, and others suffering from superimposed employment predicaments. In terms of education, minority students from poor families face not only the pressure of insufficient economic capital but also the cultural capital gap and institutional discrimination. The combined negative impact of these factors far exceeds that of a single factor. In the judicial context, cross-power relations manifest as different legal treatments and sentencing outcomes. Studies have shown that under the same circumstances, minority men are punished more severely, which is also related to their multiple marginalized identities. In terms of healthcare, intersecting power relations also affect access to and quality of medical services for different groups of people. Factors such as gender, race, class, and age are intertwined, leaving some groups' health problems unattended or misunderstood. These are manifestations of the extensiveness and persistence of cross-power relations, which exist not only in formal institutions but also permeate daily life and are a major cause of social injustice today.

5. Conclusions

This thesis, through the study of the interactive relationship between identity categories and power relations in the intersectionality theory, presents the rich features of identity politics in today's society and the ways of power operation. The category of identity is not a pre-determined identity, but a social phenomenon shaped by power in a certain historical context and social environment. Power not only defines the content and scope of identity categories, but also determines the social status and importance of different identities. Moreover, the changes and developments of identity categories are constantly altering power relations, a process of mutual shaping and mutual influence. In the intersectionality perspective, the relationship between identity categories and power is more complex. Due to the overlap between different identities, new power effects arise, which can both intensify multiple oppressions of marginalized groups and bring opportunities for resistance and change. The specific implementation of intersecting power relations is diverse and pluralistic. Such a complex power relationship exists at both the macro institutional level and the micro level of daily life, and it is an important perspective and critical tool for analyzing inequality in today's society.

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