Igniting an Intersectional Shift in Public Policy Research (and Training): Canadian Public Policy Special Lecture

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Introduction

Much has changed since Henry Aaron (1978, 17) said that studies of economic inequality were as interesting as "watching grass grow." While studies of inequality have always existed, it was the 2008 global financial collapse and the resulting Occupy movement that launched a decade of intensive and novel study on income inequality; studies that drove collaborative efforts to improve data, techniques, and understanding of income inequality. And the influence of these studies cannot be understated. Throughout the 2010s, a major focus of public policy and public policy debates was about understanding the sources of inequality and understanding the role of government in addressing income inequality. Piketty's (2014) landmark work on inequality in Europe and the US, particularly, stimulated serious and significant discussions about not just income inequality but also the rise of the top 1%. In Canada, the volume by D.A. Green, Riddell, and St-Hilaire (2016) laid out new evidence regarding the causes and effects of growing inequality, laying out the role policy could play to reduce income inequality. Considering their work, policy interventions enacted across Canada to reduce income inequality have included increasing the minimum wage, tax relief to low-income workers, targeted transfers to households with young children, increasing top personal income tax rates, enacting a variety of specific anti-avoidance rules, and reducing the tax advantages available to owners of Canadian Controlled Private Corporations (CCPCs). The data show the results of these efforts: poverty as measured by the Market-basket Measure (MBM) is down for most economic families, the Gini coefficient has declined, and the income share of the top 1 per cent has plateaued (Rosen et al. 2023, Chapter 6).

That said, significant gaps in inequality remain; gaps that go well beyond income inequality and which were emphasized throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Flor et al. 2022). The public

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health crises uncovered and exacerbated the myriad of ways in which policies, institutions, and systems are hostile to and exclusive of many Canadians, particularly those who belong to marginalized groups, something that is oft ignored by economists. A recent volume edited by Robson and Tedds (2022) brings together Canadian policy scholarship that engages with some of the ways in which the interactions of identity (e.g., gender, race, disability, Indigeneity, age, and sexuality) and inequality led to more adverse outcomes for these diverse groups. For example, many of the public health orders increased the demands on both paid and unpaid caregivers, most of whom are racialized women that impacted their physical, mental, and emotional health and put them at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 (Baiden et al. 2022; Peetz, Harasymchuck, and Aknin 2022; Prentice 2022). Social distancing restrictions increasingly resulted in greater isolation of those living in violent situations and increased the risk of gender-based violence, a phenomenon that remained largely unmeasured even before the pandemic (Smallman 2022). The switch from face-to-face learning to online learning put children with disabilities at greater risk of isolation and learning loss, particularly as individualized supports were discontinued (Foley, Haeck, and Neill 2022). The collapse of the health care system resulted in a reduced ability to access sexual and reproductive care, especially by gender-diverse people, the net effect of which remains to be uncovered (Tuite and Thampi 2022). In sum, the pandemic has served as a reminder that individuals in society have distinct experiences, and that attention to inequality **and** diversity needs to be seriously incorporated into modernized policy frameworks.

And this is precisely where existing policy frameworks fail; they are largely inattentive to the interactions of diversity with inequality. The existing policy frameworks, typically:

- elevate, and frame as oppositional, considerations of efficiency over equity, a hierarchy that emphasizes economic values while neglecting individual and social values. Such framing fails to take into account that the assumptions underlying it are themselves unrepresentative of the lived experiences of diverse individuals (D.A. Green, Kesselman, and Tedds 2020);

- fail to engage directly with questions of equity, diversity, and inclusion, along with the manifold ways in which social hierarchies and power relations shape policy outcomes (Cameron and Tedds 2022).

- relegate inequalities to cultural, social, and capital explanations (Darity 2022) and fail to recognize the ways in which policymaking, the policy process, and policy analysis are complicit in perpetuating privilege and disadvantage along with advancing a particular view of the world.

As governments commit to a fair recovery from COVID-19, and society is more hopeful for a more just society, what is required is a much more inclusive approach to policy analysis in order to address longstanding failures of the economy and society. In particular, modernized policy frameworks need to be more representative of, and attentive to, the experiences and struggles

of marginalized and underrepresented populations. In fact, this is precisely the point of the Stiglitz's inclusive growth concept (Stiglitz 2016) where greater and faster economic growth would occur if we were truly able to rewrite the rules that create inequality in the first place. At the same time, truly transformative policy approaches would seek to engage with how inequality is created and perpetuated, and rather than simply achieving integration, recognition and inclusion, and target and seek to disrupt the underlying structures that generate and entrench unequal social hierarchies.

This is not to say there have not been attempts within government to do just this, attempts that have been mostly ignored by policy scholars and policy think tanks alike. The federal government has attempted to address shortcomings in policy frameworks over a 75-year history, though progress has been slow and sometimes even stalled (Cameron and Tedds 2022). It was not until the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations 1995) that the Canadian government formalized its commitment to mainstreaming gender analysis.[2] This commitment was operationalized through the introduction of the Federal Plan for Gender Equality and the development of an analytical tool called Gender-based Analysis (GBA) (OECD, 2018a). However, it would be another decade before GBA became entrenched in government processes, as it was not until 2007 that Treasury Board Secretariat required all submissions to Cabinet be informed by GBA (Scala & Paterson, 2017). However, one central issue with the GBA approach was a prioritization of gender considerations, and as a result, a relegation or dismissal of other dimensions of identity, oppression, and need. Building on this insight, the federal government updated its GBA tool in 2011, creating GBA+, which is a modernized approach that reflects an extension of analytical scope beyond gender to incorporate considerations of the intersectional nature of multiple identity factors and inequality. GBA+ is thus rooted in an understanding that policies, programs, and initiatives have distinct impacts on women, men, and gender non-binary people; that these effects are further complicated, transmuted, and even amplified by identity factors other than gender; and that policymaking must be undertaken in a manner that is sensitive to these realities.

While the implementation of GBA(+)has been widely panned as being simply an add on check-list approach to the standard frameworks of policy analysis (McNutt and Béland 2015; Paterson 2010; Paterson, Marier, and Chu 2016; Scala and Paterson 2017), it was an important step towards incorporating a rigorous framework in an effort to revolutionize policy analysis and consider broad sources and causes of inequality; the step being to incorporate the theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality is an analytical tool rooted in the social justice paradigm that makes clear the links between notions of identity and the systems of power through which they

[2] Gender mainstreaming is an internationally accepted framework for promoting gender equality through policy analysis. Specifically, it is a method for "assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, or programmes, in all areas and at all levels" and a "strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic, and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated" (UN Economic and Social Council, 1997, p. 24).

play out. Intersectionality considers the ways in which our identities are formed at the intersections of various social constructs, such as race, ability, class and gender, and within broader contexts and structures of power, such as the labour market and government institutions. Fully integrating intersectionality into policy analysis could create a policy analysis structure that would advance policy agendas of diversity, inclusion, and inclusive growth. I turn to describing the theory of intersectionality next.

Intersectionality

In 1989, legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality as a way of conceptualizing the unique and multifaceted oppression experienced by Black women. Describing how the particular experiences of Black women translated in interactions with the American legal system, specifically in terms of the recognition of their legal claims, Crenshaw demonstrated how the intersection was productive of "legal invisibility" (Carastathis 2013, 700) for people facing multi-dimensional discrimination. Further, Crenshaw argued that, for Black women, racism and sexism cannot be separated—that Black women can never just be Black or just be a woman—and that their experiences with society and institutions was the combination of being Black and a woman, a combination of racism and sexism that cannot be separable. In the context of policy, these unique experiences of discrimination require distinct interventions (Kimberle Crenshaw 1991). Often presented as a central concert or aspect of critical race theory, the concept of intersectionality has actually also been articulated across spaces of Black, Indigenous, queer and post-colonial feminist activism and scholarship (see, for example, Combahee River Collective 1978; hooks 1981, 1984; Mohanty 1984).

Employed as an analytical framework, intersectionality targets interactions among dimensions of identity within the context of interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 2015). From here, it provides a "way of thinking about sameness and difference and its relation to power" (Cho et al. 2013 in Collins 2015, 11) and supports analyses of how processes of differentiation and systems of domination shape identities and reproduce hierarchies, discrimination, and ultimately, inequality (Dhamoon 2011). Indeed, intersectionality demonstrates the exclusionary nature of current policy practices (Carcia and Zajicek 2022), which considers identity to be static, exogenous to the policy being studied, and only representative of social grouping. As a result, embracing intersectionality could serve to revolutionize policy analysis frameworks, enabling a consideration and understanding of broad sources and causes of inequality.

The main strength that intersectionality brings to policy is that it can support researchers and practitioners to move beyond one-dimensional, siloed, and decontextualized considerations of identity and experience that has dominated policy discourse to date. Intersectional analysis can uncover how social locations and structures of power come to shape experiences of policy issues and the availability and delivery of services (Hankivsky et al. 2014), for example, and how aspects of people's lives overlap to "present different choices, produce different decisions, and manufacture different outcomes, even among similarly situated groups" (Manuel 2019, 46).

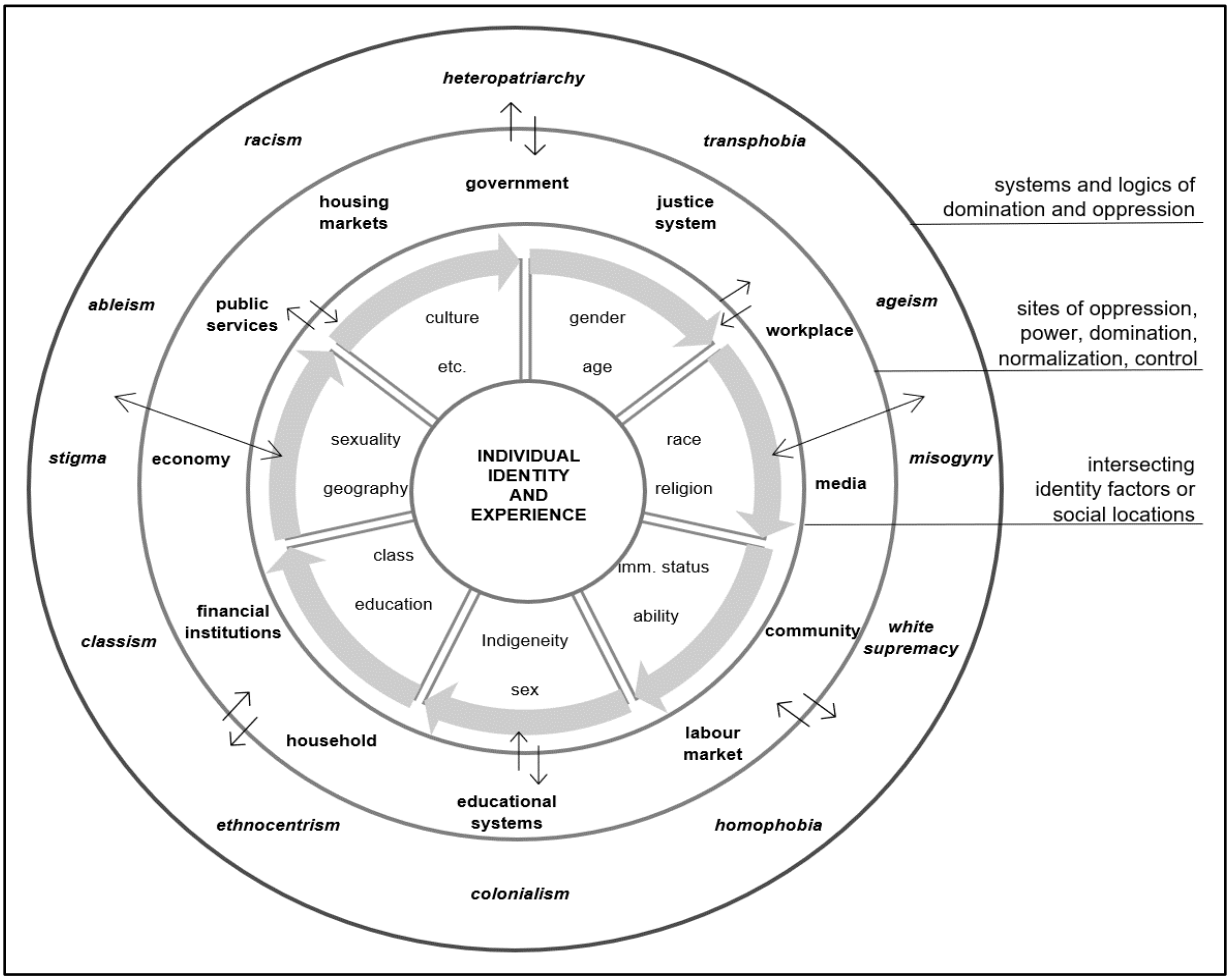
That is, it moves beyond the notion that inequality would decline if individuals would just "do the right thing" (Darity 2022, 402) to an understanding that inequality as experienced by members of identity groups is a function of discrimination and power imbalances.

Because intersectionality is a field of study—an analytical approach—it assumes various forms and encompasses all sorts of methodology, including both normative and empirical paradigms (Hancock 2007). And this is another main source of strength intersectionality has: it engages with various forms of knowledge, evidence, and expertise. While there is considerable room to improve the way in which quantitative methods are leveraged within intersectionality analysis, intersectionality ensures that statistical analysis is grounded in critical understandings of power and privilege by supplementing it with lived experienced perspective that contextualize and strengthen data driven work. This process also ensures that base-level assumptions regarding the neutrality of markets, budgets, and fiscal policymaking are confronted and challenged (Lahey 2010).

Visual representations can be helpful in grasping the various elements and interactions captured by intersectionality. Figure 1 presents a visualization of the concept of intersectionality. It captures the multifaceted nature of identity, particularly the extent to which identity and experience are shaped by systems of power and oppression that permeate both institutions and the social and private realms (Cameron and Tedds 2022). Figure 1 has four circles that correspond the three levels of intersectional analysis—individual identity, social locations, sites of oppression, and systems of oppression—that come to bear upon individual identity and experience. Together, the figure depicts the identify formation and experience of individuals and how they evolve through interactions with society and institutions (as shown by the bi-directional arrows). From this figure it should be clear that:

- incorporating identity in gender-first and additive way is a misstep in integrating diversity considerations: no one identity can be prioritized over other identity factors which are often considered secondary (Findlay, 2019; Hankivsky & Mussell, 2018; Hunting & Hankivsky, 2020).
- the social world and its composite institutions (which include the state and the market) represent sites of power. In fact, interlocking systems of power (colonialism, misogyny) are reproduced at various levels, from the individual to the societal.
- Public policy can and is complicit in producing the very problem it seeks to solve: inequality (Levasseur, Paterson, and Carvalho 2018).

Figure 1: Intersectionality Visual



Source: Cameron and Tedds (2022)

Honest engagement with Figure 1 should lead one to reach the conclusion that intersectionality challenges some of the more basic assumptions of welfare economics, and thus many public policy frameworks. Frameworks that, as was noted in the introduction, are problematic both because they are premised on the idea that individuals are able to act, uncontested, in their own self-interest, to freely interact in the market which is envisioned as being neutral to identity, and those interactions are only mediated through prices. Further, welfare economics elevates efficiency, which must then be traded off against equity. History is replete with examples of individuals whose identity leads to discrimination not only in market interactions, but also in the social institutions that guide these market interactions. This includes identities based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, ability, class, religion, ethnicity, race, citizenship, geography, and indigeneity along with the interaction of these identities. To then base public policy on the assumption that these individual identities and their intersections are only relevant for principles of equity and not efficiency "…is a notion that could only have been

formed by individuals whose identity was never challenged by other individuals, society, or its institutions." (D. Green et al. Forthcoming-b). It is clear that both economics and public policy would benefit greatly from an engagement with concepts such as intersectionality. I now turn to presenting a real-world policy example, involving mainstream economists, which demonstrates the value of applying intersectional principles in the context of Canadian policy.

Application

The B.C. Basic Income Expert panel, panel of three expert economists[3] that were appointed in 2018 to study basic income as a potential policy tool for poverty reduction, assessing its feasibility, and its relation to existing income supports in B.C. (D.A. Green, Kesselman, and Tedds 2020). As part of its work, the panel consciously decided not to use the standard economic framework—welfare economics—to evaluate policy options under its mandate. A main reason why they made this choice was because the members agreed that equity and efficiency are not separable, and one cannot be traded-off against the other. They came to this decision in part because of an understanding of intersectionality and how welfare economics has yet to recognize and address how identity, power, and systems of oppression interact with the underlying assumptions of welfare economics (D. Green et al. Forthcoming-b).[4] They also agreed that policies naturally favoured some identities and oppress others and that these biases are reaffirmed through the market process, leading to inequality. In their final report, they argued that policy analysis must take seriously who is being favoured, why, as well as ways to intervene in social hierarchies and reduce oppression (D.A. Green, Kesselman, and Tedds 2020).

Using intersectionality along with theories of justice, they proposed an analytical policy framework based on a set of ten principles—adequacy, access, security, responsiveness, opportunity, social inclusion, public trust, policy stability, reciprocity, and community building—while keeping top of mind the importance of (and engaging when appropriate) rights-based processes and intersectional analysis. Rights-based processes ensures a dedicated mechanism whereby those affected by policy are included in both the policy design stage and the evaluation stage, acknowledging that policy is an ongoing process, to ensure responsiveness. The intersectional lens ensures that serious consideration is given throughout the policy process to the ways in which power, oppression, and exclusion work. An important part of both these elements is to ensure the fulsome consideration is given to the structural context of the policy environment—the whole system of government supports, the nature of the population at risk, and the broader social environment—and not simply narrowly focused on the high-level program design features of a particular public policy solution (D. Green et al. Forthcoming-a).

[3] The panel was comprised of Dr. David Green (Chair), Dr. Rhys Kesselman, and Dr. Lindsay Tedds (the author of this paper).

[4] The panel also engaged with ideas from the disciplines of moral and political philosophy, particularly in considering diverse and competing notions of justice and their importance in shaping distinct policy approaches.

Applying this framework to the nature and causes of poverty in B.C. (Cameron and Tedds 2020b) moves the analysis beyond just examination of data to produce a harrowing picture, both of need and oppression, and one that government systems have been complicit in constructing. In particular, this detailed analysis reveals the extent to which inequality is not simply the result of limited income but is produced (and entrenched) along several dimensions of discrimination and marginalization—a fact that renders various groups more vulnerable to poverty on the basis of their intersecting identities. Moreover, they show specifically how identity further complicates interactions with and experiences of government systems and other institutions, given deeply entrenched hierarchies and forms of discrimination—this, in turn, exacerbates poverty and marginalization in many cases. This is also a point made clear in examination of the literature related to stratification economics, which itself constitutes an attempt to integrate a consideration of structures and power relations in economic analysis, that also concludes that systems and discrimination much be addressed in order to tackle inequality (Lew, Asare, and Fields 2021).

As the panel's mandate was to consider basic income within the context of policy alternatives, the rights-based intersectional framework was also applied to consideration of basic services and reform to the system (Cameron and Tedds 2020a; Petit and Tedds 2020). Here they find that intersectionality calls into question the true role that cash transfers (e.g., basic income) to individuals can play as a viable mechanism for permanently reducing and preventing inequality. In fact, it becomes quite clear that the simple provision of cash does not overcome the accessibility and affordability of essential services due to market failures that are hidden when an identity-neutral lens is applied. This is particularly true for housing, early childhood education and learning, public transportation, legal services, and broadband. For example, the usual policy framework suggests that infrastructure such as roads has no relationship to identity or oppression, yet it was this framework that led to lack of public transportation in rural and remote areas, particularly along Highway 16—the Highway of Tears—which contributed to a reliance on hitchhiking, the result of which was the widespread occurrence of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Overall, considering cash versus services through an intersectional lens leads to a clear understanding that need is a direct product of structural and systemic inequality and oppression, meaning that they do not merely arise as a result of lack of money, poor financial management, or individual failure as oft painted by the application of the standard framework of policy analysis. Instead, they are inherently intersectional. Two examples will make this clear.

Economists and politicians often advocate that the best pathway out of poverty is a well-paying job, including entry into entrepreneurship. However, moral values dictate what is appropriate work for a path out of poverty and what is not. One industry in which these values are applied is to sex work. Working as a sex worker is not illegal in Canada[5] and the internet, social media, and the pandemic has diversified forms of sex work, aided the growth of the industry, shifted

[5] Although, certain activities related to sex work are illegal including: communicating in any place for the purpose of sex work and advertising sexual services. See: Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (S.C. 2014 c. 25) for more information.

power towards sex workers, and allowed for the development of a strong network of connection among sex workers. Regardless of the economic potential of sex work in addressing inequality, there is stigma attached to sex workers and this stigma is seen in the structure of policies, creating a barrier to access for sex workers. In particular, Income Assistance in B.C. counts income from sex work against the income and asset threshold to determine eligibility for benefits while at the same sex work is not a recognized form of employment for the Employment Plan (Petit and Tedds 2020). That is, sex work is treated as legitimate income, but not legitimate employment represents how sites and systems of oppression work to interact with and change identity. Also, by the institution of government communicating that sex work is not real work, to be pursued as a choice and a profession, based on self-government of their own bodies and in their own self-interest, and mediated through prices is precisely the problem we express above regarding the problems with identity and assumptions of welfare economics.

It is well known that intimate partner and domestic violence is a widespread problem with wide ranging immediate and long-term consequences for its victims, most of whom are women and gender diverse individuals (Smallman 2022). Persons who experience intimate partner or domestic violence are dependent on transition housing for meet their immediate housing needs yet the market under provides such housing and government provision is unable to meet demand—transition houses turn away more than 200 women and children a day due to lack of space (Steacy 2020). The reliance on publicly provided housing options is due to the fact that most flee violence with little to no financial and other assets and often lack the information and other requirements to be able to immediately transition into market-based rentals. This housing instability and risk of homelessness results in victims returning to the abuser which then often leads them to be excluded from support programs to help victims obtain their independence. Further, persons facing housing instability face the risk of having their children removed from the custody, but also face this risk if they stay with their abuser. Here you can see how identity interacts with systems along with pathologies to exacerbate inequality. The expectation embedded in the system of support for victim of intimate partner violence is that they must leave their abuser and establish their independence as quickly as possible, yet the interactions of housing access and affordability, stigma, trauma, isolation, child care needs, employment instability, among many other factors means establishing that independence within the short timeframe required by government policies means these persons are not, in fact, supported to gain that independence (O'Campo et al. 2016). Persons with lived experience clearly need to have more agency in how these policies and supports are designed and implemented and institutions need to understand that is not a one-sized fits all path to independence. Intersectionality ensures that this happens.

Of course, these are just a few examples of how the panel developed and applied an intersectional lens to examining income supports and their alternatives in B.C. to reveal sources and reinforcement of inequality. The panel's recommendations, 65 in total, can be grouped into four categories:

1. Reform current income and social supports to not only render benefits more generous, but also remove barriers (to access and exit) and fill existing gaps in supports for diverse people.
2. Continue and increase investment in key basic services: childcare, housing, public transportation, legal services, broadband, and information services.
3. Strengthen labour laws and related institutions to reduce work-place discrimination and harassment, improve job quality/security, and increase for diverse people the benefits of engaging in paid work.
4. Train the public service to apply intersectionality throughout the policy process—including in issue identification/framing, program design, service delivery, and evaluation—and across government functions.

More detail can be found on the panel's website (https://bcbasicincomepanel.ca/) which includes not just the final report but also the more than 40 independent input papers that the panel commissioned.

While we detail the experience of the BC Basic Income Expert Panel, it should be noted that the BC basic income panel is not the only academic application of intersectionality in the context of Canadian policy research. That said, Canadian applications have largely been in the field of health policy (see Hankivsky et al. 2014), which aligns with findings that suggest education and health policy are the most common areas for intersectional applications overall (Garcia and Zajicek 2021). This likely has a lot to due with diversity and representation in these disciplines—something that is lacking in public policy. Most public policy experts, being economists, exist within a discipline that itself has a diversity problem (Bayer and Rouse 2016); it is largely unrepresentative of, and is thus often inattentive to, the experiences and struggles of diverse people. In the policy research community, questions of inequality, its creation and perpetuation—whether within institutions, policies, or discourse—are too frequently deemed to be of secondary concern, if they are considered at all.

Some of this can be addressed through exposure to and understanding and facility with intersectionality. It is telling that most major policy institutes have neither committed to integrating intersectionality nor made efforts to shift their composition and approach to reflect Canada's diversity. This issue extends to policy schools—the 'training grounds' for researchers and civil servants—the majority of which do not offer courses in intersectionality.

Concluding Thoughts

Despite intersectionality being based on a robust and activity scholarly community and that the power of intersectionality can help uncover unique experiences of discrimination and oppression that leads to inequality, intersectionality remains marginal relative to other methodological approaches employed in public policy research, such as quantitative analysis. I would suggest that Canadian public policy is at a crossroads. If the discipline is to remain an effective space for thinking about and responding to complex societal challenges, like

inequality, it must expand and evolve. This will entail overcoming a bias in favour of economics to embrace transdisciplinary research, while also engaging communities in knowledge co-creation; it will also mean adopting intersectionality as a core policy framework to enable rigorous engagement with issues of inequality, diversity, and power, and to account for the struggles of marginalized groups.

We are not starting from scratch in this area. Not only is there a rich literature base upon which to building, but feminist organizations such as Canadian Research Institute of the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) (Khosla 2021; Simpson 2009), as well as scholars of intersectionality (see Cameron and Tedds 2022; Hankivsky 2014), have developed toolkits and guidance for a broader array of policy analysts, researchers, and those working with community. Ultimately, there is considerable opportunity to shape the direction of intersectional policy analysis in Canada—and beyond—particularly from a transdisciplinary perspective.

Though momentum is building in this direction in Canada, the academic, institutional, and community-led initiatives underway lack the coordination and critical mass to drive the shift that is needed. We need to consciously build a pan-Canadian network of scholars, practitioners, and sector and community leaders working at the nexus of policy and intersectionality, with the ultimate goal of igniting an intersectional shift in policy research, training, and knowledge co-creation. We also need to improve available data. For quantitative analysis to better account for intersectionality, Canadian data that capture the multidimensionality of identity must be collected and made readily available (see Gladu, 2016, pp. 30–31). The shortage of data in the short-term, however, should not be used as justification to stall progress in intersectional analysis. We can look to the success of the income inequality movement for motivation, where studies drove improved data and techniques.

Finally, we must train future public policy analysts in intersectionality. A review of program requirements and course offerings across Canadian policy schools makes clear the fact that graduates are ill-equipped to employ intersectionality when they enter the workforce, as no school offers a core or elective course in intersectionality (or even GBA+). Such training would drive learners to think critically, not only about issue framing, but also about how discourse, analytical tools, and the policy process itself reinforce marginalization.

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