

Dr Kate Foord – Intersectionality: A snapshot of theory and practice

The podcast was recorded to support professionals' use of the Victorian State Government Information Sharing Schemes and the Multi Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework. These reforms require child-led practice, establishing children who experience family violence as victim survivors in their own right. They require that professionals strengthen their practice skills to improve the wellbeing and safety of children, young people and their families. This information sheet provides useful advice for organisations and professionals wanting to strengthen an intersectional approach at a systems and a practice level.

The MARAM Foundation Knowledge Guide highlights the importance of applying an intersectional analysis in responses to family violence and to improve the wellbeing and safety of clients. This Guide states that an intersectional analysis reflects an individual's age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultural background, language, religion, visa status, class, socioeconomic status, ability (including physical, neurological, cognitive, sensory, intellectual or psychosocial impairment and/or disability) or geographic location. Gender and the drivers of family violence are critical to informing your understanding of intersectional analysis in the family violence practice context.

Considering intersectionality is particularly relevant to MARAM Responsibility 5: Seek Consultation for Comprehensive Risk Assessment, Risk Management and Referral and MARAM Responsibility 6: Contribute to Information Sharing with Other Services. In implementing these responsibilities professionals can collaborate with organisations that specialise in supporting diverse communities to provide responsive and appropriate services. Such organisations may include Aboriginal Community Controlled, LGBTIQ, Disability and Cultural and Linguistically Diverse community organisations.

Dr Kate Foord is the General Manager of [queerspace](https://www.queerspace.org.au), an LGBTIQ health and wellbeing service. To access the podcast please visit www.cfecfw.asn.au/information-sharing-resource-hub.

1. What is intersectionality?

- Often intersectionality is spoken about as a synonym for inclusion, but it is more than that as it is about inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion and exclusion are equally vital parts of thinking intersectionally.
- Intersectionality is a theory, it is a way of seeing, it is a very powerful way of looking at something and applying a systemic analysis to particular situations.
- For each particular situation, using an intersectional approach, the questions that have to be asked are:
 - How is power working in this situation?
 - How, in this situation, are aspects or qualities of a person and their experience being seen and/or not seen?
 - How could those who are being marginalised be placed in the centre?
- Power works to privilege some experiences and some forms of personhood and to silence or oppress other forms. And intersectionality is the way of thinking and seeing that helps us to understand through what means that silencing and oppression occurs.
- To understand that process and to understand how power is operating, we need to be able to ask really simple questions that have really complicated answers:
 - What is going on here?
 - Why is it hard to see how power and privilege are working in this situation?
 - How can we better understand what is going on?

- What can we do about what's going on?

For Example:

"One example of how power operates is through the juridical system. An intersectional analysis of a legal system looks at how the laws work to name and to define the experience of some people but exclude and fail to define the experiences of other people. This results in the experience that is named and defined subsuming and silencing the experiences that aren't.

Kimberle Crenshaw's [foundational article](#) looks at black women's experience of anti-discrimination laws in the USA. By examining the actual situation that the woman who brought the complaint was in, Crenshaw demonstrates that the law recognised her as a woman or recognised her as black but had no capacity to recognise those two qualities together: i.e. to recognise her.

Her experience as a black woman could not be represented in that system and that's what makes the analysis so powerful: it shows you that the default position or the default definition of woman is white, but it is not spoken or acknowledged as white. It shows some of the consequences of this: that the experiences of black women are made invisible by this structure, and that legal remedies are therefore unavailable to her. Implementing an intersectional analysis requires that we ask: how can I see what the system doesn't see of its own blind spots?"

2. What does an intersectional way of working look like at an organisational level?

- Every level of an organisations, the Board, the Executive Team, Managers, Staff need to ask the questions:
 - Who are we excluding?
 - What policies and processes exclude?

Organisations need to:

- Value, at their most senior levels, an intersectional approach as an essential part of workplace change
- Analyse their processes, identifying which processes include some people and their experiences and exclude some people and their experiences
- Avoid 'tick box' approaches to implementing an intersectional framework as an intersectional approach requires an analysis of each particular situation
- Look at their practice and see what is excluded, and who is excluded and what the processes of exclusion might be which is not immediately apparent and what often organisations are often structure what not to see
- Ask some really basic questions:
 - who speaks in your organisation?
 - how does your organisation listen to voices right across the hierarchy?
 - when your organisation is looking to employ people, what is your organisational inclusion strategy, what is your organisational diversity strategy?
 - how does your organisation respond to requests that it change its practices?
- Give space and time to allow all levels of the organisation to have conversations about why you would adopt an intersectional framework
- Invest in a reflective practice, reflecting on what investments exist in the organisation that keeps the status quo, keeps things the way that they are.

For example:

"A Board or an Executive Team might say that they don't think the organisation is a racist organisation or a sexist organisation. What they are really saying is that they don't see evidence of racism, they don't hear people complaining or bringing grievances on the basis of race. And that may well be true, there may be no overtly racist expression of discrimination. However, the systems that organisations operate in, such as legal system, produces forms of discrimination that are structural.

These systems are particularly cultural and operates as if it were natural, impacting on the way that we do things. We are all in the legal framework, we are all in the system, we are all in the history of that as it has been expressed in our particular culture and it makes organisations not realise other ways they can do things."

3. What does an intersectional way of working look like at a practice level?

Practitioners need to:

- Think about what their resistance to change actually is, to reflect on what their own investments are both as individuals but as workers in the status quo, in keeping things the way that they are.
- Ask themselves the following questions:
 - what is this particular person's experience of the particular situation?
 - how do you hear what is being said to you without interpreting it immediately?
 - what am I assuming in this situation?
 - what is the system at work here and how are power relations functioning?
 - how am I a representative or an enactor of those power relations?
- Always go back to the particularity of the situation that you are trying to analyse and how power is working in that situation
- Become more conscious of your own resistances to change
- Remember that the culture you grew up in is not 'natural' and automatically shared with others
- Examine the point of view from which you're looking at something and try to notice systems of discrimination by asking what you can't see from that point of view
- Use a person-centred approach because to be person centred is to be open to hearing as much as you possibly can what the person in front of you is saying
- Try not to identify with your client's experience, try not to find comparisons in your own life, because that often leads you away from their point of view and experience
- Find communities of practice or invent them if they don't exist, where intersectional practice is at the centre of the approach
- Develop intersectional practice in your methods of reflective practice, always considering how you open yourself to the voices of others in such a way that you will be moved and influenced in your direct practice and in your life
- Be committed to continuous improvement, as having an intersectional approach is a lifelong process which requires that practitioners keep on questioning in every situation, how power is working to include some and exclude others, or to give voice to some people and to silence others
- Read Kimberle Crenshaw's [article](#) and think about it as something you could apply to practice situations you find yourself in.

"Taking a person-centred approach is to be open to hearing, as much as you possibly can, what the person in front of you is saying. It means leaving behind your assumptions about what you already know about them and allowing them to tell you what they know about themselves. It then requires you to be influenced by that in a way that brings them into the centre of your way of seeing, which displaces you from the centre."

Examples of why intersectionality is important and how it can be applied:

Children and Young People: Scenario 1

Children and young people might experience difficulties within a family structure given the power relations within the family, where power often sits too exclusively with the parents. In such a family dynamic it might be difficult for children to be seen and heard for the full human beings that they are. At a basic level, someone under 16 years of age doesn't have the same position in the legal system as someone over 16 years of age. They can't avail themselves of the rights of an adult and that has very real material effects on their position. This is an example of intersectionality because it shows how their position as 'children' (defined here as people whose agency is restricted and seen as justly restricted) means that they are not treated as sovereign human beings

Practitioners working with a family would need to consider how the power is operating in this family, and reflect on how the young person is positioned in their family, not just by the parent in front of them who they see all the time, but by the legal system and people who represent the legal system. And what difference does all this make to what they can do and how they are seen.

An intersectional approach:

- A practitioner sees a child or young person as a fully sovereign human being even though they don't have the same legal rights, or even though they don't have the same decision-making capacities as adults
- Knowing the difference between an intersectional approach, where the child's or young person's sovereignty is at the centre, and a careful approach to engaging with the child or young person which assesses and responds to their capacities (developmental or personal) Each response may have a very different impact on the child or young person and significantly impact on their wellbeing
- Asking the questions:
- How is power operating in this situation?
- What are the effects of people in this situation of those forms of power?

Motherhood/Protective Parenting: Scenario 2

A white woman goes into a police station and says to the sergeant that she is a victim of family violence and wants an intervention order as she is particularly concerned about her children. During the interview that takes place in the police station, the Sergeant discovers that the alleged perpetrator of the family violence is a woman: how does this change how he hears the story? The Sergeant also discovers that the biological mother of the children is the woman who is the alleged perpetrator and he decides that he won't interfere in the relationship of a (biological) mother and her children. He tells the woman seeking the intervention order that she needs to go and sort out the problem herself.

This scenario of interaction about a family violence situation highlights how the legal system and the juridical system supports forms of discrimination. In an intersectional approach:

- A practitioner reflects on cultural beliefs about motherhood
- A practitioner would analyse what meanings and power are operating culturally to enable the policeman to feel authorised by the culture to respond as he does
- For example, whilst many people now may know families with 2 mothers, this is not underpinned by legal fact, where it is not possible to register two mothers. Current birth certificates in Victoria enable the registration of a mother and a parent.

- The systems at work to support and enable the policeman's behaviour in this scenario have very real material effects on the possibility of the mother who is the protective parent of being able to protect those children and to pursue her complaint through the justice system and be represented fairly within it

This scenario shows that to be able to enter the justice system believing that an outcome of justice can be achieved, individuals have to be able to be recognised by that system in your particular position