

SECTION 1: INTERSECTIONALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

1.1: LGBTQ+ MARGINALIZATION AS PART OF LARGER SOCIAL INJUSTICE

LGBTQ+ marginalization occurs within the larger context of social injustice. This is a particularly opportune time to address this; in the aftermath of a global pandemic and racial reckoning, we are witnessing a momentous increase in awareness and motivation to contribute to social justice.

“Rather than just feel neglected, marginalized, and prone to despair, how do you transcend a marginalized identity? Your experience tells you negative things about you, but you have the power to change society.” (Senior faculty member, Morningside)

1.2: INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES AND OPPRESSION

“[There are] so many efforts around combating racism. I think that taking an intersectional approach to supporting all of people’s different identities and recognizing that . . . they do intersect—that people carry multiple identities and need to be supported in different ways. Like when I think about my LGBT people of color colleagues . . . there’s a lot on their shoulders right now.” (Midcareer faculty member, Medical Center)

“In general, I think when we talk about academia, we have to address the fact that it is saturated with whiteness and . . . elitism, and making it accessible is part of the queering of it, right, because if we don’t make it accessible to the populations for which it speaks about, then really . . . we can’t . . . take the steps that are actually going to make it, you know, work in populations.” (Graduate student, Morningside)

In 1989, Columbia Law Professor Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term **intersectionality**, defined as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.”



“Understanding how these issues are an intersection—that’s always important. Especially for folks of color. We’re always navigating race and sexuality, and it becomes awkward at some moments because most of my identity is wrapped around being Black and because of the ways in which being gay isn’t accepted in many of the spaces or hasn’t been accepted in media spaces that I’ve occupied. It’s always this choice of ‘Am I going to ascertain my Black or LGBTQ identity today?’ and ‘How do I do that?’ Offering opportunities for Black-identifying LGBT folk to figure out these things together, because we really don’t have opportunities to talk about it. I think having some type of fusion of this intersectional piece of it all is going to be really important because, honestly, sometimes I wonder if, when we say LGBTQ, if most folks just think about White people.”
(Faculty member, Morningside)

Kevin Nadal (2019) outlines the limited research around the experience of LGBTQ+ people of color in higher education in his article “Queering and Browning the Pipeline for LGBTQ Faculty of Color in the Academy: The Formation of the LGBTQ Scholars of Color National Network.” For students, this includes the negative impact of the historic centering of the experiences of white people in queer theory, the obstacles in coming out and finding social support, navigating campus environments in which resources are based on singular identity spaces, and lack of resources and representation (Kumashiro 2001, Duran 2018). Aguilar and Johnson (2017) found that LGBTQ+ faculty and staff faced the double burden of mentorship and service for LGBTQ+ students and students of color. Nadal also highlights studies that found high levels of resilience among LGBTQ+ people of color, and the positive impact of social support for LGBTQ+ individuals in the academy, in particular through networks.

“My school is good about bringing in like-minded younger faculty. And so I came in with folks, we don’t share research interests, but we just have similar backgrounds. We were all folks of color. And we just bonded, and I can’t tell you how important that has been because it’s not only a resource for how to navigate tenure and be productive, but it is also a social piece that we do outside of our academic work that makes this place livable and hospitable. So when moments come up, you know what I’m going to do. Everyone in my small group has had an opportunity to leave and to go to an equally elite space and we’ve all stayed because we have each other.” (Senior faculty member, Morningside)

In focus group discussions, Columbia students emphasized the need for spaces and support, as well as programming, for LGBTQ+ persons of color. Students also pointed to the need to address economic hardship, including food security. Some LGBTQ+ students experience a lack of financial and emotional support from their families. And in individual interviews, LGBTQ+ women faculty highlighted the impact of sexism on their experience:

“A story of oppression in the academy for me has been around gender as a woman, and then as a Black woman, and not so much around sexuality. Maybe that’s because I’m a feminine-presenting woman. I don’t know. I know some women who are not feminine-presenting, who are more androgynous or masculine identified . . . You know, I think for me, my hurdles are around sexism in the academy, especially in more conservative schools like Columbia.”

(Senior faculty member, Morningside)

“I would say I’ve experienced more issues in my department as a woman than as a lesbian.” (Senior faculty member, Morningside)

“With the standards [that University administration] has, which I would say privilege men over women still, if you look at what they value as leaders in sexuality research, I would say they probably lean more toward men who are doing this work [LGBTQ+ studies] nationally and internationally.” (Senior faculty member, Morningside)

1.3: ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIAL CHANGE

“You know, they say, like when you improve things for certain groups, you often end up improving them for everyone.” (Senior faculty member, Morningside)

Community and public engagement and activism can be meaningful in transcending a marginalized identity, in creating a sense of purpose, and in building resilience. An LGBTQ+ identity is one example of such an identity. Furthermore, it is crucial that LGBTQ+ inclusion is part of any initiative to promote social justice. Our broader ongoing effort remains to foster a climate in which each member of the Columbia community—regardless of role, seniority level, or identity—can flourish.

According to the University’s [Fourth Purpose](#), as described by President Bollinger, universities must push beyond their original pursuits of research, teaching, and public service to fulfill a new mandate: to leverage insights from the academy to address real-world challenges. This time in our history, with the COVID-19 epidemic and the flash point brought about by the police murder of George Floyd, has brought us to new understandings about oppression and justice:

“Life goals, purpose, and what people want to do has become transformed since the beginning of the year [2020] as a result of societal-level changes, toward having lives of meaning and purpose. So we have an opportunity, at Columbia, to support students in connecting with their communities and with the broader social issues and challenges in the country. And within that, is LGBTQ.” (Senior faculty member, Morningside)