

The Importance of 'Intersectionality' for Feminist Political Theory and Activism

Written by Natalie Lovell

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NATALIE LOVELL, DEC 29 2015

Critically examine the importance of 'intersectionality' for feminist political theory and activism

Since its inception, the notion of intersectionality has been proclaimed as “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (McCall, 2005: 1771). Indeed, intersectionality has emerged as “the primary theoretical tool” (Nash, 2008: 2) to analyse the multiple and co-constituting vectors of difference and the resulting power relations that characterise subjectivity (Dhamoon, 2010). In other words, intersectionality has provided a framework for examining the mutually reinforcing intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class and other social divisions, and has therefore “provided an enormously challenging critique with theoretical and political implications” (Sigle-Rushton et al. 2013: 129) for both feminist theory and the wider social sciences. As Walby et al. (2012: 2) note, the influence of intersectionality also has practical implications for debates “in the ‘real’ world” and the realm of policy making, having extended into international human rights discourses. Despite its popularity within feminist scholarship, however, intersectionality remains an essentially contested concept and has been conceived and defined in a multitude of ways. As a result, the ambiguity and confusion surrounding the notion, as well as the lack of a clearly defined methodology (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008; Sigle-Rushton et al. 2013) raises questions about how intersectionality can, or should, be effectively utilised in feminist inquiry (Davis, 2008: 67).

In this essay, I examine the significance of intersectionality for feminist political theory and activism. Due to limitations and the scope of the discussion, rather than catalogue and evaluate the myriad of definitions assigned to intersectionality, my goals are to outline its main theoretical premise in order to critically reflect upon its implications for feminist theory. I begin by providing a brief overview of the origins of the concept. Drawing upon the analyses of McCall (2005), Davis (2008) and Carastathis (2014) in particular, I argue that intersectionality provides four analytical benefits to feminist theory: simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility and inclusivity. It is concluded that, whilst intersectionality has been invoked in a number of unreflective ways that may be deemed problematic, it is precisely the ongoing contestation, reinvention and ambiguity of the concept that makes intersectionality such a fundamental and compelling contribution to feminist scholarship, or, to be more precise, “this concept is one of the greatest gifts of *black women’s studies* to social theory as a whole” (Belkhir, 2009: 300, emphasis added).

The term ‘intersectionality’ was originally coined by Crenshaw (1989; 1993) in her seminal critique of US antidiscrimination laws against black women and the ‘difference-blindness’ of identity politics. Crenshaw argued that a single-axis framework maintained focus on either race *or* gender, thereby distorting and erasing the experiences of black women by failing to address the “multidimensionality” (1989: 139) that underscores the lives of marginalized subjects. The narrow and limited focus on one identity at the expense of another, Crenshaw (1991: 1242) argued, “works to exclude or marginalize those who are different”, and consequently, “contemporary feminist and anti-racist discourses have failed to consider intersectional identities such as women of colour” (Crenshaw, 1991: 1243). Treating gender and race as mutually exclusive analytical categories renders invisible “the simultaneous experience of gendered racism” (Carastathis, 2014: 306). Crenshaw’s metaphor of crossroads thus served to describe the double, triple, multiple and many-layered blanket of oppression that marginalized groups experience at the intersections of patriarchy, racism and colonialism, to name a few (cited in Yuval-Davis, 2006: 196; Dhamoon, 2010:

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2).

It is worth noting that, whilst Crenshaw's (1989; 1993) formulation has been hugely significant for the development of intersectionality; the concept has a long history in black feminism. Late 19th Century black activists such as Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Well Barnett and Fannie Lou Hamer (Hill Collins, 1989: 745) have been well documented in their struggles and contestation regarding the interrelationships between racism, gender, sexuality and social class (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 76). Further, political coalitions such as the Combahee River Collective (1977), a black lesbian feminist organisation in the US, and Organisation for Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD, 1978) in the UK, were instrumental in highlighting how white feminist movements were both exclusionary and inadequate in addressing the particular needs of women of colour. The Combahee River Collective (1977: online) advocated "the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppressions are interlocking" whilst OWAAD (cited in Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 79) emphasized the need to "take into account our cultural differences", calling to attention the necessity in acknowledging the heterogeneity inherent both within groups and amongst women. Nevertheless, Crenshaw's (1989; 1993) articulation provided a much needed frame of reference that further opened up conceptual space to study the previously under-examined particularities of marginalized subjects, and the various interlocking oppressions (Hill Collins, 1989: 2000) at the point of intersection (Walby et al. 2012; Dhamoon, 2010; Sigle-Rushton et al. 2013)

Intersectionality has since been understood in a plethora of ways. Numerous terms including theory, framework, lens, perspective, heuristic device and paradigm have been used to try and categorize the concept (Hulko, 2009: 44). Meanwhile, other feminists have opted instead for terms such as "multiple jeopardy" (King, 1988) and "multiplex epistemologies" (Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006) in order to convey the necessity of treating social positions as relational. Hill Collins (1995, cited in Hulko, 2009: 47), a prominent black feminist, expanded on the term to distinguish between intersectionality and interlocking oppressions:

"First, the notion of interlocking oppressions refers to the macro level connections linking systems of oppression such as race, class, and gender. This is the model describing the social structures that create social positions. Second, the notion of intersectionality describes micro level processes—namely, how each individual and group occupies a social position with interlocking structures of oppression described by the metaphor of intersectionality. Together they shape oppression."

In the above quote, Hill Collins identifies race, class and gender as macro-level processes constituting systems of oppression, whilst micro-level processes such as social positionality as constituting structures of oppression (Hulko, 2009). A clearer distinction is provided by Dhamoon (2010: 4-5) whose model distinguishes between *identities* (e.g a black trans-woman), the *categories of difference* (e.g race and gender), the *processes of differentiation* (e.g racialization, gendering and sexualization), and the *systems of domination* (e.g racism, colonialism, sexism, patriarchy, heterosexism) where "each emphasizes something different in our understanding of subject formation, difference and power". Consequently, Dhamoon's (2010) *identities* and *categories of difference* can be seen as analogous to Hill Collins's (1995, cited in Hulko, 2009: 47) micro-level processes and therefore intersectionality, whilst *the processes of differentiation* and the *systems of domination* correlate to macro-level processes, and thus, the notion of interlocking oppressions.

This essay begins from the assumption that 'intersectionality' denotes an umbrella term that refers to arrange of ideas, as Brah and Phoenix (2004: 76) note, about the "complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts". As such I adopt Hancock's (2007) and Hulko's (2009) formulation of intersectionality as a paradigm, in which paradigm is taken to connote "a cohesive set of theoretical concepts, method of analysis, and belief system" (Hulko, 2009: 44). By doing so, I hope to avoid falling into the pitfall of seeking a precise definition of intersectionality and therefore obscuring the complexities inherent in examining the multiple forms of difference.

Four main analytic benefits, as identified by Carastathis (2014: 307), for feminist theory can be derived from intersectionality as a paradigm: simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility and inclusivity. First of all, intersectionality

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posits that identities and categories of difference are co-constitutive and mutually reinforcing and therefore need to be analysed simultaneously. As Yuval -Davis (2006: 198) notes, "social divisions are about macro axes of social power but also involve actual, concrete people". In addition to capturing experiences of oppressions as simultaneous, intersectionality enables theorizing the relationship between systems of oppression. Dhamoon (2010: 6) suggests "an intersectional-type framework starts from the premise that each process of differentiation and system of domination needs each other to function". Whilst theoretically one may be able to separate a social division in isolation to another, within 'real-life', multiple intersecting identities and categories of difference intermesh and have an indivisible effect on the way people experience their daily lives. Intersectionality as a paradigm provides the means to capture the simultaneity of how oppressions are experienced without fragmenting, and by extension categorically excluding, those experiences. For example, then, intersectionality is able to capture the gendered racism (notwithstanding the multiple other social divisions for example) one experiences as a woman of colour.

The second theoretical benefit of intersectionality is arguably what McCall (2005: 1772, emphasis added) asserts as "a defining characteristic of research in this area: the *complexity* that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis". Indeed, such a demand for complexity is challenging and impossible to achieve in its entirety. Nevertheless, McCall (2005: 1773) analyses three methodological approaches that attempt to "manage" the complexity of intersectionality: the *anti-categorical* approach, the *intra-categorical* approach, and the *inter-categorical* approach.

The first approach, *anticategorical complexity*, "...is based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories" (McCall, 2005: 1773). In this view, the stabilization of categories is seen as problematic and essentialist since they are too simplistic, unable to capture the "complexity of lived experience" (McCall, 2005: 1776). This approach emphasizes that the employment of categories only serves to reify the regimes of oppression and exclusion that the analyst may be hoping to destabilize (Nash, 2008: 5). Thus, it was born in a moment of theoretical critique whereby "hegemonic feminist theorists, poststructuralists, and antiracist theorists almost simultaneously launched assaults of the validity of modern analytical categories." (McCall, 2005: 1776). The focus was on the deconstruction of unitary analytical categories such as 'women' and 'gender', since it is argued that categorization leads to demarcation, which ultimately results in inequality and exclusion. The second approach, *intra-categorical complexity* is concerned with "particular social groups at neglected points of intersection...in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups" (McCall, 2005: 1774). This approach draws upon Crenshaw's (1989; 1993) work by centring the experiences of previously under-theorised and multiply marginalized subjects such as black women (Nash, 2008; Walby, et al. 2012). Meanwhile, the third approach *inter-categorical complexity*, "provisionally adopt[s] existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality among multiple and conflicting dimensions" (McCall, 2005: 1773). McCall (2005: 1785) favours the *inter-categorical* approach, since its analysis on the relationship between the categories and inequality is seen to reflect actual groupings of people. Fundamental to all three approaches, however, is the claim that one-dimensional, single-axis frameworks fail to capture the inherent complexity of subjective experiences and the social structure in which they embedded.

The third contribution intersectionality posits for feminist theory is the irreducibility of the categories of difference (Yuval- Davis, 2006; Caratathis, 2014). Intersectionality contends that both oppression and privilege is produced through the interaction of multiple, co-constitutive and mutually reproducing axes of social divisions and as such cannot be explained by "a process of accretion" (Anthias, 2013: 8), that is, a process of addition "thereby reducing them to the sum of their parts", nor through a process of reduction. For example, a working-class woman of colour cannot be understood purely in terms of class, whilst an upper-middle class man cannot be understood purely in terms of gender. What is important is the necessity of addressing how multiple identities and categories of difference intermesh with each other, in order to examine the particular production of oppressions, or privilege located within different spatial or temporal contexts. Attempts to essentialize and reduce 'working classness', 'blackness', 'womanhood or 'whiteness', for instance, only functions to fragment a dynamic, multidimensional construction of being. Furthermore, as Yuval-Davis (2006: 200) suggests, it is important to note that "the ontological basis of each of these divisions is autonomous, and each prioritizes different spheres of social relations".

The final and arguably most significant asset intersectionality brings to feminist theory is directly attributable to the

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fact that it addresses “the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism” (Davis, 2008: 70): inclusivity. The need to develop a serious appreciation of the differences between women has become a particularly prominent issue in the present moment, as Western feminist movements and its reliance on liberal assumptions increasingly comes into tension with other feminist praxis. Carastathis (2014: 309) argues that “intersectionality can act as a corrective against the white solipsism, heteronormativity, elitism, and ableism of dominant power and hegemonic feminist theory by making social locations and experiences visible that are occluded in essentialist and exclusionary constructions of the category ‘woman’”. Crenshaw (1991: 1253) sought to show, for example, how “women of colour can be erased by the strategic silences of anti-racism and feminism”. The primacy of women of colour in early intersectional theorising was born out of the need to bring to light the “very limited representational currency” (Carbado, 2013: 813) women of colour had as a group. By centring the experiences of women of colour, intersectional theorists were able to expose conventional feminism’s systematic exclusion of black women, thereby demonstrating “the necessity of deepening feminist and anti-racist conversations” (Nash, 2008: 8).

That’s not to say, however, that intersectionality is primarily a theory concerned only with race, gender, and class, although the priority given to the categories has produced what Dhamoon (2010: 5) calls the “race-class-gender-trinity”. Different approaches and the expansion of intersectionality as a paradigm has raised questions concerning how many and which categories of difference should be included in the intersectional process. Perhaps the most comprehensive attempt is Lutz’s (2002, cited in Yuval-Davis, 2006: 202) 14 lines of difference which included: “gender; sexuality; race/skin-colour; ethnicity; nation/state; class; culture; ability; age; sedentariness/origin; wealth; North-South; religion; stage of social development.” Consequently, an intersectional paradigm can and has been applied to an analysis examining the multiple vectors of privilege such as whiteness and middle-classness (Levine-Rasky, 2011); studies concerning sexuality (Taylor et al., 2011); multifaceted analyses of transgender people of colour (de Vries, 2015); and disability (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009), to name but a few.

Intersectionality promises to address the long legacy of exclusions and the issues of difference and diversity, by asking ‘the other question’:

“The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call ‘ask the other question.’ When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’” (Matsuda, 1991: 1189)

It reflects the need for feminist theory to constantly be self-reflective, self-critical, and aware of their social positionality. Moreover, as suggested by the methodological approaches identified by McCall (2005), intersectionality provides a “new platform for feminist theory as shared enterprise” (Davis, 2008: 72), by bringing together different strands of feminist theorising. Paradoxically, it is precisely intersectionality’s ambiguity that makes intersectionality so valuable for feminist theory. Lykke (2011: 2008), for instance, describes intersectionality as “nodal point” in the feminist toolbox, “a discursive site where different feminist positions are in critical dialogue or productive conflict with each other”. Conceiving intersectionality as a ‘nodal point’ facilitates grounds for feminist cooperation by exposing analytical similarities and differences whilst simultaneously celebrating diversity between women that can provide critical analysis and strengthen political solidarity.

In conclusion, this essay has examined intersectionality in order to demonstrate its significance for feminist political theory and activism. Having outlined its main theoretical premise and located the origins of the concept within black feminism, I then proceeded to present four fundamental aspects that intersectionality as paradigm contributes to feminist scholarship. It is argued that intersectionality compels us to tackle complexity and to address categories of difference simultaneously, recognizing that identity categories are dynamic, fluid and indivisible. Engaging in intersectional analysis exposes feminism’s long legacy of exclusion, by centring the voices of the marginalized and promising to redress inclusivity. Intersectionality as a paradigm challenges scholars to reflect critically on the multidimensionality of subjectivity, and the inextricably bound vectors of power that characterise both oppression and privilege, in order to implement social change

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*Written by: Natalie Lovell
Written at: University of Leeds
Written for: Dr. Alexa Athelstan
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