The Politics of Intersectional Practice: Towards an Intersectional Gender Equality Architecture

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OUTLINE OF PRESENTATION

• Intersectionality: Key elements
• Background to my research on ‘Intersectionality in Practice’
• Key findings:
  • The spectrum of ‘intersectionality’: 5 competing applied concepts of intersectionality
• Gender architecture: The problem of ‘diversity within’ & examples
• Recommendations arising: Creating an intersectional gender equality architecture
• Conclusions
INTERSECTIONALITY
INTERSECTIONALITY

• Black feminist theory (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins 1990; Amos et al. 1984; Anthias 1993; Mirza 1997): names Black women’s theorising of the social world’s foundational organising logics of white supremacy, gendered racism and racialised sexism

• The understanding that social inequalities are interdependent and indivisible from one another: ‘race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena’ (Collins 2015, 2)

• Kimberlé Crenshaw employed the term to describe the ways that Black women’s experiences and identities are marginalised by tendencies to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories in antidiscrimination law, feminism, and antiracist movements, with all focusing on the most powerful/privileged members of groups (white women, etc.) and taking them as representatives of the group as a whole

• Systems of oppression are interlocking and interdependent within a ‘matrix of domination’ (Collins 1990)
# Intersectionality: Key elements

1. Individual AND structural levels of analysis

- Overfocus on identity and experience
- Identities and experiences (marginalised AND privileged) are created by the *synthesis of inequality structures* (white supremacy, sexism, ableism, cisgenderism, heterosexism, etc.)

2. Relational *and* focused on those who are (most) oppressed

- Axes of inequality produce both privilege and oppression in relationships with others: ‘someone’s disadvantage is someone else’s privilege’ (Center for Intersectional Justice 2018)
- Experience characterised simultaneously by both oppression and privilege along different axes and according to context; not either/or
- But some are more oppressed/privileged than others in particular contexts: this can be learned through investigation and those who are (most) oppressed are the priority
- NOT differences among white women
- Sexism is not always the most relevant axis; gender can’t be presumed as a focal point
### Intersectionality: Key elements

3. **Mutually constitutive** (vs. additive)

- Other inequalities are *always* indivisible from gender (not just sometimes); no ‘multiple identities’

- No value in discussing ‘women’ or ‘men’ generically: gender is constituted by other inequalities, resulting in a specific experience of gender which is qualitatively different to others

- ‘Woman’ is always-already constructed as white (Lewis 2017)
WHY IS INTERSECTIONALITY IMPORTANT?

• Little progress has been made with the separate single issue approach in terms of achieving equality for the most marginalised (Bassel and Emefulu 2017; Women’s Budget Group et al. 2017)

• Single issue approach has increased inequalities within and across social groups; created ‘policy privileges to affluent, educated, white women’ (Hankivsky and Cormier 2011, 218)

• Yet, much equality policy and practice remains hugely siloed, predominantly focused around single issues/identities, and serving relatively homogenous and intersectionally privileged groups
RESEARCH: INTERSECTIONALITY IN PRACTICE
BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Research question

- How is intersectionality conceptualised and operationalised in the equality third sector and among equality policy makers in England and Scotland?

Methodology/methods

- Case studies of three local networks of equality organisations (LGBTI rights, racial justice, feminist, disability rights, refugee organisations, and intersectional combinations) with documented commitments to intersectionality, in cities; employing interviews (41), focus groups (1), participant observation, and documentary analysis (66) (2016-2018)

- Ethnographic and participatory approach
Debates in intersectionality studies & popular culture

• (White) appropriation of intersectionality (e.g. Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013) from Black/women of colour/indigenous feminism, ‘colonization’ of intersectionality (Tomlinson 2013)

• Controversial use of ‘intersectionality’ to describe social inequalities other than those positioning women of colour
POLICY & THIRD SECTOR ENVIRONMENT

• Intersectionality tends to be used in an unspecified way, across the nine ‘protected characteristics’ in the Equality Act 2010 (Christoffersen 2019a)

• Unified equality law and architecture (Equality Act 2010 and EHRC) creates both opportunities and challenges for intersectionality (e.g. Hankivsky, de Merich, and Christoffersen 2019; Hankivsky and Christoffersen 2011; Christoffersen 2019a)
  • Gender specific legislation and gender mainstreaming ≠ intersectionality (Hankivsky and Mussell 2019)

• Growing popularity of intersectionality: but what does it mean, how is it used, and in whose interests?

• Analysis of Scottish equality policy documents found that there were a range of definitions of intersectionality decontextualised from its origins, and its use was largely individualised; descriptive; additive; and superficial (Christoffersen 2019a)

• Meaningful engagement with race and race/gender as key categories of intersectionality theory was lacking in policy documents not specifically concerning race equality (Christoffersen 2019a)

• Austerity (Christoffersen 2019b)
KEY OVERALL FINDINGS

• 5 competing applied concepts of intersectionality used in third sector equality organising and policy, each with different implications for intersectionally marginalised groups & intersectional justice

• Operationalising intersectionality is fundamentally about:
  • Representation (who is represented, and whether and how to represent)
  • Coalition and solidarity

• Conflicts around each are driven by competing concepts of intersectionality; competing concepts are at the heart of the politics of who does intersectionality, and how

• Intersectionality’s operationalisation necessitates a twin focus on common issues and intersectionally marginalised identities, including emergent ones

• Equality organisations, practitioners & policy makers can build greater unity through ensuring shared understandings of intersectionality, and work to balance acting in solidarity while prioritising the agency of those who are intersectionally marginalised
GENDER ARCHITECTURE: THE PROBLEM OF ‘DIVERSITY WITHIN’
DIVERSITY WITHIN: ‘THE FURTHER COMPLICATIONS, THE FURTHER DISADVANTAGES AND FURTHER DISCRIMINATION THAT YOU CAN EXPERIENCE... IF YOU FALL INTO MORE THAN ONE GROUP’

• How intersectionality is often addressed within single issue (i.e. white-led/predominantly white) women’s organisations and single issue policy making machineries: inclusion projects targeted at intersectionally marginalised groups

• Additive: gender viewed implicitly or explicitly as more important than other inequalities, which are added or subtracted at will; intersectionality/other inequalities thought relevant sometimes (not all the time)

• Pertains to an individual level of analysis; neglects interactions of structures of inequality, since it views one inequality (gender) as fundamental

• Views groups as solely oppressed/privileged along the primary axis (gender). Belonging to other equality strands usually thought about as ‘additional barriers’ (deficit model)

• Does not focus on those who are most disadvantaged, since the primary inequality (gender) is pre-defined

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EXAMPLE: PROJECTS ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST DISABLED WOMEN
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Concept of intersectionality employed</th>
<th>How it works in practice</th>
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| A, B    | Diversity within                     | • Representation of disabled women among those running and directing the project was viewed as a bonus, not a necessity: “inclusion without representation”  
• Disabled women expected to give up their time for free  
• Not necessarily any outreach to the disabled people’s sector in project development/implementation  
• No attention to other inequalities within the project (e.g. race)  
• Project focus: building capacity of non-disabled women’s organisations to serve disabled women (acting for/doing to disabled women) |
| C       | Intersections of equality strands     | • Aspired to be disabled women-led/survivor-led as a core guiding principle  
• Disabled women advocated for their participation to be remunerated as expertise  
• Building relationships with the disabled people’s sector in developing and implementing the project viewed as essential from the outset  
• Consistent attention to other inequalities (race, trans status, sexuality), women of colour represented among decision makers  
• Project focus: developing disabled women-led peer support services (agency of disabled women) |
INCLUSION PROJECTS

• Lack of projects focused on race

• Clear pattern of white-led/predominantly white organisations commenting that race remains the ‘one area they struggle with’, i.e. focused work on race and projects targeted toward women/people of colour

• Because diversity within is additive, projects are conceptualised separately; a women’s organisation may have a disabled project and a BAME project, but these are managed separately

• Inclusion of intersectionally marginalised people as service users does not mean that there is any change in the issue agendas of organisations

• Projects thought about as service delivery to the ‘hard to reach’ with little apparent thought to agency or structural change

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SUMMARY: THE PROBLEM OF DIVERSITY WITHIN

• Associated with ‘siloed thinking’ - thinking about specific inequalities (and the equality sectors organised around them) in isolation from one another: lack of recognition of the ways in which inequalities cross over or intersect
  • Can ultimately manifest in discrimination from some equality sectors and communities toward others

• Serves to further the interests of singularly disadvantaged groups (e.g., white women), and ultimately to uphold white supremacy and other structural inequalities

• Thought of as intersectionality because otherwise organisations, practitioners & policy makers would have to admit that they are not really doing intersectionality

• Outside of this discourse, intersectionally marginalised women organise to represent themselves
RECOMMENDATIONS: CREATING AN INTERSECTIONAL GENDER ARCHITECTURE
POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

• Be specific about what we mean by intersectionality

• Fund intersectional organisations and alliances – remunerate as policy partners

• Hold single strand organisations to account for facilitating meaningful participation and self-representation of intersectionally marginalised groups
  • Intersectional organisations exist because single issue organisations do not represent them

• Build greater unity and coalition working around common issues and in solidarity, while highlighting and prioritising intersectionally marginalised experiences and leadership - avoid ‘speaking for’ marginalised others

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CONCLUSIONS

• Different applied concepts of intersectionality serve different interests
  • Intersections of equality strands: associated with intersectionally marginalised people and organisations representing them
  • Diversity within: intersectionally privileged women and organisations representing them
• There is a pressing need for organisations, practitioners & policy makers to be much more specific about which particular concept of intersectionality they are employing when they use the term
• Approaches that privilege gender as the primary inequality are necessarily additive, ‘diversity within’ approaches
• Expertise of intersectional organisations must play a key role in the gender equality architecture in order for it to be intersectional
• Relevant and valuable intersectionality expertise in other equality sectors (racial justice, LGBTI and disability rights, refugee etc.)
• Given the range of meanings of intersectionality in equality practice, it is not sufficient to state that we are ‘intersectional’ - we need to think in terms of intersectional justice
THANK YOU

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REFERENCES


