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"Exploring the Complexity of Identity: Revisiting Intersectionality through the Lens of Gender and Race"

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Abstract

"Exploring the Complexity of Identity: Revisiting Intersectionality through the Lens of Gender and Race " is a critical examination of the concept of intersectionality and its relevance in contemporary society. Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw that describes how different forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism, intersect and interact with each other to shape the experiences of individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. The paper explores how the intersectionality framework has evolved since its inception and how it has been applied to various fields, including law, sociology, and feminist theory. The paper also highlights the importance of recognizing the diversity within marginalized communities and the need to account for the experiences of individuals who may not fit neatly into existing categories. Through an analysis of historical and contemporary examples, the paper argues that an intersectional approach is necessary for understanding the experiences of women of color, who are often excluded from mainstream feminist discourse. Furthermore, the paper examines the ways in which intersectionality has been co-opted and commodified by mainstream culture, and argues that a deeper understanding of intersectionality is necessary to effectively challenge systems of oppression. Overall, the paper contends that intersectionality remains a critical framework for understanding the complexities of identity and oppression in contemporary society, and that continued engagement with the concept is necessary for creating a more just and equitable world."

Keywords: Identity, Complexity, Intersectionality,Racialisation, Contemporary

Introduction

As American and British bombs fell over Iraq once again in March 2003, many of the 'old' questions that we have debated about the category 'woman' assume critical urgency once again, albeit they now bear the weight of global circumstances of the early twenty first century. This paper aims briefly to discuss some 'old' issues that continue to be central to

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making feminist agenda currently relevant. The first part of the paper discusses some long-standing internal conversations among different strands of feminisms which have already furnished important insights into contemporary problems. On the contrary, we would wish to learn from and build upon these insights through critique so that they can shed new light on current predicaments. Hence, when we start with the 19th century debates, it is not because there is a direct correspondence between slavery and 21st century forms of govern mentality, but rather to indicate that some issues that emerged then can help illuminate and elucidate our current entanglements with similar problematics.

Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, this concern was the subject of major debate as the concept of 'global sisterhood' was critiqued for its failure to fully take on board the power relations that divided us (Haraway, 1991, Davis 1981, Feminist Review, 1984, Talpade-Mohanty 1988). The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands.It is worth bearing in mind that the phrase, 'Ain't I a Woman?' was first introduced into North American and British feminist lexicon by an enslaved woman Sojourner Truth (the name she took, instead of her original name Isabella, when she became a travelling preacher). It is as well to remember in this regard, that the first women's antislavery society was formed in 1832 by black women in Salem, Massachusetts in the USA. Yet, black women were conspicuous by their absence at the Seneca Falls Anti-Slavery Convention of 1848 where the mainly middle class white delegates debated the motion for women's suffrage. Several questions arise when we reflect on black women's absence at the Convention. What, for instance, are the implications of an event which occludes the black female subject from the political imaginary of a feminism designed to campaign for the abolition of slavery? How did events like these mark black and white women's relational sense of themselves? Importantly, what happens when the subaltern subject – black woman in this case – repudiate such silencing gestures?We know from the biographies of black women such as Sojourner Truth that many of them spoke loud and clear. Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, very well demonstrates the historical power of a political subject who challenges imperatives of subordination and thereby creates new visions. This power (which, according to Foucault, simultaneously disciplines and creates new subjects) and its consequences are much bigger than the gains or losses of an individual life who articulates a particular political subject position. What is clear is that the words of Sojourner Truth had an enormous impact at the Convention and that the challenge they express foreshadowed campaigns by black feminists more than a century later:

Sojourner Truth's identity claims are thus relational, constructed in relation to white women and all men and clearly demonstrate that what we call 'identities' are not objects but processes constituted inand through power relations.It is in this sense of critique, practice and inspiration that this discourse holds crucial lessons for us today. that women are necessarily weaker than men or that enslaved black women were not real women). This point holds critical importance today when the allure of new Orientalism and their concomitant desire to 'unveil' Muslim women has proved to be attractive even to some feminists in a 'post

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September' world.There are millions of women today who remain marginalized, treated as a 'problem', or construed as the focal point of a moral panic – women suffering poverty, disease, lack of water, proper sanitation; women who themselves or their households are scattered across the globe as economic migrants, undocumented workers, as refugees and asylum seekers; women whose bodies and sexualities are commodified, fetishized, criminalized, racialised, disciplined and regulated through a myriad of representational regimes and social practices. So many of us, indeed, perhaps, all of us one way or another, continue to be 'hailed' as subjects within Sojourner Truth's diasporic imagination with its massive potential for un-doing the hegemonic moves of social orders confronting us today.

Such decentring activities scaled new heights when fuelled by political energies generated by the social movements of the second half of the last century--anti-colonial movements for independence, Civil Rights and the Black Power movements, the Peace movement, student protests and the Workers' movements, the Women's Movement or the Gay and Lesbian Movement. Whichever set of hegemonic moves became the focus of contestation in a specific debate-- whether it was the plight of subordinated sexualities, class injustices, or other subaltern realities--the concept of a self-referencing, unified subject of modernity now became the subject of overt and explicit political critique. As Norma Alacorn, in her analysis of the book 'The Bridge Called My Back' – a North American collection of political writings by women of colour -- later suggested, the theoretical subject of 'Bridge' is a figure of multiplicity, representing consciousness as a "site of multiple voicings" seen "not as necessarily originating with the subject but as discourses that traverse consciousness and which the subject must struggle with constantly". This figure is the bearer of modes of subjectivity that are deeply marked by "psychic and material violence" and it demands a thorough "reconfiguration of feminist theory" (Alacorn in Anzaldua 1990: 359-365).

In Britain, we were making similar claims when women of African, Caribbean, and South Asian background came to be figured as 'black' through political coalitions, challenging the essentialist connotations of racism (Grewal et al., 1988, Brah 1996 , Mirza 1997). This particular project of Black British feminism was forged through the work of local women's organisations around issues such as wages and conditions of work, immigration law, fascist violence, reproductive rights, and domestic violence.

This careful attention to working within, through and across cultural differences is a highly significant heritage of this feminism and it is one that can be used as a resource for working with the question of cultural difference in the present moment when, for example, differences between Muslim and non-Muslim women are constructed as posing insurmountable cultural differences. Internal conflicts within OWAAD, as amongst white women's groups, especially around homophobia, proved salutary so that, even as British 'black feminism' assumed a distinctive political identity separate from 'white feminism', engaging the latter in critical theoretical and political debate, it was not immune to the contradictions of its own internal heterogeneity.

We are primarily concerned with the ways in which class and its intersections are narrated in some autobiographical and empirical studies.

In the introduction to a now classic book Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing-Up in the Fifties, Liz Heron (1985) discusses how the provision of free orange juice gave working class children the sense that they had a right to exist. In the same book, Valerie Walkerdine (who has consistently discussed social class over the last 20 years), describes walking with a middle class friend on a seaside pier and seeing a working class family adding brown sauce to their chips. When her friend asks, ‘how could they do that?’ Walkerdine is immediately interpellated as working class, drawn into recognising the ‘othering’ of her working class background in this class inflected discourse on culinary habits. In later work Walkerdine also discusses middle class tendencies to view working classes as ‘animals in a zoo’ (with Helen Lucey, 1989) and with Helen Lucey and June Melody (2002) she considers the ways in which social class is lived in everyday practices and the emotional investments and issues it produces. Some of the middle class young women, for example, were subjected to expectations that meant that they could never perform sufficiently well to please their parents.

While the intersection of ‘race’ with social class is not analysed in Walkerdine’s example, it is a silent presence in that it is white, working class practices that are subject, in the 1985 example, to the fascinated scopophilic gaze. In a similar way, Beverley Skeggs' (1997) work on young, white, working class women in North-West England showed their struggle for respectability and their often painful awareness of being judged more severely than middle class women.

Anne McClintock (1995) uses an intersectional analysis to argue that to understand colonialism and postcolonialism, one must first recognize that 'race', gender and class are not distinct and isolated realms of experience. In keeping with Catherine Hall’s (1992, 2002) argument, McClintock shows that the Victorians connected ‘race’, class, and gender in ways that promoted imperialism abroad and class distinction in Britain.

At the level of everyday practices and subjectivity, Gail Lewis (1985) demonstrates how ‘race’ and gender intersected with the working class positioning of her parents so that their shifting power relations were only understandable as locally situated, albeit with global underpinnings. Lewis (2000) develops her analysis of the intersections of ‘race’, gender and class in studying the diverse everyday practices of black women social workers in relation to black and white clients and colleagues and white line managers. She demonstrates that the intersection of ‘race’, gender and class is subjectively lived, that it is part of social structure and involves differential (and sometimes discriminatory) treatment (see also Dill, 1993).Other autobiographical pieces of work also demonstrate these intersections. For example, bell hooks (1994) writes of how she quickly learned that working class black people around Yale University greeted her on the street, while middle class ones ignored her. Using her own experience as a white, Jewish, middle class woman, Paula Rothenberg (2000) examines the intersections of ‘race’, gender and social class. She argues that people generally do not see the ways in which they are privileged, and so well-intentioned, middle class, white liberals often strive to maintain privilege for their children, while denying that they are doing so. From a different class position, Nancie Caraway (1991) argues that a simplistically racialised notion of privilege is highly unsatisfactory for analysing the experiences of working class white women living in poverty.Over the last twenty years, the manner in which class is discussed in political, popular and academic discourse has radically changed to the point that, as Sayer (2002) notes, some sociologists have found it embarrassing to talk to research participants about class. In Britain and the USA, recent studies by Ehrenreich (2002) and Toynbee (2003) provide another timely reminder of how grinding, poorly-paid, working class jobs continue to differentiate women's experiences. From their analyses of data from 118 British Local Education Authorities, Gillborn and Mirza (2000) found that social class makes the biggest difference to educational attainment, followed by 'race' and then by gender – although they recognised that class outcomes are always intertwined with gender and 'race'. The processes by which social class continues to operate (for the middle as well as the working classes) require more attention if processes of social inclusion and exclusion are to be taken seriously. As Diane Reay (1998) points out in relation to education, this is not because different social classes view the importance of education differently – middle class position is commonly seen by both sections as central to social mobility and success. However, middle class mothers can draw upon more success-related cultural capital than their working class peers – e.g. However, 'working class' people do not constitute a unitary, homogeneous category, and participation in higher education varies between different working class groups. In particular, recognition that 'race', social class and sexuality differentiated women's experiences has disrupted notions of a homogeneous category 'woman' with its attendant assumptions of universality that served to maintain the status quo in relation to 'race', social class and sexuality, while challenging gendered assumptions.

Feminist theories of the 1970s and 1980 were informed by conceptual repertoires drawn largely from 'modernist' theoretical and philosophical traditions of European Enlightenment such as liberalism and Marxism. The work of scholars who found poststructuralist insights productive traversed theoretical ground that ranged from discourse theory, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, queer theory, and postcolonial criticism. The concept of 'agency' was substantially reconfigured, especially through poststructuralist appropriations of psychoanalysis. New theories of subjectivity attempted to take account of psychic and emotional life without recourse to the idea of an inner/outer divide. Indeed, it remains crucial in analysis as a 'signifying practice' at the heart of the way we make sense of the world symbolically and narratively. Overall, critical but productive conversations with poststructuralism have resulted in new theories for refashioning the analysis of 'difference' (Butler, 1990; One distinctive strand of this work is concerned with the potential of combining strengths of modern theory with postmodern insights. Postcolonial feminist studies foreground processes underlying colonial and postcolonial discourses of gender. Frequently, such work uses poststructuralist frameworks, especially Foucauldian discourse analysis or Derridean deconstruction. The concept of diaspora is increasingly used in analysing the mobility of peoples, commodities, capital and cultures in the context of globalisaton and transnationalism. The concept is designed to analyse configurations of power – both productive and coercive – in 'local' and 'global' encounters in specific spaces and historical moments. In her work (Brah 1996, 2002) addresses the concept of 'diaspora' alongside that of Gloria Anzaldua's theorisation of 'border' and the widely debated feminist concept of 'politics of home'. The intersection of these three terms is understood through the concept of 'diaspora space' which covers the entanglements of genealogies of dispersal with those of 'staying put'. Importantly, the concept of 'diaspora space' embraces the intersection of 'difference' in its variable forms, placing emphasis upon emotional and psychic dynamics as much as socio-economic, political and cultural differences. Home and belonging is also a theme of emerging literature on 'mixed-race' identities which interrogates the concept of 'race' as an essentialist discourse with racist effects (Tizard and Phoenix 2002/1993, Zack 1993)

In 2003, the second war against Iraq has brought into relief many continuing feminist concerns such as the growing militarization of the world, the critical role of the military industrial complex as a technology of imperial governance, the feminisation of global labour markets and migration flows, the reconstitution of differentially racialised forms of sexuality as a constitutive part of developing regimes of 'globalisation', and the deepening inequalities of power and wealth across different regions of the world. What is the impact of these new modes of govern mentality on the lives of differentially exploited, racialised, ethicised, sexualised, and religionised humans living in different parts of the world? What do these lived experiences say to us – living as we do in this space called the west -- about our own positionalities, responsibilities, politics, and ethics?

Conclusion

Revisiting Intersectionality through the Lens of Gender and Race provides a critical analysis of the concept of intersectionality and its continued relevance in contemporary society. The paper argues that intersectionality remains a necessary framework for understanding the experiences of individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups and the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and interact. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diversity within marginalized communities and the need to account for the experiences of individuals who may not fit neatly into existing categories. It also highlights the ways in which intersectionality has been co-opted and commodified by mainstream culture, and the need for a deeper understanding of intersectionality to effectively challenge systems of oppression. Overall, the paper contends that intersectionality is a critical tool for creating a more just and equitable world. It is an ongoing project that requires continued engagement, reflection, and application. By recognizing the complexities of identity and oppression, and by centering the experiences of those who are often marginalized, an intersectional approach can provide a framework for building a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

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