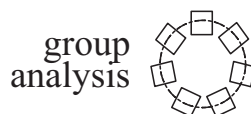


Article



## Black feminist intersectionality is vital to group analysis: Can group analysis allow outsider ideas in?

Suryia Nayak 

*This is the transcript of a speech I gave at an Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) event on the 28th November 2020 about intersectionality and groups analysis. This was momentous for group analysis because it was the first IGA event to focus on black feminist intersectionality. Noteworthy, because it is so rare, the large group was convened by two black women, qualified members of the IGA—a deliberate intervention in keeping with my questioning of the relationship between group analysis and power, privilege, and position. This event took place during the Covid-19 pandemic via an online platform called ‘Zoom’. Whilst holding the event online had implications for the embodied visceral experience of the audience, it enabled an international attendance, including members of Group Analysis India.*

*Invitation to the event: ‘Why the black feminist idea of intersectionality is vital to group analysis’*

*Using black feminist intersectionality, this workshop explores two interconnected issues:*

- *Group analysis is about integration of parts, but how do we do this across difference in power, privilege, and position?*
- *Can group analysis allow outsider ideas in? This question goes to the heart of who/ what we include in group analytic practice—what about black feminism?*



## 2 Group Analysis 54(3)

*If there 'cannot possibly be one single version of the truth so we need to hear as many different versions of it as we can' (Blackwell, 2003: 462), we need to include as many different situated standpoints as possible. Here is where and why the black feminist idea of intersectionality is vital to group analysis.*

*On equality, diversity and inclusion, intersectionality says that the 'problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including black [people] within an already established analytical structure' (Crenshaw, 1989: 140). Can group analysis allow the outsider idea of intersectionality in?*

*Key words: racism, intersectionality, black feminism, power, privilege and position, outsider, decolonization*

### **Introduction**

I begin with a vignette. The case of intersectionality that I know most well is myself. I am a mixed race, Irish, Indian, gay woman of colour. Growing up and into adulthood, I had no idea that all the aspects of who I am, and my experience are interlocking mutually reinforcing vectors. The point is that every moment, every day, every year of my childhood continuing to today and until I die, I cannot separate out the elements of the context that constructs who I am. I cannot isolate the racism, from sexism, from my gender, from domestic violence, from sexual exploitation, from poverty and social deprivation, from homophobia, from my sexuality, from class and caste. And, yet I grew up with no template for negating or understanding my interconnectedness, my immediate world and society at large was managed by compartmentalization. We could say that the social unconscious clings onto division, fragmentation, and borders. It took decades for my siblings to stop describing themselves as half-caste. The point is that I had to find a conceptual language, a template to help me understand and name what I was feeling, and why it was, and continues, to be so hard to experience the multiple simultaneous interconnected layers of who I am. And, whilst theories of interconnection, synergy, symbiosis, homeostasis, and interaction from disciplines such as mathematics, chemistry, physics, biology, engineering, psychology, psychoanalysis and even group analysis are very useful—their purpose, and in turn their application, is not to explicitly understand the interdependency of social injustices and abuses of power such as tyranny, coercion, and cruelty.

In short, the roots, purpose, and function of ideas matter, the importance of this point will become clear as we examine the anti-border concept of intersectionality.

A template for understanding the interdependency of difference as a mechanism of oppression, and as a mechanism for liberation, remains vital to my survival, reparation, and transformation (Lorde, 1979a). Because of black feminist, critical race, and anti-colonial theories, I now know that oppressive structures and experiences such as racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and homophobia ‘cannot be treated as “independent variables”, because the oppression of each is inscribed within the other—is constituted by, and is constitutive of the other’ (Brah, 1996: 109).

### **Training in group analysis**

I am training to be a group therapist. I am a patient in group therapy. I have group supervision. And I also have the academic part of training in group analysis. I know that there is a correlation between how rigorously I engage in these components of training with how rigorous I will be as a qualified group analyst. I ask the questions, does the education and practice of group analysis enable me to explore who I am? What kind of group conductor I can be? And how do I find my place in the Institute of Group Analysis? More specifically what I need is a therapeutic practice that enables me to grapple with the excruciating difficulty of lying down with the interconnected parts of myself (Nayak, 2015). My attempts at an emotional intersectionality of ‘all my different selves’ (Lorde, 1980: 120–121) bumps up against multiple unconscious borders. And, in a racist, homo/transphobic capitalist patriarchy, where ‘[i]dentities are constituted out of repudiations of the Other’ (Dalal, 2020: 438) inhabiting those parts of us that are relentlessly repudiated is painfully hard. I need a group analytic training experience that helps me sustain the task of emotional intersectionality in the face of unconscious defences which function like military border patrol warding off repudiated parts of myself (Nayak, 2020).

### **Too much**

I do not know how you received my opening autobiographical picture—I deliberately used broad brush strokes or headlines anxious that otherwise it might be overwhelming and excessive. Being too

much or excessive is a familiar trope in group and individual psychoanalysis. Being too much or excessive is also a familiar trope of racism, sexism, homophobia and pretty much every oppressive construct I can think of (Ashcroft, 1994). Interestingly, when I looked up the synonym adjective for ‘too much’ the list of options included ‘highly coloured’! How do I get me/you to hold the interconnectedness of all the parts of who I am without being too much? When someone in a therapy group says that they have taken up too much space or that they are too much—an interpretation that focusses on the re-enactment of deprivation, how little someone has had or their lack of entitlement maybe relevant, but perhaps of equal relevance is an interpretation that focuses on the opposite, for example how the interconnectedness of self and life experiences feel too much. The point is that feeling the full weight of interlocking mutually reinforcing vectors (Nash, 2008: 3) of oppression is excruciating overwhelming. I, we, need a way of understanding the function of being in excess as a group communication of simultaneous mutually constitutive oppressions.

Oppressive social structures function to produce, and reproduce, compartmentalization and divisions—hierarchies are a classic example. A way of managing the psychological impact of multiple oppression is psychological compartmentalization. Oppression produces a problem that we reproduce in trying to manage the problem.

### **Borders**

Bordered social structures create bordered psychic structures—we live in a bordered society, and borders shape who we are (Nayak, 2017; Oliver, 2001). We live in a world of categories, divisions, and fragmentation and resort to these dominant discursive frames of understanding experience—especially when we feel threatened (Nayak, 2015). So, it is no coincidence (and nothing ever is) that society, the group, and individuals in groups use attacks on linking as a defence mechanism. The idea of ‘attacks on linking’ (Bion, 1959) is a well-known psychoanalytic concept to describe the defence mechanism where the mind prevents links being made between experiences, ideas, and feelings because the linkage is unbearable. Foulkes’ ‘Basic Law of Group Dynamics’ says, the ‘borderline of what is “in” or “outside” is constantly moving . . . there is no clear-cut frontier between inside and outside’ (Foulkes, 1990: 184). However, the moment something becomes intolerable borderlines become frozen and frontiers

become very clear cut. This happens in groups especially where difference is a vehicle of power, privilege, and position.

### **Black feminist group analysis?**

I am convinced of group analysis, I have witnessed the power of group therapy and I believe in the theory of group analysis, but I came to this already having a rigorous foundation in critical race, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist, queer and black feminism. I came to this with a close reading and application of the political writing of Audre Lorde—but what if I didn't? How would I fare? And, what do I do with this knowledge as a group analyst? When I was accepted onto this training and became a member of the IGA as Suryaia, I am also a Suryaia that is deeply interconnected with Audre Lorde. I ask, if you accept me then do you accept my black feminist thinking? I am being assessed on the extent to which I understand and apply group analysis but, can group analysis do the same with black feminist ideas? Could it be possible for Lorde to have the same standing as Foulkes? For me this is a question of who and what group analysis will let into its slow, open, group of theory. This question gave birth to and is at the heart of intersectionality, namely the question of who or what is recognized, allowed in the frame, or through the hatch (Crenshaw, 1989; Nayak, 2015). If entry is conditional on acceptance into and compliance with an existing framework what is erased, left out, and with what consequences? Whilst we may be familiar with the delicate complex process of bringing new members into an established therapy or supervision group, my questions encourage translation of the clinical principles of a slow open group to the conceptual group of group analysis.

### **Resonance between intersectionality and group analysis**

The foundational ideas of group analysis are in keeping with my ideological, political, and lived experience as an activist for social justice, namely that subjectivity is a product of social context and social relations (Elias, 1978) of 'The Established and the Outsiders' (Elias and Scotson, 1994). Intersectionality and group analysis both emphasize the significance of context (Anthias, 2011; Hopper, 1982; Nitzgen, 2002). More specifically, I can see that group analysis and intersectionality are effective for working with interdependency, interconnectedness, hybridity, plurality, and simultaneity. The theoretical basis

and practice of group analysis is conveyed in the shape of a circle to ‘allow every member to see every other member . . . where everybody is equal’ (Foulkes, 1975:81) and in the idea that the experience of the group is greater than the sum of its individual members. Elias captured the principle of interdependency in the analogy: ‘we say the wind is blowing, as if the wind were separate from its blowing, as if a wind could exist which did not blow’ (Elias, 1999:112).

Group analysis and intersectionality share the characteristics described by Dalal (1998: 39) as:

1. The ‘part’ is always connected to the ‘whole’;
2. The ‘whole’ determines what takes place in the ‘parts’;
3. The ‘whole’ is always an artefact, an abstraction that is carved out of a greater complexity.

I find resonance between the tenants of intersectionality and Foulkes’ ideas of ‘intercommunicational, interactional network’ (1973: 231), ‘interacting processes’ (1986: 16) and ‘dynamic, reciprocal interrelation’ (1968: 184).

One of the most striking examples of the resonance between intersectionality and group analysis is the concept of the ‘matrix’ and both describe the matrix through the metaphor of ‘traffic’ (Crenshaw, 1989:149) to illustrate the ‘concert of interactions which is our primary basis for orientation, interpretation and confrontation’ (Foulkes, 1966: 154). However, it seems to me that we need help to process internalized abuses of power, privilege, and position, we need a decolonized framework to sharpen the political potential of group analysis in the highly bordered world of globalization. We need a way of working with the disproportionate effects of the current Covid-19 global pandemic. We need applications of group analysis that extend ‘beyond clinical theory and method’ (Rohr, 2014: 367). To be clear, I am not trying to convince you that intersectionality can be fitted into an existing frame (Crenshaw, 1989: 140), for that would be counter to the spirit of intersectionality. There will be inevitable tensions and contestations. The task is to inhabit these tensions as productive sites of praxis (Forrest and Nayak, 2020).

I argue that group analysis needs the black feminist concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality will assist us—so we can start to speak of intersectional counter-transference; intersectional transference; intersectional projective identification; intersectional resonance;

intersectional matrix and an intersectional paranoid schizoid and depressive position.

I am arguing for:

An understanding of the unconscious as intersectional—an intersectional unconscious—an unconscious that find intersectionality hard to tolerate.

I am arguing for:

An understanding of the relationship between unconscious and intersectional processes.

I am arguing for:

An understanding of ‘interpenetrating matrices’ (Hopper, 2018: 202) as an intersectional ‘matrix of domination’ (Hill Collins, 2000: 228) that foregrounds the issue of power.

I do believe that our understanding of intersectionality is enriched by psychoanalytic thinking and our understanding of psychoanalytic group thinking is enriched by intersectionality—a kind of reciprocity or reciprocal praxis.

Foulkes, the founder of group analysis, never uses the term ‘intersectionality’. However, Foulkes developed the practice and theory of group analysis whilst working in the psychiatric hospital for the RAF and Army at the Northfield Military Neurosis Centre, where, he ‘turned it into a series of interlocking groups—each ward had a group’ (Zelaskowski and Cohen, 2014: 17). The idea of ‘a series of interlocking’ phenomena is central to the anti-border concept of intersectionality (Nayak, 2019). Intersectionality is a black feminist theoretical methodology that refutes mutually exclusive categories of identity, experience, and analysis.

### **Contextual intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a group concept born out of being part of a group process. The critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term ‘intersectionality’ in her deconstruction of legal cases where groups of black women raised the issue of discrimination on the basis of being black women in the group context of

the companies they were employed by (Crenshaw, 1989). Their argument was that black men as a group enjoyed better pay and working conditions than black women, and white women as a group enjoyed better pay and working conditions than black women—so the single issue of race or the single issue of gender did not apply to black women. The problem is that in this representational scheme the experiences of black women get buried under the experience of black men and under the experience of white women. When the focus of a group becomes a single-issue focus, for example on race or gender or sexuality or class, then experiences of multiple simultaneous interconnectedness is driven under-ground.

Whilst Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989, she was giving name to the testimonies and methods of thinking and action that defined historical black women's struggles for centuries (Nayak and Robbins, 2018). Intersectionality was born out of black women's experience of multiple oppression; this constitutes its revolutionary potential and distinguishes black feminist methodologies from other methodologies as a tool for global social justice (Sheehy and Nayak, 2020). To be clear, intersectionality is not about having multiple identities—you have three, I have six and so on—it is about how structures make certain identities the vehicle for vulnerability—it is about context and this is why I prefer the term contextual intersectionality (Nayak, Montenegro and Pujol, 2018). Using the analogy of a traffic intersection to illustrate that black women are hit by oppression in simultaneous multiple directions, Crenshaw argued that the 'intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism' (Crenshaw, 1989:140). Here, Crenshaw disrupts the idea of adding and subtracting or a hierarchical ranking of categories of oppression that operate through classifications of identity. In short, intersectionality refutes equations where racism is added to sexism is added to homophobia is added to class. The key is in the words 'greater than'. The inextricable interdependency of simultaneous multiple parts of oppression, 'is greater than' individual parts of oppression. However, whilst representational positions such as race, class, caste, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, cannot be separated out into parts—the race part cannot be separated from the class part—neither can it be said that race and class are the same. The complexity is that the specificity of difference exists within constitutive mutual interdependency. The challenge is summarised in the question, '[a]t what point, and in what ways, for example, does the



specificity of a particular social experience become an expression of essentialism?’ (Brah, 1996: 95).

### **Applying Crenshaw’s arguments for intersectionality to group analysis**

Now, I will attempt an application of Crenshaw’s arguments for intersectionality to group analysis. Through a close re-reading of Crenshaw’s *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (1989), I will take five aspects of her argument one by one, aware that the specific detail of these different arguments is at once mutually constitutive. The intersection of each point is greater than the sum of their individual parts:

#### **1. Crenshaw’s argument:**

A single-axis framework erases black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group. (Crenshaw, 1989: 140)

#### **A possible application to group analysis:**

The dynamics of a group, ‘collectively . . . constitute the very Norm, from which individually, they deviate’ (Foulkes, 1948: 29).

Here, the words of the black feminist activist Chandra Mohanty are relevant:

I am trying to uncover how ethnocentric universalism is produced in certain analyses. As a matter of fact, my argument holds for any discourse that sets up its own . . . yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse. (Mohanty, 1984: 21)

A yardstick is a measuring rod a yard long, typically divided into inches—a standard used for comparison. That seems straight forward enough until, as Mohanty does, we add in the issue of power, hierarchy, and dominance.

The norm of a group functions as a yardstick, where ‘the community, of which they are a miniature edition, itself determines what is normal, socially accepted behaviour’ (Foulkes, 1948: 29-30).

**Question for consideration:**

Under the lens of intersectional racism how does the norm of the group limit inquiry to the experiences of dominant normative social constructs?

**2. Crenshaw's argument:**

This focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon. (Crenshaw, 1989: 140)

Under this view, black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with the sub-set. (Crenshaw, 1989: 143)

Black women are regarded either as too much like women or Blacks and the compounded nature of their experience is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group or as too different, in which case black women's Blackness or femaleness sometimes has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin. (Crenshaw, 1989: 150)

Not fitting into the sub-set—being 'at the margin' or outside of the sub-set results in fragmentation and alienation—returning to the opening vignette, this would be a replay of not being in the white mother's sub-set; a replay of not fitting into the Irish or Indian sub-sets; and a replay of not fitting into the heterosexual sub-set. In short, a replay of not fitting into racist heteronormative subsets as the earliest of developmental experiences. The point is that the experience of feeding from a racist heteronormative breast of group analysis would be a replay of a feeding from a physically present but emotionally absent racist heteronormative breast. If the structures, theory, and practice of group analysis function in dominant sub-set mode, it will not be fit for purpose for the 'complex phenomenon' (Crenshaw, 1989: 140) of intersectional racism.

**A possible application to group analysis:**

'In order to see a person as a whole, one has to see them in a group . . . The group is the background, the horizon, the frame of reference of the total situation' (Foulkes, 1974: 109).

Under the lens of contextual intersectionality, the notions of ‘background’; ‘horizon’; ‘total situation’ shift our focus from identity (which are sub-sets) to the situations or contexts that produce identity. Contextual intersectionality spotlights ‘process or context in which . . . identifications happen [and] the arenas of activity that enable or constrain the affirmation of particular allegiances or designations’ (Burman and Frosh, 2005: 10).

### **Question for consideration:**

Make no mistake sub-set figurations will be appealing—at last race or class or gender or sexuality is being addressed! The black feminist scholar and activist Norma Alarcón gives the following caution:

With gender [or any sub-set focus] as the central concept in feminist [group analytic] thinking, epistemology is flattened out in such a way that we lose sight of the complex and multiple ways in which the subject and object of possible experience are constituted . . . There’s no inquiry into the knowing subject beyond the fact of being a ‘woman’. (Alarcón, 1990: 361)

The anti-colonial thinker Homi Bhabha uses the term ‘sly civility’ (Bhabha, 1994: 93), which I would apply to group processes where race is focused at the expense of intersectional racism.

How might an intersectional optics of figure and ground trouble a group process of ‘sly civility’?

How could we apply Achille Mbembe’s anti-colonial caution to the dynamics of group analysis?

domination is a regime that involves not just control but conviviality, even connivance—as shown by the constant compromises, the small tokens of fealty . . . individuals are constantly being trapped in a net of rituals that reaffirm tyranny, and in that these rituals, however minor, are intimate in nature. (Mbembe, 2001: 66)

### **3. Crenshaw’s argument:**

Challenges to the entire system of oppression are foreclosed by the limited view of the wrong and the narrow scope of the available remedy. (Crenshaw, 1989: 145)

### **A possible application to group analysis:**

If group analysis is a mechanism for reparation and transformation, we must address Azu-Okeke’s question of, ‘whether, given the ethos

of group analysis, we can accommodate the interests of all who are affected by the consequences of colonialism' (2003: 476).

**Question for consideration:**

How does an intersectional optics expand our view of the 'wrong' and expand the available remedy of group analysis?

**4. Crenshaw's argument:**

Those who experience and need remedy from multiple simultaneous oppression are essentially isolated and often required to fend for themselves. (Crenshaw, 1989: 145)

**A possible application to group analysis:**

A group analytic interpretation of a patient who fends for herself, where fending for self is interpreted as the patient's defensive resistance, could feed into oppressive societal tropes of being too aloof; too distant; too self-reliant; too independent; too self-sufficient; '[t]oo much, too long, too many, too subversive, too voluble, too insistent, too loud, too strident, too much-too-much, too complex, too hybrid, too convoluted, too disrespectful, too antagonistic, too insistent, too insistent, too insistent, too repetitive, too paranoid, too . . . excessive (Ashcroft, 1994: 33; ellipsis in original).

**Question for consideration:**

Under the lens of intersectionality what might an interpretation of isolation and 'fending for self' look like?

**5. Crenshaw's argument:**

Those who experience and need remedy from multiple simultaneous oppression

receive protection only to the extent that their experiences are recognizably similar to those whose experiences tend to be reflected in antidiscrimination doctrine. (Crenshaw, 1989: 152)

**A possible application to group analysis:**

Here, intersectionality gets us to re-think the function resonance, identification, and recognition in group therapy.

Resonance refers to the echoing of themes and feelings through the group, creating identifications from one member to another, which can awaken and heighten emotional awareness enabling social bonding through a spirit of communality as a 'curative' factor in group therapy. (Nitsun, 1996: 18)

### **Question for consideration**

An intersectional optic is curious as to the extent to which the echo includes or excludes experiences of difference that replicate and reinforce the group yardstick. Is the echo a manifestation of a recognizable sub-set?

An example of where an intersectional lens is necessary in therapy is the trauma of rape. Given the prevalence of rape, it is not unusual for patients to bring the trauma of rape to group therapy. However, a singular focus on rape as a manifestation of male power over female sexuality, eclipses the use of rape as a weapon of racial terror. When black women are raped, they are being raped not as women generally, but as black women specifically, for example, sexist expectations of chastity and racist assumptions of sexual promiscuity combine to create a distinct set of issues confronting black women (Crenshaw, 1989).

### **Black feminist group analysis is not white group analysis in blackface**

To conclude, I now turn to a message that has hovered between the figure and ground of the matrix of my presentation. If the figure is intersectionality the ground is radical anti-racist thinking such as black feminism, critical race theory and anticolonial theory rooted in living struggles for social justice. So, I close by making the implicit argument for decolonizing group analysis explicit.

If group analysis wants to take seriously Elias's 'idea of *The Civilizing Process* (2000), including the restraints and constraints of the social unconscious, then group analysis has to address the fact that these 'injurious interpellations' (Butler, 1997:104) injure us differently. We are 'interpellated differently' (Probyn, 2003: 298). The black feminist Audre Lorde explains that 'in a patriarchal power system where white-skin privilege is a major prop, the entrapments used to neutralize black [people] and white [people] are not the same' (Lorde, 1980:118). Here, the implications for group analysis of intersectional racism are far reaching. Foundational group-analytic concepts cannot be applied as either 'one size fits all' or as politically neutral. Just as 'black feminism

is not white feminism in blackface' (Lorde, 1979b: 60), an anti-racist or black feminist group analysis is not white group analysis in blackface. I have argued that intersectionality rejects an addition and subtraction formula to widening participation because: 'problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including black [people] within an already established analytical structure' (Crenshaw, 1989:140).

Taking into account the devastating consequences of 'linguistic imperialism' (Azu-Okeke, 2003: 474), the work of the IGA's 'Power Privilege and Position' group and the work of black feminist, anti-colonial and critical race theory raises the question of, what knowledge/standpoint is eligible and legitimized and where is it situated? This is a question of the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault and Colin, 1980) .

I hear that our webinar event tonight in terms of our collective group focus on intersectional group analysis is ground-breaking. You came tonight in response to a question I posed in the invitation: Can group analysis allow outsider ideas in?

I believe the future of group analysis depends on this question.

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## 16 *Group Analysis* 54(3)

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