

produces a particular experience of oppression, and one cannot arrive at an adequate explanation by using an additive strategy of gender, plus race, plus class, plus sexuality (Andersen, 2005). Crenshaw, for example, shows that black women frequently experience discrimination in employment because they are *black women*, but courts routinely refuse to recognize this discrimination—unless it can be shown to be a case of what is considered general discrimination, “sex discrimination” (read “also white women”), or “race discrimination” (read “also black men”). In characterizing these as vectors of oppression *and* privilege, we wish to suggest a fundamental insight of intersectionality theories—that the privilege exercised by some women and men turns on the oppression of other women and men. Theories of intersectionality at their core understand these arrangements of inequality as hierarchical structures based in unjust power relations. The theme of injustice signals the consistent critical focus of this analysis.

## PATRICIA HILL COLLINS

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Photo courtesy of Patricia Hill Collins



Patricia Hill Collins was born in 1948. By her own report, she grew up in a supportive and extended black working-class family located in a black community in Philadelphia; she moved from this secure base daily to attend an academically demanding public high school for girls, and then, more permanently, to earn her bachelor's degree at Brandeis University in 1969 and her MAT at Harvard in 1970. During the 1970s, she worked as a curriculum specialist in schools in Boston, Pittsburgh, Hartford, New York, and Washington, DC. She returned to Brandeis to earn her PhD in sociology in 1984. She spent much of her career in higher education at the University of Cincinnati, where she held a dual appointment as Charles Phelps Taft Professor of Sociology and as Professor of African-American Studies. Currently, she is Distinguished University Profes-

sor at the University of Maryland. She was president of the American Sociological Association in 2009—the first African American woman elected to this position.

Collins writes that her experiences of educational success were permeated by the counterexperience of being “the ‘first,’ or ‘one of the few,’ or the ‘only’ African-American and/or woman and/or working-class person in my schools, communities, and work settings” (1990:xi). In these situations, she found herself judged as being less than others who came from different backgrounds, and she learned that educational success seemed to demand that she distance herself from her black working-class background. This created in her a tension that produced “a loss of voice.”

Her response to these tensions has been to formulate an alternative understanding of social theory and an alternative way of doing theory. This project led her to discover the theoretical voice of her community and to reclaim her own voice by situating it in that community. It culminated in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), a landmark text in feminist and social theory that received both the Jessie Bernard Award and the C. Wright Mills Award. *Black Feminist*