Chapter 34

Multiple Targeted Identities
Intersectionality and the Lived Experiences of Black Gay Males

James M. DeVita & Allison Daniel Anders

In this chapter, we engage the everyday politics of navigating multiple targeted identities using the conception of intersectionality put forth by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991a, 1991b, 1995), whose work centers around race and the law. The application of Crenshaw’s conception of intersectionality provides for dialogic exchanges about gender and sexuality, as well as opportunities to critique the ways social and institutional power target multiple subordinate identities. We represent Crenshaw’s articulations of intersectionality and apply her conception to research completed with Black male undergraduates who identify as gay.

We first introduce context and scholarship on race and sexual orientation. We present then Crenshaw’s work on structural, political, and representational intersectionality, and argue for analysis that privileges the lived experiences of targeted groups, rather than abstract theorizing about targeted groups (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Noblit, 1999). Crenshaw’s (1991b) commitment to interrogating systemic issues and patterns of social power, and her analyses of interactional disenfranchisement and disempowerment devote attention to the everyday lived experience of targeted groups. Ultimately, she argued for institutional and political changes that acknowledge the interactional experience of race and gender; we argue that “in the pursuit of political and structural equity one must consider the intersectionality of targeted individuals” (Anders, DeVita, & Oliver, 2012, p. 72). We investigate the application of her work in the illustrative scholarship that follows. Finally, we ask our readers to practice discernment, in particular, when studying identity, especially where targeted and privileged identities interact. Though Crenshaw did not foreclose the application of intersectionality to analyses of multiple identities, we argue, due to Crenshaw’s commitments to the social and the systemic, that targeted identities must remain prominent and centered in applications of her work. The burden of application is on its user.

For example, as White scholars who embody able-bodiedness, cisgender, and racial privilege, rather than using Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality to denote our multiple
identities, we use the language of “intersections of identity” or “multiple identities” when theorizing about our own lived experience. White scholars who want to discuss ways they might experience targeting in particular contexts and through particular institutions may find the application of intersectionality seductive. However, given Crenshaw’s own commitments to analyzing systemic inequity, we argue that our White identity and its tight coupling with White supremacy—and therefore, discourses and policies of White privilege in the United States—forecloses a claim to intersectionality as a way to understand our lived experiences. As White folks, using intersectionality to theorize about our own lives would mean altering Crenshaw’s articulations of multiple subordinations in order to meet our own needs—even though I (James) identify as an openly gay man, and Allison identifies as a woman. The privilege that Whiteness provides us in “white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1984, p. xiv; hooks, 1992) precludes any claim we might make about intersectionality and our identities. Here, we are not arguing that the process of addition endorses the use of intersectionality; we are not counting the number of multiple targeted identities. Rather, we emphasize Crenshaw’s (1991b) point that dominant social patterns and systemic inequities affect the interaction of targeted identities and often produce “intersectional disempowerment” (p. 1245). As such, we invite readers to carefully engage with Crenshaw’s arguments and their applications. In addition, we invite readers to critique that which we cannot yet understand in our own arguments.

Literature on Black Gay Males

In the United States, research on attitudes toward gay populations on college campuses asserts that, among other groups, males (see, for example, Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994) and individuals who identified as Black (Herek & Capitanio, 1996) were more likely to hold negative views of gay individuals than their peers. Recently, researchers have asserted that Black gay male undergraduates struggle to resolve issues related to the intersection of their multiple targeted identities (see, for example, Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008, 2010). Bohan (1996) pointed out that because Black gay males must “simultaneously negotiate a passage through two different but interrelated processes of identity formation,” “[they] are more likely to feel isolated and tense” (pp. 121, 131). Moreover, “since their racial/ethnic or sexual orientation identity is often marginalized in both cultures, many Black [gay males] do not feel fully accepted in either” (Conerly, 2001, p. 11). Research on Black gay male undergraduates confirms the compounding, negative effects of multiple targeted identities, and establishes evidence of the need to alter campus resources to better serve Black gay males (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008, 2010).

Research addressing developmental issues various identity groups encounter, including racial and/or ethnic minorities and gay males, has generated identity development models and stage theories. For example, researchers like Cross (1971) developed stage-based theories of Black identity development, while others like D’Augelli (1994) developed theories that explained the developmental trajectories of gay individuals. Although these theories have contributed to some understanding of the process through which one’s racial or sexual identity develops, they are discipline-specific and limited in their applicability, due to their emphasis on a single-category axis of identity and its governance. A major critique addres-
es the absence of analysis that captures experience at the intersection of multiple identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Stevens, 2004), such as Black gay males.

Several researchers have utilized Black identity-development theories to explore the experiences of Black college students, including extensive research on Black males and the factors that impact their success in college (see, for example, Cuyjet, 2006). Only recently, however, have researchers examined the intersections of multiple identities and experiences of Black males that represent diversity of identification and experience (Harper & Nichols, 2008), and particularly Black gay males (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008, 2010). While this literature has effectively recognized the ways in which multiple identities affect Black gay males’ experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), it failed to conceptualize the discrimination participants encountered at the intersection of their multiple targeted identities. We argue that theorizing with Crenshaw’s (1991a, 1991b) concept of intersectionality opens opportunities to illustrate the discriminatory effects from the multiple intersections of race, sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation for Black gay males. Social patterns and dominant narratives require Black gay males to negotiate and endure discrimination based on racial identity and sexual orientation in ways that inextricably interact with gender expression and identity.

Gender Assignment, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sexual Orientation

Throughout our experiences as student affairs professionals on multiple college campuses and now as faculty, we have taught, evaluated, and (re)conceptualized the curriculum and pedagogical methods utilized in educational trainings and programs aimed at improving campus climates for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. Among the most meaningful, yet difficult conceptualizations to succinctly represent in our work, both from our conversations and Safe Zone trainings we have facilitated are the complex representations of female assignment at birth, male assignment at birth, gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation as multiple identity continuums. These continuums illustrate that perceived and performed identities, even when claimed, are mutable, contextual, and influenced by other identities.

We challenge traditional notions of sex as an innate, biological construction, and support the idea that “sex” is an ascribed gender assignment at birth. The medical profession names genitalia female, male, or intersexed. In our Safe Zone work, transgender students have taught us to distinguish carefully from the use of terms like “sex,” female assignment at birth (FAAB), and male assignment at birth (MAAB). They have reminded us that the process of naming results from social patterns and dominant narratives about gender that often collapse assignment, gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This flattening of distinctions is a critique we share with Crenshaw (Anders et al., 2012). Additionally, discussions of FAAB and MAAB return us to our own cisgender privilege—the privilege of experiencing congruency across assignment and gender identity. Such congruency often produces access to privileges constituted by alignment and perception of alignment along normative social patterns of expression and identity.
The representation and performance of gender amidst normative ascriptions anchored by dominant categories called “masculinity” and “femininity” represents gender expression. We frame one’s self-identification of gender as gender identity. Even though we provide working frameworks here, we want to acknowledge the power of perceived gender performance and identity, too, particularly in contexts of discrimination and violence. ¹ We do not provide an exhaustive constellation of possible gender expressions and gender identities here, but it is important to note that though self-identification may be an agentic process, social patterns and institutional policy often situate individuals in ways that may disregard and silence self-identification. Individuals may self-identify as masculine, feminine, or androgynous, or as distinct from the masculine-feminine and gay-straight binaries altogether (e.g., genderqueer) (Sedgwick, 1993). Similarly, individuals perform representations of self that align with gender identity through clothing, mannerisms, and hairstyle, among other things, and others do not, or do in particular contexts but not others, or perform gender identity only through expression.

Many continuums of sexual orientation have expanded from historic positionings of a gay–straight dichotomy that may include bisexuality in contrast to ones that embody experiential and expressive variability in physical, emotional, and psychological attraction and in the engagement, establishment, or performativity of relationships with others (e.g., Constantinople, 2005; Kinnish, Strassberg, & Turner, 2005). Additionally, contemporary work frames sexual orientation as a fluid and mutable aspect of expression and identity that may generate multiple meanings and identifications, ones that may evolve across time and context for some individuals, or ones that spiral through cycles for others. Sexual orientation may shift across contexts, or it may not; it may affect engagement and intimacy with others, or it may not (see, for example, Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). And, at this point in history in the United States, self-identification of sexual orientation outside heteronormative patterns (e.g., queer) affects how others perceive and respond to an individual—for example, the heterosexual ally who identifies as queer as both a political statement and in solidarity with the LGBTQIA community and movement.

We argue that because of the ways social patterns and practices couple masculine gender expression with male gender identity in White and non-White communities, in both Black communities and gay communities, the male identity, gender expression, and gender identity of Black gay males are marginalized. Black gay males encounter homophobia experienced in the Black community and racism in the gay community that has compounding detrimental effects on their sexual orientation.

Intersectionality

In “De-Marginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Crenshaw (1991a) used the term intersectionality when she applied the intersections of race and gender to her analysis of antidiscrimination in legal cases. Specifically, she analyzed cases that reflected court requirements that plaintiffs make their arguments regarding discrimination along only a single-category axis of identity, in this case, gender or race. Crenshaw criticized the courts for forcing Black women to present cases of discrimination based on only one category of identity. The courts refused to allow women to stipulate discrimination based on both gen-
nder and race. In doing so, they denied the multiple intersections of discrimination. Crenshaw asserted that in doing so, the courts denied the experience of multiple intersections of identity and the effects of discrimination perpetrated against multiple targeted identities. The decision effectively forced the implementation of one-dimensional frameworks of interpretation and oversimplified issues of discrimination. Crenshaw argued, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (1991a, p. 58). Crenshaw's (1991b) emphasis on intersectionality "highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 1245). Intersectionality shapes experiences of minority women, and Crenshaw interrogated "multiple subordination" (p. 1251). Focused on the "social and systemic" (p. 1241), she demanded that any interrogation of oppression include a framework that acknowledges the interrelationships among multiple dimensions of identity.

Crenshaw's lessons about intersectionality were twofold. First, for women of color the experience of racism and sexism is neither discrete nor summative. Intersectionality positions experience in the particular "interactions of race and gender" (1991b, p. 1296). Second, dominant conceptions of race and sex do not account for the experiences of women of color. For example, Crenshaw explained, "Women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color, and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women" (1991b, p. 1252). The experience of discrimination is not captured by adding an analysis of patriarchy and sexism to an analysis of racism and racist discourses and practices. Nor is the experience of gender discrimination representative of the sum analyses of race and racism and patriarchy and sexism.

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color; and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. These mutual elisions present a particularly difficult political dilemma for women of color. Adopting either analysis constitutes a denial of a fundamental dimension of subordination, and precludes the development of a political discourse that more fully empowers women of color. (Crenshaw, 1991b, p. 1252)

It is the experience of the interaction of race and gender discrimination, and not the sum of racism and sexism, that Black women carry.

Structural, Political, and Representational Intersectionality

In "Mapping the Margins," Crenshaw (1991b) conceptualized three kinds of intersectionality: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality. First, Crenshaw used illustrative accounts within discourses that frame the issue of domestic violence to present structural intersectionality, the ways discourses, policy, and practices influence and position the experience of women of color differently than those of White women. Linking concomitant issues of employment and housing in domestic violence cases, the role of court advocates, and English as the language of the courts, Crenshaw
nation. Crenshaw's intersections of identity frameworks of "Because the analysis that articulates man-91b) emphasis on identity when shapes exper- tion" (p. 1251). terrogation of mong multiple
in of color the tionality posi-1296). Second, women of color, as not always ways parallel to uration is not ism and racist representative of
ism will often to interrogate These mutual either analysis elopment of a not the sum of
of intersection-
tional intersec-
t-frame the issue-
ies, policy, and y than those of domestic vio-
curs, Crenshaw
documented the differences across women who have access to economic, linguistic, and racial privilege, and those who do not.
Second, Crenshaw explained in her conceptualization of political intersectionality, how the coupling of identity politics to political discourse and action affects the experiences of women of color. Recounting the agendas of antiracist movements and feminist movements, she critiqued the restricted possibilities of singularly defined conceptions of empowerment. The concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinate groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. "The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and White women seldom confront" (Crenshaw, 1991b, pp. 1251–1252). Dominant antiracist and feminist discourses fail to conceptualize the experiences of Black women, and feminism fails to conceptualize the experience of sex and gender for Black women. Often, they fail to acknowledge that the experiences of Black women are qualitatively different than Black men and White women. The courts, Crenshaw argued, act similarly. They are unable, due to their use of a single-category axis of analysis, to envision a conception that would identify and provide remediation for discrimination as experienced by Black women.
Third, Crenshaw addressed representations of women of color that reproduce "racial and gender hierarchy in the United States" (1991b, p. 1283). Representational intersectionality not only rejects the dominant narratives of race and gender, but also examines critique of dominant narratives that marginalize women of color by "ignoring the intersectional interests of women of color" (p. 1283). Crenshaw argued that an intersectional analysis demands an interrogation of the ways in which racism and sexism mutually reinforce one another.
Aiming to bring together the different aspects of an otherwise divided sensibility, "an intersectional analysis argues that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing, that Black women are commonly marginalized by a politics of race alone or gender alone, and that a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both" (Crenshaw, 1991b, p. 1283). Crenshaw critiqued the deployment of women of color as discursive objects in arguments that fail to tackle the lived experience of women of color. She included examples that reflect both antiracist strategy and White feminist positions. Both uses negate and objectify not only the everyday, lived experience of the interaction of race and gender for women of color, but also reinforce the marginalization of women of color.
Researchers in communication studies (e.g., Crenshaw, 1997), feminist theory (e.g., Bettie, 2003; McCall, 2005), human rights work (Raj, 2002), political science (e.g., Berger, 2004), and sociology (e.g., Ferguson, 2001) have applied the idea of intersectional identities, in this chapter we commit to exploring Crenshaw's conception of intersectionality, specifically addressing multiple targeted identities. Her conception provides a space to study the interaction of multiple targeted identities and the effects at the intersection of those identities. We argue that this is the strength of Crenshaw's work.
Application of Intersectionality

In 2001, the World Conference Against Racism and Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Other Related Intolerance (WCAR), and the Center for Women’s Global Leadership organized hearings that addressed the intersectionality of discrimination. Using language of the “compounding” effects of discrimination, international activists who had researched the subordination and political, cultural, and economic disenfranchisement of women, asserted that if someone is discriminated against based on one of her identities, consequently, she is more likely to experience discrimination along other dimensions of her identity as well. The hearing addressed both the commonalities among women and the diversity among women across international contexts. Among other issues, testimonies on HIV/AIDS and women; women as immigrant workers; rape as a tool of war; and women’s access to health care, education, and housing were presented. One of the goals of the hearings was “to demonstrate the intersection of race and gender with other factors and what it means in concrete terms to take the rhetoric and the discussion of intersectionality and show its reality in everyday life” (Raj, 2002, p. 1). Women told stories of forced sterilization in Slovakia; discrimination against Roma women in Serbia; against women with HIV/AIDS in South Africa; against women who survived mass rape in Indonesia; and rape while in custody in the United States. An analysis of intersectionality and its potential relationship to global racial and social justice movements followed the hearing.

An example from women’s human rights work on women in conflict is indicative of the way in which intersectionality is applied to the conception of rape as a tool of war. During the genocidal conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, women were targeted and raped as tools of war in an effort to ethnically cleanse Muslim Bosnians, among others. Beginning in 1991 and continuing throughout the conflict, “women were systematically raped by Serb militiamen...because they were women of a particular ethnic, national or religious group” (Amnesty International, 2001, p. 47). Bosnian and Croat Muslim women, or women perceived to be Muslim, were abducted and sent to camps where they were forced into sexual slavery. Eventually, in 2001 the International Criminal Tribunal prosecuted three Serbian militiamen on 33 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the rape of Muslim Bosnian women. For women and men doing the work to seek justice for women, the idea of intersectionality is an effective strategy to employ in order to frame lived experience. Intersectionality did not create the embodiment of multiple dimensions of identity and the significance of their particular interactions, but the concept offers us a way to analyze injustices perpetrated against people living at the intersections of multiple targeted identities. WCAR was careful to recognize that although the implementation of an analysis based on intersectionality could be highly significant in working toward human rights, women’s human rights, and identity-based discrimination, the reality of intersectionality was that women and girls had already endured discrimination along intersecting dimensions of their identities in their lived experiences.
Intersectionality and Black Men Who Identify as Gay

The examples shared in this chapter are drawn from a study on Black gay male undergraduates at PWIs (DeVita, 2010; Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008, 2010). The researchers conducted semistructured interviews with individuals who self-identified as Black, gay, and male about their experiences while enrolled in college. Participants included 11 Black gay males enrolled at different institutions in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States. After revisiting interview transcripts, we decided that an intersectional analysis that included both internal and external perceptions about race, gender expression, and gender identity needed to drive our understandings about multiple targeted identities and the ways in which participants navigated the performances of their identities and the perceptions of their identities. In the following section, we provide excerpts that illustrate the connections between the concept of intersectionality and Black gay male undergraduates’ perceptions of race, gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Structural Intersectionality

Often socialized within Black communities, when Black gay males interact in gay communities, they encounter a community where gay identity is viewed and performed as a “white, male, affluent, metropolitan identity” (Brady, 2006, p. 186). Thus, as Black gay males enter the gay community, they are faced with a dominant White culture that positions gay males differently and unfairly based on racial identity. Several Black gay male undergraduates described explicitly the divisiveness of gay identity and their experiences in Black communities. One participant discussed the negative comments he witnessed. He shared,

> from Black people, it’s been, like, [they] made snide comments. Because gay in the African-American community, it seems, to most Black people, it’s even like greater fault than—I don’t know. They really don’t take too well to it. And they’re really heinous, sometimes, about it.

The affect of heteronormativity as the dominant social pattern marks derogatory comments toward Black men who identify as gay, discursively separating for this participant his racial identity from his sexual orientation.

Black gay male undergraduates talked also about the racism they experienced in the dominant White gay community. One participant shared how he used humor to denigrate his Black racial identity in order to identify with the dominant White gay community. He explained: “So I’m always making like ‘the Black joke,’” that everyone is thinking but not really saying. It’s just humorous to me for me to be the only Black guy, or [sometimes] the only ‘gay guy.’” By using “the Black joke” around his White gay friends, the student reinforced dominant racial patterns in order to navigate the gay community to which he had access, a community that was predominantly White. Explaining what happens when he does, he said,

> For the most part, everyone just like, takes it and runs with it, laughs with it, because I always make a joke about it. I’m so used to being the only Black guy in a room. So I crack jokes all the time so they don’t really have a problem with it.
The participant describes his jokes about Black people as a tactic that assures his navigation in a predominantly White gay community. He tells the jokes “so they don’t really have a problem with it.” “It” is his subordinated racial status in political and social systems of White supremacy. His racial identity may invite attention in a predominantly White gay community, and strategies to make White folks comfortable with his race yield jokes at the expense of his own racial identity.

Black gay males experience homophobia and sexism in Black communities, and racism in White gay communities. The dominance of heteronormativity and White supremacy limits opportunities to interact in either community. When asked about what advice he would give to a Black gay male high school student who was considering enrolling at the PWI he attended, one of the participants said:

If he decides to come to [the university], I'd just tell him to be ready to face racism and homophobia... like, White people here don’t really respect Black students... it’s not everyone, but a lot of them, especially white faculty; and there’s all this stuff going on with racist remarks on campus... on the other hand, he’s gonna deal with homophobia from Black people... it’s like, they’ve been mistreated, so now they want to mistreat somebody... even the ones who are [gay]... they do it too.

Demonstrative of both the power of White supremacy and heteronormativity, the warnings from this participant reflect the everyday navigation of racism and homophobia, and the discrimination and mistreatment he endures as a Black male who identifies as gay.

Despite encountering racism in predominantly White gay spaces on a regular basis, Black gay male students repeatedly noted that they felt more comfortable and safer within predominantly White gay spaces than in Black community spaces. Citing the consistency of homophobia, one participant explained his experiences this way. The overt instances of harassment based on sexual orientation and gender expression that Black gay males described in Black community spaces on campus revealed expectations around normative patterns of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation in their Black communities. These expectations, delivered through harassment, subordinate the students’ racial identity and sexual orientation, limiting the performance of the former and silencing the latter.

Research suggests that Black male students are more likely to feel most comfortable around other students of color (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001), specifically, other Black men (Harper, 2009); however, the evidence from the students quoted above suggests that comfort may be predicated along a single-category axis of identity—race. Though one participant attributed his engagement in a predominantly White gay community to his observation that he “never really related to Black people,” we argue that the navigation Black gay male students are trying to withstand is saturated with social patterns and systemic inequities that ignore the intersections of their identities, and privilege White supremacy and heteronormativity.

Many college campuses have attempted to provide additional support to targeted individuals and provide educational opportunities for dominant individuals by developing campus cultural centers. Often these centers are framed around individualized identities (e.g., Black cultural centers) or groups of related identities (e.g., LGBTQQA resource
res his naviga-
on't really have
cial systems of
ly White gay
eld jokes at the
ies, and racism
site supremacy
what advice he
rolling at the
omophobia...
em, especially
her hand, he's
y they want to
y, the warnings
obia, and the
as gay.
regular basis,
d safer within
he consistency
vert instances
ack gay males
and normative
ir Black com-
students' racial
3 silencing the
st comfortable
her Black men-
est that com-
gh one partici-
to his obser-
vigation Black
and systemic
ite supremacy
o targeted in-
by developing
ized identities
QIA resource
centers). Even on campuses where collaboration is encouraged, supported, and enacted, these centers represent the ways in which campuses have been structured to recognize the issues faced by students from specific targeted groups at the expense of individuals who must navigate multiple targeted identities. The resources, though important, are inadequate in addressing the negotiation of everyday politics for students who embody and perform multiple targeted identities.

Political Intersectionality

A predominantly White movement, the pursuit of LGBT rights in the United States faces challenges to increase diverse racial support. Concomitantly, African American communities have faced challenges in celebrating Black community members who identify as gay and lesbian. A devastating example of the consequence of these politics was the passage of Proposition 8 during the 2008 presidential election which overturned gay marriage rights that had been conferred to same-sex couples by the California Supreme Court just five months earlier. A great deal of debate about how and why such a proposition passed followed. Pollsters, bloggers, and pundits alike pointed to older voters, religious conservatives, and African American voters who supported the constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage rights (Morain & Garrison, 2008; Silver, 2008). Even after a 5-year court battle culminated in the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn Prop 8 in summer 2013 (Gaynet, 2013), same-sex couples outside of California continued to face overt discrimination and the denial of rights extended to heterosexual couples in all 50 states (see, for example, Brydum, 2013; García, 2013). Arguably the most prominent public figure, President Obama’s increased support for same-sex marriage and open opposition to Prop 8 were remarkable given both his position and identity as a Black man (Parsons & Savage, 2013).

Despite Obama’s support for LGBT rights, homophobic and sexist messages from entertainment, media, and state and national politics saturated with a history of White supremacist practices, affect the everyday experiences of LGBT community members. One Black gay male described the almost complete elimination of rap music from his life because of the “negative spin on being gay.” “Listen to almost any rap song,” he said. “There’s some negative spin on being gay. Period. It’s not necessarily gay and Black. Just gay, period. So I never...most of the time I don’t listen to those records anyway.” He articulated the obstacles of being both Black and gay, and then reemphasized being gay. He invited a critique of homophobia across racial identities, and decoupled homophobia from the Black male and gay body in his restatement of “just gay, period.” The student did so even as he shared that he must navigate both his racial identity and his sexual orientation at the intersection of embodying both. His decision to stop listening to rap music was based on targeted expressions of hate towards his gay identity, which exemplifies the inextricable link between race and sexual orientation in his everyday life.

Several participants also shared that they were members of LGBT organizations on their respective college campuses. Even though the majority of the group members in these organizations were White, most of the participants noted that they felt more comfortable around White people. For example, over half of the participants said most of their friends were White—and predominantly White, straight females. When asked about race and
sexual orientation, one student shared how his everyday campus activities generated singular opportunities for identity expression:

[I think a lot about my race, probably not so much freshman and sophomore year, but now [said with emphasis] I think about it a lot. I'm trying to restructure a sense of community on campus...a Black community...and I work on a lot of student committees trying to bring Black students together and get them working with faculty and stuff. So, being Black...I think about it constantly. How often do I think about my sexuality...like being gay?...I don't think about it as much...I don't know if that's because it's not as important to me or if it's because it's not really a question anymore to me. I don't know.

Proudly, the student articulates a passion and a commitment to his Black community. He shares that he thinks about being Black "constantly," and works to bring Black students and faculty together. In contrast, he thinks of his identity as gay less often, relegating it to a private space. Most revealing is his rhetorical separation of two intersecting identities. He performs them in the interview as separate. Crenshaw would ask us to consider what possibilities exist for intersectional empowerment that includes the interaction of multiple identities. For example, institutions of higher education demonstrate an appreciation for the effects of this interaction by providing programs that examine these intersections with those who experience them.²

When asked the same question about race and sexual orientation, another participant responded with a list of identities, beginning with his racial identity. "Well, I'm obviously Black although I am light-skinned," he said, and added

...and I'm gay...well, I prefer to say 'homosexual'...and contrary to what these right-wing conservatives think, I can still be spiritual and Christian; so, basically I'm like Black...American...homosexual male...Christian who is politically democratic or whatever doesn't fuck me over at the moment [laughing]....

Though he catalogs his identities, the student links them to a politics that won't "fuck" him over. Implicitly, he gestures to the intersections of his targeted identities. Given that a Christian identity is privileged in the U.S., and that U.S. citizenship institutionally secures access to rights, we argue that the student's reference to the way "right-wing conservatives" exile gay Christians and to his own racial identity mark his vulnerability as he references "whatever doesn't fuck [him] over at the moment." His catalog of identities becomes coupled in the interaction of his racial identity and sexual orientation in opposition to the political forces of "right-wing conservatives," which we read also as the religious right and White. Self-identifying as a Democrat implies an active as well as political dimension to his identity, as his use of "at the moment" implies savvy, agency, and political expediency. His political identity is useful only inasmuch as it protects his multiple targeted identities. An articulation of a politics of empowerment at the intersection of his identities is absent, even if the Democratic party offers some protection as they are cataloged.

Representational Intersectionality

Monolithic representations of race, gender, and sexual orientation perpetuate stereotypes that marginalize targeted populations, including Black gay males (Anders, 2007, 2011; Fer-
guson, 2001; Meiners, 2007). D’Augelli (1994) included stereotypes and stigma among the societal norms that negatively affect the development of gay individuals. Stereotypes about gay males include claims that gay males are more effeminate than their straight peers, and that gay males are likely to be sexually promiscuous. D’Augelli theorized that while stereotypes about sexual orientation are shared across contexts, an individual’s experiences might vary because of their treatment by others. While notable, D’Augelli’s theory fails to examine the explicit connections between race and sexual orientation, a critique of his work and other theoretical frameworks that examine race and sexual orientation (e.g., Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Stevens, 2004). We argue that interrogating multiple targeted identities demands theorizing that signifies the importance of the intersectionality and interaction of those multiple identities.

Crenshaw presented two elements of representational intersectionality. The first aspect relates to the ways in which stereotypes based on monolithic identities marginalize individuals by failing to account for the intersections of identities and malleability of identity across contexts. For Black gay males, stereotypes about sexual orientation are inextricably linked to expectations about gender expression when coupled with expectations about normative patterns of masculinity for Black males. Indeed, all of the Black gay male students who shared their experiences were keenly aware of the ways in which expectations regarding Black masculinity affected their attraction to other males, relationships with roommates and family members, and the activities and interests where they felt accepted.

Despite engagement in traditionally feminized activities like cheerleading (1 participant), performing arts (5 participants), and fashion (2 participants), Black gay male undergraduates protected their own normative performances of masculinity and targeted other Black males whose gender expression challenged dominant patterns of masculinity. One participant characterized another Black gay male on campus in the following way. The student offered: he is a “Tina...like a girl pretty much. That’s what [we] use for a girl. And when I see that I’m...I kinda stop and like, ‘Am I like that?’ Because I really don’t want to be like that.” His reaction to what he framed as an effeminate identity expression is related to a claim that all 11 participants made: that they were more masculine than the typical Black gay men they encountered, which reifies the dominant performance of Black masculinity in cultural representations as well.

Additionally, perspectives on masculinity influenced participants’ attraction to other men. One participant characterized Black gay males as “either 6’4” and 275 or they were 5’8” and 150 pound swishy little queens.” He explained, “And it was like, neither one of those are things I want.” The student viewed other Black gay males as representing distinct masculinities that failed to align with his ideal of an attractive male; but that do align, however, with stereotypical notions of Black males as either large and powerful (i.e., straight and athletic) or slight and effeminate (i.e., gay and artistic). His characterization of other Black gay males along dominant cultural representations is problematic, and further exemplifies the negative effects of the intersection of multiple targeted identities.

Several participants shared their frustrations over the seemingly static and rigid definitions of masculinity for Black males and gay males. One participant described his time
away from a predominantly Black community in which his freedom to express his gender identity and sexual orientation was stifled:

It was like that summer between college and senior year where I spent the entire summer in like Boy’s Town [Chicago’s predominantly gay area] and like didn’t have to see 90 percent of the people I graduated with, you know what I mean? So it was liberation. My wardrobe completely changed, and like, my mannerisms and all that stuff it’s all kind of, not all shifted, because I’ve always walked the way I walk, but it all kind of just became more me and less like a façade....

His articulation of “liberation” is much more than a “coming out” or “coming of age” story, as he describes the physical undressing and redressing of his body and how such changes allowed him to be “more” himself, or as he said: “more me.” This participant was able to shed the oppressive cloak of Black masculinity and express his sexual orientation and gender identity as he chose.

The failure of critiques to effectively identify and integrate race into examinations of sexual orientation and vice versa relates to the second aspect of representational intersectionality. Therefore, we caution readers to be careful, as Crenshaw cautioned us to remember that even in our critiques of monolithic cultural representations, which tend to flatten the complexity of everyday experience, we should remember to include the very everyday experience we wield as evidence to deepen our understandings and our theorizing.

Conclusion

Here, we repeat Crenshaw’s (1991b) statement that “Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color, and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms” (p. 1252). Similarly, we have argued that Black gay males experience racism differently from Black straight males, and that Black gay males experience discrimination associated with gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation differently from White gay males. Thus, efforts to eradicate racism and homophobia are limited without layering justice work. We returned to intersectionality, because Crenshaw’s concept frames complex understandings of the ways an individual is influenced by the intersections of his/her/hir multiple targeted identities, the ways institutions and structures compound stigmatization, and the ways normative social patterns foreclose identity politics and silence the lived experiences of targeted individuals. We invite others to extend her concept.

Notes

1 We invite readers to examine recent court cases that extended Title IX protection on the basis of both actual and perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender conformity to students in public school districts (JL v. Mohave Central School District, 2010, Doc v. Anoka-Hennepin School District No. 11, 2012).

2 LGBT programming targeted at non-White communities has been implemented on college campuses, with notable examples at Texas A&M (see http://studentlife.tamu.edu/glibt/).
References


