

KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



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Kimberlé Crenshaw was born in 1959 in Canton, Ohio. In 1981, she earned a bachelor of arts degree from Cornell University, where she majored in government and Africana studies. She earned a doctor of jurisprudence (JD) from Harvard in 1984 and a masters of law (LL.M) from the University of Wisconsin in 1985. She is a leading legal scholar and one of the founding figures of critical race theory. Crenshaw also coined the term “intersectionality,” and played a central role in the development of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, 1997).

Intersectionality theory, as discussed in Chapter 12, argues that social oppression must be understood through multiple structures such as race, class, and gender. In particular, Crenshaw says that when race or gender are analyzed on their own, the experiences of, and injustices suffered by, women of color are overlooked. In an interview with *Perspectives Magazine*, Crenshaw described the origins of intersectionality theory:

It grew out of trying to conceptualize the way the law responded to issues where both race and gender discrimination were involved. What happened was like an accident, a collision. Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you’re standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both. These women are injured, but when the race ambulance and the gender ambulance arrive at the scene, they see these women of color lying in the intersection and they say, “Well, we can’t figure out if this was just race or just sex discrimination. And unless they can show us which one it was, we can’t help them.”

(Crenshaw, cited in Thomas, 2004)

In 1991, Crenshaw worked with the team that represented Anita Hill in her sexual harassment claims against Supreme Court judicial nominee Clarence Thomas. Crenshaw describes the Anita Hill case as “life-defining” (Crenshaw, cited in Adewumin, 2014), and her reflections on the case reflect her intersectionality perspective. Even though a black woman—Anita Hill—was at the center of the case, her particular experiences were lost in the surrounding political and media discourse. In the long term, Crenshaw says, the case drew attention to workplace harassment in general, but it failed to help recognize “black women’s unique experiences with discrimination” (Crenshaw, cited in Adewumin, 2014).

Since 1986, Crenshaw has been a faculty member at UCLA School of Law, and, since 1995, she has been a professor at Columbia University Law School. There she is also head of the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. Among her many papers on race, intersectionality, and the law she has edited and authored key texts in critical race theory: *Critical Race Theory* (1995, co-edited with Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas) and *Words That Wound* (1993, coauthored with Matsuda, Lawrence, and Delgado).