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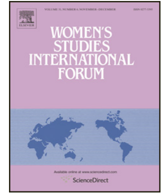

# Intersectional expectations: Young feminists' perceived failure at dealing with differences and their retreat to individualism

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ABSTRACT

Using qualitative data from interviews with young New Zealand feminists, this article shows that these women incorporate their understandings of intersectionality theory into their feminist ideology and strive for overcoming challenges of women's diversity and relative privilege within their feminist practices. However, mismatching strategies of inclusivity and exclusivity among majority and minority groups of feminists hinder their success of cooperation. Such failure creates anxieties among feminists – particularly among those belonging to relatively privileged groups – who feel they do not live up to "intersectional expectations". This article argues that increasing individualization of young feminists' identities, ideologies and practices is, partly, a result of such difficulties to deal with women's diversity because it is used as a strategy that focuses on the individual rather than on the collective.

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## Introduction

Young women's approaches to feminism in the West are often characterized as and critiqued for having become individualized. Third wave feminist ideals and/or neoliberal cooptation are mainly named as reasons for this development (e.g. Baker, 2008; Budgeon, 2015; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Rich, 2005; Scharff, 2012). This article agrees with this diagnosis, however, using empirical data from New Zealand, I claim that the increasing individualization among young feminists is additionally and significantly facilitated by their difficulties to accommodate women's diversity within their feminist practices.

These difficulties have a long history. About four decades ago, second wave women's movements across the West got unsettled by various conflicts between feminists of different ethnicities, social classes and sexual identities. Those conflicts highlighted that some feminists were more privileged than others and the dominance of white, middle-class, heterosexual women within feminist communities, discourses and practices became increasingly condemned (e.g. Hill Collins, 2002; Mohanty, 1988; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Debates sparking from those conflicts are widely documented in the legacies of Black feminism, post-colonial feminism, queer feminism, Marxist feminism and other feminisms addressing women's heterogeneity and therefore, do not need to be reiterated here. Importantly, they engraved the widely-shared understanding into contemporary feminist ideology that women are not a homogenous group and differences among them matter. Despite this acknowledgment, issues of women's differences and relative privilege[1] continue to shape today's feminist discourses and lead to conflicts within various branches of young feminist movements, as, for instance, controversies about allegedly ethnocentric and culturally insensitive approaches of FEMEN or SlutWalk, and online campaigns like #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen have shown (Kendall, 2013; O'Keefe, 2014; Reger, 2015). Given this continuity and persistency of feminism's difficulties to deal with women's differences, it is worthwhile exploring the strategies with which today's young feminists respond to such challenges. I will argue that young feminists' individualization of feminist identities, ideologies and practices serves as an easy way out when finding constructive ways of addressing women's diversity and relative privilege cannot be accomplished. Of course, not all young feminists — neither within New Zealand nor across the West — follow the same strategies. Evans (2015a); Mackay (2014), or Lenz and Paetau (2009), for instance, offered nuanced portrays of British, U.S. and German contemporary feminist communities that suggest otherwise and showed that collective forms of engagement continue to exist. This article however, focuses on individualized feminist practices and contributes to explaining their causes.

The article unfolds by first discussing the development of intersectionality theory as an important branch of feminist theory addressing women's differences and as a significant influence on today's young feminists' understandings of feminism. The empirical study is introduced subsequently. This is followed by the main discussion of empirical findings, which explores young feminists' understandings of the role of women's differences for their versions of feminism, before

[1] I use the qualifier "relative" to signal the relational and contextual character of privilege.

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delving into their practical strategies of dealing with such differences. The conclusion underpins the argument made and offers some reflection on how the presented findings may be used to decelerate disadvantageous development within contemporary feminism.

*Intersectional feminism*

From the late 1980s on, intersectionality theory provided a major toolkit for feminism to engage with women's diversity. The increasing desire within feminist movements to overcome the dominance of majority perspectives welcomed the core ideas of this emerging and increasingly popular theoretical approach. Initially, the term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to explain how social groups who find themselves on "intersections" of multiple dimensions of discrimination (e.g. sexism, racism), are marginalized more severely and in different ways than groups who are confronted with single dimensions of discrimination. Crenshaw used the example of the United States legal system to demonstrate that although white women and Black men are discriminated against, Black women are even worse off because the effects of sexism and racism reinforce and shape each other. Following Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) arguments, a large body of literature has been published, discussing intersectionality as a promising tool to implement an acknowledgement of women's diversity, power differences and relative privilege into feminist analyses. Scholars developed the concept into theoretical frameworks (e.g. Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005; Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012) and methodologies for feminist research (e.g. Bowleg, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2011). McCall (2005: 1771) called intersectionality the "most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far".

From the mid-2000s on, emphasis has been placed on the practical use of intersectionality theory. There is research on legal and political practices (e.g. Kantola & Nousiainen, 2009; Skjeie & Langvasbråten, 2009) and on organizational work (e.g. Acker, 2012; Lépinard, 2014). The importance of intersectionality for feminist activism has also been in the focus of several authors (e.g. Ackerly & True, 2010; Lenz & Paetau, 2009), often with a specific interest on the development of solidarity that unites diverse political actors. Cole (2008), for example, explained how the concept of intersectionality can be used to understand alliances between feminist activist groups who share political interests but are divided by power-imbalances. Greenwood and Christian (2008) found that diversity within a political group challenges the development of a shared political consciousness and the building of coalitions. By using the example of the Balkan area, Milevska (2011) highlighted how the focus on a regional level of intersectional feminist activism and research (as opposed to such activities on a national or even transnational level) prevents the emergence of a hollow solidarity based on essentialist commonalities and instead leads to one that is informed by local issues.

However, other scholars have voiced criticism. Nash (2010), for instance, warned against a fetishization of intersectionality and suggested, similarly to Lépinard (2014), that the intersectional approach is only one of many possible strategies for feminist practices. Mohanty (2013) argued that the influence of neoliberal discourses transformed intersectionality theory into an academic approach that collapses collective into individual responsibilities; and Puar (2012) suggested that the way intersectionality is often used secures the centrality of white women rather than providing a challenge to it.

My study focusses specifically on feminist engagement of young women and much literature on contemporary young feminist activity specifically draws on intersectionality. An abundance of literature on third wave feminism elaborates on distinctions between the young generation and its mother's generation, which often involves the young feminists' claim to be more sensitive to issues of diversity than the second wave had been (e.g. Bulbeck, 2001, 2006; Evans, 2015b; Henry, 2004). However, while much work has been published to explore young women's approaches to and outlets for feminist engagement (e.g. Davis, 2015; Evans & Chamberlain, 2015; Kempson, 2014; Maddison & Sawer, 2013), there is, to my knowledge, only little work done to explore explicitly how young feminists' understandings of women's diversity impact on their practices and strategies. Maddison (2004b) illustrated how young women in Australia's women's movement struggle with aligning their version of collective identity with strategic choices, but this study does not address women's diversity. Lenz and Paetau (2009) explored German feminist activists' views on contemporary feminisms including intersectionality issues, but this study's focus was not on practical experiences. Ringrose (2007) investigated how Canadian students of Women's Studies engaged with intersectionality theory and thus provided useful insight into young women's understandings of this concept. Yet, this study does not explore how the students transform their knowledge into a practice outside academia. Evans (2015a) elaborated on intersectional challenges for third wave feminism and offered much insight to current debates of inclusivity.

My article builds on such work, however, focusses more specifically on how difficulties of addressing women's diversity impacts on the practices of young feminists.

*The study*

New Zealand constitutes an excellent context for studies on contemporary feminism, in particular in relation to women's diversity. New Zealand's strong second wave movement declined in the mid-1980s: the government's determined shift to neoliberal politics from 1984 onwards forced many autonomous feminist groups to adopt increasingly formal ways of organizing to secure funding and (at least a weak) political voice. Consequently, state feminism (e.g. by the Ministry of Women's Affairs) and institutionalized networks remained the strongest arms of the movement. This contributed to declining identification rates of young women with feminism in the early 1990s (Coleman, 2009; Grey, 2008; Larner & Butler, 2005). Sparked by some high profile cases of sexual assault by members of the police, young women's feminist engagement awoke in the following years. But the third wave did not fully hit New Zealand until the first decade of the new century, as, for instance, participation in the international SlutWalk movement or other large scale protests against rape culture showed (Schuster, 2014).

Some of these events got criticized for not acknowledging women's diversity appropriately. While such criticism is characteristic of third wave feminist debates across the West, it initiated particularly interesting debates in New Zealand, because social diversity is more than just an abstract concept for New Zealand feminists. Besides the white European-descent (74% of the population) and the indigenous Māori population (15%), New Zealand is home to many Asian immigrants (12%) and Pacific peoples (7%)[2] (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). More importantly however, due to its official status as a bicultural society,[3] the acknowledgment of ethnic differences is omnipresent in public, political and social contexts. While many other Western societies are also confronted with ethnic diversity (e.g. in other post-colonial nations or countries with high immigration rates), New Zealand's biculturalism requires all serious political interest groups to address Māori perspectives when articulating political aims (Mulholland, 2015). Admittedly, in many political contexts, Māori views are implemented only tokenistically and on a superficial level. However, feminist groups generally tend to show acknowledgement for the significance of biculturalism. Thus, debates about women's diversity have practical relevance to feminists in New Zealand.

[2] In the New Zealand census one can tick as many ethnic groups as one identifies with, therefore numbers add up to 108%.

[3] New Zealand's founding document – the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), signed by the British Crown and Māori chiefs – officially recognizes both Māori and European cultures equally (Mulholland, 2015).

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