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Intersectionality

Wendy Sigle-Rushton and Elin Lindström

1. Introduction

Intersectionality is a key concept in gender studies both because feminist scholars played a key role in its early development and because, once articulated, it has provided an enormously challenging critique with extensive theoretical and political implications. It is a concept with a rich and diverse genealogy, one in which gender studies figures prominently, not least because intersectionality can be seen as a logical extension of critical feminist approaches.

An important early contribution of feminist scholarship was its critique of mainstream research for not acknowledging or incorporating the experiences of women. Feminists developed tools to uncover strategies of power and exclusion that were hidden in mainstream, male dominated and male centred research. In an attempt to understand what it means to be oppressed “as a woman”, some feminist scholars sought to isolate gender oppression from other forms of oppression, and as a direct consequence, their work tended to be either pre-occupied with the experiences of white middle class women or to ignore completely the experiences of other women. It is from critiques of this (largely feminist) work, that the development and articulation of intersectionality began to take shape. However, it wasn't until just over two decades ago that the theoretical concept found its name.

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in her seminal critique of US antidiscrimination law and its failure to acknowledge Black women's unique experiences of racism and sexism as simultaneous and inseparable. As

Crenshaw argued, if there is no unified group of women that experience gender discrimination in the same way, it makes no sense to treat sexism and racism as if they could be isolated, and then understood and redressed separately. Legislation that proceeds in this way fails to provide equal protection to black women. While the concept did not represent a new way of thinking, its articulation gave voice to long-standing and widespread theoretical preoccupations and provided a much-needed frame of reference for the comparison and negotiation of various endeavours, opening up space for critical dialogue.

Described as "...one the most important theoretical contributions that Women's Studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made thus far" (McCall, 2005, pg. 1771), it did not take long for intersectionality to enter the feminist lexicon. Despite, or perhaps because of, its continued pervasiveness, intersectionality is understood in a wide variety of ways, as both a theoretical and an analytic tool. Nonetheless, relative to its theoretical sophistication, its methodology remains poorly specified and underdeveloped (McCall 2005; Nash 2008). With these two points in mind, rather than attempt to catalogue the myriad ways in which the concept can be formulated (both explicitly and implicitly), which would extend well beyond our limits of size and scope, we have chosen a more modest but more tractable strategy for our contribution. In what follows, we briefly present intersectionality's main theoretical premise and trace out its implications.¹ We pay particular attention to what the implications mean for how we analyse gender and gender inequalities. In recent years, researchers have expressed concern that "there

¹ We acknowledge that space limitations mean our treatment of the underlying theoretical premise is both cursory and incomplete, and does not acknowledge the discussions and debates that surround its meaning and interpretation. However, we are more concerned with the implications, the substance of which would remain generally unmodified were we to examine the core theoretical premise in more depth and detail.

has been little discussion of how to study intersectionality, that is, of its methodology." (McCall, 2005, pg 1771; see also Nash 2008). By illustrating some of the issues that must be grappled with when we seek to use intersectionality to rethink how we go about analysis, we aim to contribute to the development of this discussion.

2. Intersectionality: Theoretical Premise and Critique

Intersectionality is, by all accounts, a loosely specified theoretical concept -- an umbrella term -- that brings together a set of ideas about the complex multidimensionality of subjectivity and social stratification and the consequences of its mis-specification. At its root, intersectionality posits that different dimensions of social life (hierarchies, axes of differentiation, axes of oppression, social structures, normativities) are intersecting, mutually modifying and inseparable. They "fuse to create unique experiences and opportunities for all groups" (Brown and Misra, 2003, pg. 488). If we accept this basic premise, the implications are both extensive and profound. First, any (unqualified and unreflective) references to "woman" as a stand alone category are deemed problematic. We cannot "think of a woman's "womanness" in abstraction from the fact that she is a particular woman, whether she is a middle-class Black woman living in North America in the twentieth century or a poor white woman living in France in the seventeenth century" (Spelman 1988, pg. 13). Second, because multidimensionality cannot be understood or assessed as a series of additive and separable relationships, we cannot understand Black women's experiences of discrimination by thinking separately about sex discrimination and race discrimination. Additive thinking of this sort, assumes away, for example, the possibility that Black women experience different kinds of gender oppression than white women or different kinds of racial oppression than Black men.

Taken together these two corollaries require that we take on and take in an enormous amount of complexity. Instead of a vector of social structures, each of which can be assessed in its own right, we are confronted with a "matrix of domination" in which each cell represents a unique position (Collins 2000). But if we sacrifice complexity, we also sacrifice inclusion. Failing to account adequately for complexity means that the experiences of the multiply marginalised are likely to be overlooked or obscured, bringing issues of power and privilege within feminist theory and politics into stark relief. For example, consider the claim, common in Anglo-American feminisms during the 1970s, that gender inequality is rooted in women's exclusion from the public sphere of work and politics and that to redress gender inequality, feminism should promote women's entry into the public sphere by facilitating (or at least removing obstacles to) their labour market participation. This account tended to universalize the experiences of certain women, most of whom were white, middle or upper-class women in heterosexual marriages. It was not necessarily relevant to all women, as Patricia Hill Collins's (2000, pg. 45-67) overview of studies of Black women's experiences in the United States demonstrates. Rather than being confined to 'the private', there is a long history of Black women's paid or bonded work in the US 'public'. But instead of being a route to empowerment, it was, and for many remains, a site of hard work for low pay, often in the low-status service sector. In addition, rather than 'the private' home being a source of subordination, it has been described as a site of respite from and resistance to the discrimination experienced in public (ibid., pg. 46).

Accepting the basic premise of intersectionality means acknowledging that power hierarchies not only stratify two supposedly homogenous groups -- 'women' and 'men' --

but that power hierarchies are also involved in determining whose experiences count and who gets to speak on behalf of 'women' (Spelman 1988, pg. 77-79). It not only calls to mind analyses focusing on power, both in relation to sexuality and in relation to racialisation, that document the ways in which the essentialising assumptions and perspectives of privileged women permeate much of feminist discourse. These concerns also resonate with postmodern and poststructuralist arguments that the act of categorization itself is part of the workings of power, producing, policing and stratifying subjects.

Because it provides a powerful and salutary critique of how feminism has conducted itself, intersectionality raises some troubling questions. If we cannot somehow conceptualise or name women as a group, does feminist politics become meaningless? This leads to a commonly identified dilemma: "... how simultaneously to hold on to a radical and contingent account of knowledge claims and knowing subjects, thereby dissolving the false "we" of the feminist standpoint, while maintaining solidarity, across differences, among women in the name of a long-term or wide-ranging feminist movement." (Dietz 2003, pg. 410)

3. Intersectional Analysis

Thus far, we have discussed how intersectionality has provided a critical tool that was used to uncover important weaknesses in how we have gone about trying to understand and analyse gender. In this section, we consider how, taking the implications of intersectionality into account, we might modify the ways we analyse gender and gender inequality.

Broadly speaking, intersectionality requires that we sacrifice simplifying assumptions and embrace a good deal more complexity, while at the same time paying close attention to issues of power. At present, there is no clear or straightforward solution for how that complexity can effectively be managed (McCall 2005). Clearly, an intersectional analysis should aim to treat different social dimensions as mutually modifying or reinforcing, but that is difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish in its entirety. If the theoretical premise is taken to its limit, "this strategy can generate an infinite regress that dissolves groups into individuals" (Young, 1994, pg. 721). Collins (1999) suggests that researchers should focus on "a concrete topic that is already the subject of investigation and ... find the combined effects of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation, where before only one or two interpretive categories were used." (pg, 278). Even if we follow that pragmatic strategy and try to consider a limited but greater number of dimensions (and building on the findings of previous analytical endeavours), analysing all of the permutations of even three or four categories can be daunting. It may dissolve into "just a listing of people and a description without any analysis as to how their particular conditions are located within structures of power." (Crenshaw quoted in Guidroz & Berger 2009, 70).

To both deal with complexity and allow a greater balance between description and analysis, one strategy is to narrow the analysis to a particular set of intersections and focus intensively on marginalised or neglected groups located at the interstices of several social dimensions (McCall 2005). Comparisons with analyses that treat as homogeneous the more broadly defined category to which that group belongs provides opportunities to explore the diverse experiences of differentially located subjects. Nonetheless, to the extent that this approach is only the first stage of a larger project –

one which seeks to redress previous oversights and the impact of previous exclusions on theory and practice – it is a strategy that defers rather than obviates questions about how to deal with complexity. Methods for dealing with complexity, including how to present it (a particularly vexing issue when faced with the constraints and space and scope imposed by some scholarly outlets like journals), remain limited and underdeveloped (Mc Call 2005).

Both the broader and the more narrow approaches to analysis that we have just described begin with the use of analytic categories. They both draw attention to the importance of heterogeneity within broadly defined analytic categories. But intersectionality highlights dilemmas that may lead us to ask whether (or at least when) it possible to justify the use of categories in this way (McCall 2005). If categories will never sufficiently capture complexity and if the act of categorisation is an exercise of power that disciplines and manages difference (Dietz 2003, 411-414), any approach which uses categories must proceed with great care. The choice of categories matters for how inequality comes to be understood, shapes whose situation is highlighted and obscured, and produces specific subject positions. Although methodological approaches which aim to deconstruct categories and those which provisionally and pragmatically make use of them might be understood as mutually exclusive and incompatible, we think this interpretation should be resisted. Intersectional analyses should aim both to document patterns of inequality and to explore how groups and categories are produced – and here we see the potential for intersectionality to build bridges across the material-discursive divide.

4. Concluding Thoughts

In the past two decades, intersectionality has transformed the way we think about feminist theory and politics. Intersectionality illustrates the need for feminist scholars to pay greater attention to issues of inclusion, privilege and power. By drawing attention to processes of exclusion and its consequences, intersectionality highlights the need to critically question our own position and assumptions. It provides a salutary reminder that the conceptual models we employ determine not just what we ask but also what we are able to find, that our definition and use of categories, our underlying assumptions, and our modes of analysis all work to focus attention to some areas and divert it from others. Because intersectionality provides a set of critical questions and challenges that cannot be resolved, but must be made part of reflective approaches to feminist theory and practice, we expect it will remain both prominent and influential for years to come.

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