

Intersectionality: Understanding Attitudes & Issues

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Introduction to Intersectionality and Attitude Formation

The concept of **intersectionality**, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, represents a critical framework for understanding how various social and political identities--such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability--combine to create unique modalities of discrimination and privilege. Attitudes toward this framework are complex, dynamic, and often highly polarized, reflecting underlying psychological processes related to social identity, cognitive complexity, and the acceptance or rejection of systemic inequality. An attitude, in the psychological sense, is a lasting general evaluation of people, objects, or issues, and attitudes toward intersectionality are formed through the interplay of cognitive beliefs (knowledge about oppression), affective reactions (emotional responses to injustice), and behavioral intentions (willingness to engage in advocacy or resistance). Understanding these attitudes is crucial because they dictate the willingness of individuals and institutions to adopt policies and practices that address multifaceted forms of marginalization, moving beyond the limitations of single-axis analyses of identity and oppression.

The psychological study of attitudes toward intersectionality necessitates a shift away from traditional models that analyze prejudice toward one group at a time, such as racism or sexism in isolation. Instead, it requires evaluating an individual's capacity to recognize and internalize the idea that identities are inseparable and mutually constitutive, meaning that a Black woman does not experience racism and sexism separately, but rather experiences anti-Black sexism. This recognition is often cognitively demanding and emotionally challenging, particularly for those who hold positions of relative social dominance. Consequently, attitudes range across a broad spectrum: from enthusiastic acceptance and integration into personal worldviews and activism, to outright rejection, dismissal, or active resistance stemming from perceived threats to existing social hierarchies. These varying attitudes influence everything from interpersonal interactions to macro-level political engagement and policy debates surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives within organizations and educational settings.

Furthermore, the formation and expression of attitudes toward intersectionality are heavily mediated by an individual's existing political ideology and their level of social dominance orientation (SDO). Individuals scoring high on SDO, who generally favor hierarchical structures and the maintenance of inequality between social groups, tend to exhibit significantly more negative attitudes toward intersectionality, viewing it as a destabilizing force that threatens the legitimacy of existing power structures. Conversely, those with strong egalitarian values and high levels of empathy are more likely to internalize the framework positively, recognizing its utility in diagnosing and mitigating complex injustices. This inherent link between political psychology and the acceptance of intersectionality demonstrates that attitudes toward the concept are not merely intellectual disagreements but deeply rooted psychological positions regarding the structure and fairness of society itself.

Theoretical Foundations: The Interlocking Systems of Oppression

A core theoretical challenge in forming positive attitudes toward intersectionality lies in moving beyond the **additive model of oppression**. The additive model mistakenly assumes that the burden of oppression is simply the sum of individual disadvantages (e.g., being a woman plus being Black equals two separate oppressions). Intersectionality fundamentally rejects this arithmetic approach, insisting instead on a multiplicative or interactive model where the identities combine to produce unique experiences that cannot be understood by examining the components in isolation. This theoretical distinction is vital because individuals who hold negative attitudes often fail to grasp this complexity, defaulting to the simpler, additive framework which minimizes the specificity of intersecting marginalizations. Consequently, positive attitudes require a high degree of cognitive flexibility and a willingness to abandon familiar, reductionist categorizations of social experience.

The concept emphasizes that systems of oppression--such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism--are not independent entities but rather **interlocking systems** that mutually reinforce one another. For instance, poverty is not merely an economic issue; it is racialized and gendered, disproportionately affecting women of color due to historical and ongoing systemic barriers. Individuals with positive attitudes toward intersectionality recognize that effective solutions must address these interacting systems simultaneously, rather than focusing on one axis (like gender) while ignoring others (like class or race). This comprehensive understanding demands a significant cognitive restructuring of how injustice is perceived, moving the focus away from individual acts of prejudice and toward institutionalized, systemic inequality. The difficulty of adopting this systemic view contributes substantially to the resistance observed in negative attitudes, particularly among those who benefit from the existing arrangement.

Furthermore, attitudes are significantly shaped by the acknowledgment of **simultaneous privilege and disadvantage**. A white, working-class woman, for example, holds gender disadvantage relative to men but racial privilege relative to women of color. Positive attitudes toward intersectionality require the individual to hold these contradictory positions in mind--recognizing where one benefits from the system while simultaneously suffering under it. This psychological task can induce cognitive dissonance, especially for members of dominant groups who are asked to acknowledge their unearned advantages. Resistance (negative attitudes) often manifests as a defense mechanism aimed at reducing this dissonance, frequently by minimizing the reality of systemic privilege or dismissing intersectionality as overly complicated or divisive identity politics. Therefore, the theoretical acceptance of interlocking systems is inextricably linked to the psychological management of one's own position within those systems.

Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Attitudes

Several established psychological theories help explain the spectrum of attitudes toward intersectionality. **Social Identity Theory (SIT)** suggests that people derive self-esteem from their group memberships (in-groups). Intersectionality challenges simplistic in-group/out-group boundaries by creating complex, overlapping categories. For those whose identity is tied strongly to a single, monolithic in-group (e.g., 'white men' or 'women as a unified group'), intersectionality can be perceived as fragmenting the in-group, leading to defensive, negative attitudes aimed at maintaining the perceived cohesion and clarity of their social identity. The recognition of difference within the group (e.g., differences between Black women and white women) can be threatening to the collective self-esteem of the broader category.

Another critical mechanism is **System Justification Theory (SJT)**, which posits that people are motivated to defend, legitimize, and maintain the status quo, even if it is personally disadvantageous, because doing so fulfills basic epistemic and existential needs for stability and predictability. Intersectionality, by explicitly naming and detailing the complexity of systemic injustice, fundamentally destabilizes the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the social system. Consequently, individuals with a high need for system justification are psychologically predisposed to hold negative attitudes toward the framework, often viewing it as radical or unnecessarily critical. Their resistance serves to restore psychological equilibrium by reaffirming the existing social order as just and inevitable, thereby rejecting the framework that highlights its profound flaws.

The concept of **cognitive complexity** is also central. Accepting intersectionality requires the ability to process multiple, interacting variables simultaneously, a process known as integrative complexity. Individuals with low cognitive complexity often struggle to grasp the nuances of interlocking oppression, preferring simpler, single-cause explanations for social phenomena (e.g., poverty is caused by individual laziness, not systemic racism and classism). This cognitive limitation contributes to superficial or negative attitudes, as the framework is simply too demanding to process effectively. Conversely, positive attitudes are strongly correlated with high integrative complexity, reflecting an individual's capacity and willingness to engage with the messy, interdependent reality of social experience and injustice.

Positive Attitudes: Recognition and Allyship

Positive attitudes toward intersectionality are characterized by three key components: cognitive recognition, affective empathy, and behavioral commitment. **Cognitive recognition** involves not just knowing the definition of intersectionality, but truly understanding its implications--recognizing that the experiences of marginalized individuals are unique and non-additive. This recognition often involves actively seeking out diverse narratives and challenging one's own assumptions derived from single-axis perspectives. For individuals from dominant groups, positive attitudes require an

active acknowledgment of unearned privilege and the historical mechanisms that sustain it, moving beyond simple guilt to actionable comprehension of responsibility.

The affective component, **empathy**, is crucial. Positive attitudes are deeply rooted in the capacity to feel concern for others whose experiences of oppression differ significantly from one's own. This empathy goes beyond general sympathy; it involves a nuanced understanding of specific harms caused by intersecting marginalizations, leading to a strong emotional investment in social justice outcomes for the most marginalized groups. This affective commitment helps sustain engagement even when the work is difficult or emotionally draining, contrasting sharply with the emotional distance often accompanying negative or indifferent attitudes.

Finally, positive attitudes translate into **behavioral commitment**, most notably through active allyship and advocacy. Allyship in an intersectional context means prioritizing the needs and leadership of those at the intersection of multiple oppressions (e.g., disabled queer women of color). This involves concrete actions such as challenging biased institutional practices, advocating for inclusive policies that address multiple axes of identity simultaneously, and using one's own privilege to amplify marginalized voices. This behavioral dimension distinguishes genuine positive attitudes from mere performative acceptance, demonstrating a willingness to expend social and political capital to dismantle complex structures of inequality.

Negative Attitudes: Resistance and Backlash

Negative attitudes toward intersectionality are often rooted in resistance to structural change and perceived threats to social status. One common manifestation is **zero-sum thinking**, the belief that gains made by marginalized groups necessarily come at the expense of dominant groups. When intersectionality highlights the unique needs of multiply marginalized individuals, those holding negative attitudes often interpret this as a diversion of resources or attention away from their own perceived grievances (e.g., the perceived marginalization of the dominant group). This perception fuels resentment and backlash, framing intersectionality as inherently divisive or unfair to the majority.

Another source of negative attitudes is the perception of **ideological threat**. For political conservatives or those deeply invested in meritocratic ideology, intersectionality's emphasis on systemic barriers and unearned privilege directly contradicts the belief that success is solely determined by individual effort. Negative attitudes serve to protect this ideological framework, often by dismissing intersectionality as unfounded academic jargon or a form of political extremism designed to induce guilt or demand unwarranted reparations. This resistance is often expressed through language that emphasizes individual responsibility and downplays the role of historical and institutional discrimination.

The backlash against intersectionality also frequently involves **conceptual minimization and**

distortion. Critics often misrepresent the framework, claiming it forces people to adopt an infinite number of identities or that it promotes victimhood. These distortions, disseminated widely through media and political discourse, allow individuals to reject a simplified, straw-man version of the concept without engaging with its actual theoretical complexity or empirical basis. This psychological shortcut enables the maintenance of negative attitudes while avoiding the difficult cognitive and moral labor required to confront the reality of interlocking oppression. The result is a cycle of resistance that actively undermines efforts toward comprehensive social equity.

Measurement and Assessment of Intersectionality Attitudes

Measuring attitudes toward a complex framework like intersectionality presents unique methodological challenges for psychological researchers. Traditional attitude scales, which often rely on simple Likert scales assessing agreement with statements about specific groups, are often inadequate because they fail to capture the multiplicative nature of the concept. Researchers must instead employ methods that assess an individual's capacity for **integrative complexity** regarding identity and oppression.

One approach involves developing specialized survey instruments that gauge the acceptance of complex, simultaneous disadvantage. These instruments might present vignettes detailing the experiences of multiply marginalized individuals and assess the respondent's belief that these experiences are unique and irreducible to single-axis factors. Furthermore, researchers utilize measures that assess the rejection of additive models, examining whether respondents agree that systemic disadvantages multiply rather than merely accumulate. The reliability of these explicit measures is crucial, though they are susceptible to social desirability bias, where respondents report positive attitudes they do not genuinely hold.

To mitigate bias, researchers increasingly incorporate **implicit measures**, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), adapted to assess intersectional biases. For example, an IAT might compare the implicit association between positive/negative attributes and the conjunction of two marginalized identities (e.g., disabled and Black) versus the single identities. Behavioral measures, such as observational studies of resource allocation or hiring decisions in scenarios involving intersectionally marginalized candidates, also provide valuable insight into attitudes that translate into real-world action. Effective measurement is essential for tracking changes in public and organizational attitudes and for evaluating the efficacy of educational interventions designed to foster more positive and nuanced views of social justice.

Contextual Factors Influencing Attitude Variability

Attitudes toward intersectionality are not static personal traits but are highly susceptible to **contextual influences**. The prevailing political climate significantly shapes the public discourse

surrounding identity and equity. In contexts where political rhetoric emphasizes national unity and dismisses identity politics, attitudes toward intersectionality tend to become more negative, as the framework is framed as divisive or anti-patriotic. Conversely, periods of heightened social activism and movements for racial justice often correlate with increased openness and more positive public attitudes toward the framework's utility in understanding protest and policy demands.

Institutional contexts, such as the workplace or educational settings, also play a critical role. Organizations that explicitly adopt intersectional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies tend to foster more positive explicit attitudes among their members, although true internalization (implicit attitudes) may lag. The quality of educational interventions, particularly those that utilize the **contact hypothesis** by facilitating meaningful, sustained interaction between individuals from different intersecting identities, can significantly reduce negative biases and enhance cognitive complexity regarding identity. However, poorly implemented DEI training can lead to resentment and further entrench negative attitudes, particularly if the training is perceived as mandatory, superficial, or accusatory.

Finally, personal exposure and demographic factors influence attitude variability. Individuals who belong to groups that are themselves intersectionally marginalized often exhibit the most positive attitudes, recognizing the framework's alignment with their lived reality. Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of education, particularly in the social sciences, are generally more likely to hold positive attitudes, suggesting that formal exposure to critical social theory facilitates cognitive acceptance. The variability across these contexts underscores that attitudes toward intersectionality are continually negotiated based on perceived social norms, institutional demands, and personal experiences of hierarchy and privilege.

Implications for Social Justice and Policy

The prevailing attitudes toward intersectionality have profound implications for the success of social justice movements and the efficacy of public policy aimed at promoting equity. When positive attitudes prevail within legislative and organizational bodies, policies are more likely to be designed using an intersectional lens, addressing compounded disadvantages rather than treating different forms of oppression in silos. For instance, positive attitudes lead to policy recommendations that consider how housing instability affects disabled, undocumented women differently than it affects other groups, ensuring that solutions are targeted and truly inclusive.

Conversely, widespread negative attitudes act as a significant barrier to policy reform. Resistance based on zero-sum thinking often leads to the rejection of targeted interventions, favoring universal policies that frequently fail to address the specific, compounded needs of the most marginalized. Furthermore, negative attitudes within institutions can result in the symbolic adoption of diversity language without genuine systemic change, leading to diversity fatigue and skepticism regarding

the effectiveness of equity initiatives. The psychological resistance to the framework thus translates directly into political inertia, preserving existing inequalities.

Ultimately, fostering positive attitudes toward intersectionality is essential not only for ethical reasons but also for practical effectiveness in achieving a more equitable society. Research demonstrates that acknowledging and addressing intersectional complexity leads to better outcomes in mental health services, educational equity, and workplace inclusion. Educational strategies must focus not just on disseminating information but also on engaging the affective and cognitive barriers--reducing system justification tendencies, increasing cognitive complexity, and fostering genuine empathy--to move attitudes from superficial acceptance or outright rejection toward deep, internalized recognition of the multiplicative nature of identity and oppression.

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