



Intersectionality as feminist praxis in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality has had a profound impact on feminist theory and activism: it has created a new set of discursive structures for analysing power and been translated into activist strategies. However, its acceptance within the women's movement differs by context. In the UK it has been relatively controversial: the left fear its impact on the possibilities of solidarity, whilst the right are concerned it detracts from gender as the principle site of analysis. These differences of approach have, to some extent, revealed fissures within UK feminism. Conversely, this article draws upon original survey data to argue that intersectionality underpins student feminist activism in the UK, in particular influencing: their activities; their discursive approach to inclusion; and their ongoing commitment to theory application. In sum, there has been a normalisation of the intersectional framework amongst student feminist activists.

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Introduction

Intersectionality, the recognition of multiple and overlapping points of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), has heralded a paradigmatic shift in feminist scholarship (Hancock, 2007). Whilst the concept emerged from black feminism to explore the intersections between race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990), it has subsequently been 'stretched' to include analysis of (inter alia) class, sexuality, disability and age (Krizsan, Skjeie, & Squires, 2012). As a theory it has 'travelled' beyond the Global North (Knapp, 2005), although its influence and reach differs according to national and local context (Lépinard, 2014); indeed, it has often been used as an analytical tool without being labelled specifically 'intersectional' (Collins & Bilge, 2016: 3). In the UK, it has sparked debates amongst feminists in regards to its impact on collectivism, gender and on how best to address the need for greater diversity and inclusion (Evans, 2015). Despite wider divisions within the movement, this article draws upon original survey data of student feminist societies to argue that intersectional feminist praxis is central to the activism of younger feminists in three key ways: 1) it underpins the types of activities and events they organise; 2) it influences discursive approaches to inclusion; and 3) it constitutes a popular subject of theory application amongst the activists. Whilst there is a clear intersectional commitment to advancing feminist politics, this tends to be focussed on the intersections between sex, race, disability and gender identity, with little attention paid to class or sexuality. This article argues that these findings are important because they signify a move towards a more intersectional feminist praxis in the UK albeit one which has not yet fully addressed all forms of oppression.

Intersectionality theories have enabled scholars, and latterly activists, to explore the matrices of oppression affecting power dynamics at both the individual and group level (Collins and Bilge, 2016). Although it emerged from black feminist legal scholars in the US (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) it dovetailed with a refocused analysis of identity politics in the UK; specifically, the idea that identities can only be understood within the narratives of other identities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The complexity of the concept can make it difficult to work with (McCall, 2005; Davis, 2008); not least because identity markers, such as gender, race, and sexuality, are also open to individual interpretation and construction (Marx Ferree, 2009). However, it has helped crystallise multifaceted subjectivities and social stratifications (Sigle-Rushton & Lindstrom, 2013), whilst also providing space for analysis of the conditions within which identities are created and recreated (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

To understand and clarify its application as feminist praxis, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) suggest three approaches. The first is to explore the extent to which an intersectional frame of analysis is applied; specifically, this approach allows us to reflect upon the numerous ways in which gender, race and class interact in the creation of laws and inequalities, and how governments and activists can respond to these interactions in such a way as to 'transcend traditional single-axis horizons.' (Cho et al., 2013: 785). The second is to critically reflect upon the debates about the theory and methods of intersectionality and the ways in which it can offer new discursive and disciplinary possibilities; this approach suggests the need for critical engagement with the epistemological politics at work within the concept, and within the wider field of intersectionality studies, in order to avoid essentialist narratives about who or what intersectionality refers to (Cho et al., 2013: 786). And the third calls for analysis of the intersectional nature of political interventions; this approach identifies praxis as key to understanding

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how intersectionality works for social justice groups beyond academia (Cho et al., 2013: 786).

Cho et al. (2013) observe that it is the *application* of intersectional politics that matters, rather than its definition (2013), not least because it is a theory 'constantly under construction' (Collins & Bilge, 2016: 31). However, in order to identify how and when an intersectional lens is applied we do need a greater understanding of the various conceptual dimensions addressed within an intersectional framework. Collins and Bilge (2016: 25–30) identify six core ideas: social inequality; power; relationality; social context; complexity; and social justice. Whilst they note that these themes are not a priori part of every intersectional framework, they do provide an important theoretical foundation for understanding how intersectionality can and does work in practice, and are briefly discussed below.

An intersectional analysis should include recognition and analysis of social inequalities; in particular exploring the interaction between different identity markers, such as race and gender, that underpin social, political and economic formal rules and informal norms and cultures. Intersectionality speaks directly to questions of power: how it is used, and by whom, to marginalise and exclude groups of people through the intersecting domains of racism and sexism. Intersectionality also reveals the relationality at work in power dynamics, allowing us to identify and appreciate the interconnectedness of social divisions. Intersectional studies should be aware of the ways in which social context affects social inequalities, especially how historic, economic and political conditions shape and inform our awareness of, and resistance to, marginalisation and exploitation. Intersectionality is a complex and, as should be clear by now, multi-faceted concept, as such reflexive engagement with it as an analytical framework is necessary for scholars seeking to apply and develop it to an expanding range of issues. Finally, intersectionality should advocate for social justice and be part and parcel of wider efforts to both critique the status quo as well as to improve the lives of marginalised and oppressed people (Collins & Bilge, 2016: 25–30).

This article makes use of Cho et al.'s (2013) framework, especially the third call for understanding how intersectionality is applied, whilst also paying attention to the core ideas set out by Collins and Bilge (2016). The article finds evidence that intersectionality influences the types of events organised by student feminist groups, their approach to inclusion and that discussion of intersectionality as feminist theory is a central part of their activities. Whilst the focus tends to be on specific intersections, most commonly gender and race, the activists are also engaged in a critical process of understanding how to apply intersectionality to their feminism, although this does not extend to analysis of the international context which shapes the discourse and praxis of intersectionality.

This article argues that in addition to the core ideas set out by Collins and Bilge (2016), and the framework suggested by Cho et al. (2013), that there is also a *normalisation* process at work. Student feminist activists in the UK accept the concept and application of intersectionality as a 'good thing' and its place within both discourse and praxis is established. Whilst intersectionality is central to student feminist praxis it is also the case that it is slightly limited in its application, specifically in terms of the nature of its conceptualisations and the 'categories' of analysis. Before setting out the methods and analysis of intersectional student feminist praxis, the article provides a brief overview of the current 'state' of intersectionality in the UK.

Intersectionality in the UK

There has been a resurgence of feminist activism in the UK since the early 2000s (Dean, 2010). Although this contains multiple ideological strands, there has been a noticeable renewal of radical feminism (Mackay, 2015) which has, in part, given rise to a range of tensions within the movement – most notably in relation to trans-inclusion and the politics of intersectionality (Jeffreys, 2014). Some high profile

feminists have sought to blame intersectionality for preventing a collective approach to politics, arguing that the concept effectively shuts down debate (Mensch, 2013).¹ Other well-known feminists have angered black feminists for refusing to recognize the importance of addressing the ways in which women of colour are effectively silenced or ignored (Adewunmi, 2012).² At the grassroots level, research has found that activists in the UK are less clear about the role of intersectionality, compared with feminists in the US who have sought to centralise intersectionality within their praxis (Evans, 2015: 11).

A couple of newly established feminist groups do appear to articulate an intersectional feminism: Sisters Uncut have a diverse membership and campaign against austerity measures that disproportionately affect women of colour, whilst Feminist Fightback is an anti-capitalist collective committed to exploring the intersections between axes of oppression (see Sisters Uncut, 2016; Feminist Fightback, n.d.).³ At the same time there has been a resurgence of 'riot-grrl-esque' feminist zines written by and about women of colour, that advocate an intersectional praxis (see Gal-dem, n.d.; OOMK, n.d.).⁴ However, these are the exceptions and most high profile feminist groups and actions have failed to take intersectionality seriously, for instance: the recent high-profile Slut Walks in the UK, as elsewhere, have proved hostile to exploring the intersection that women of colour represent (Miriam, 2012); Reclaim the Night marches have been accused of practising 'exclusionary behaviour' (NUS, 2014)⁵; Abortion Rights, the largest national campaign group, has rejected calls to adopt a reproductive justice framework – typically associated with the politics of intersectionality (Evans, 2015: 183); the recently launched Women's Equality Party has been criticised for being comprised mainly of white, middle-class affluent women (Little, 2015); whilst campaigners' attempts to introduce gender quotas for Parliament have also largely failed to recognize how gender intersects with other identities (Hughes, 2011).

Concomitantly, intersectionality is becoming an increasingly 'mainstream' element of feminist teaching in the UK, although lagging behind the US where it has been a central part of interdisciplinary studies (Dill, 2009; Collins & Bilge, 2016). This means that students are encouraged to read and debate intersectional theory as part of studying gender. Meanwhile, intersectionality scholars have become more concerned with the ways in which the concept can make the transition from theory to practice (Yuval-Davis, 2006), providing students with the opportunity to read about intersectionality 'in action' (the recent book by Collins & Bilge (2016) is particularly good for this). Including intersectionality in this way has the potential to shape and inform students' understanding of feminist activism and praxis in such a way as to normalise it for them, an idea to which this article will return.

Methods

Universities are important spaces for political socialization (Crossley, 2008), and in particular for the development of feminist identities (Gmelch, 1998). Students are 'freed' from the influence of parental or family ties to explore their political beliefs; large numbers of students mean there is a critical mass of activists to mix with; Universities offer students the time and opportunity to join societies that facilitate the

¹ See Conservative feminist Louise Mensch <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/30/reality-based-feminism-louise-mensch> and leftist Suzanne Moore <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/09/dont-care-if-born-woman>

² See Caitlin Moran's comments on the lack of racial diversity in US TV show *Girls*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/08/girls-twitter-feminism-caitlin-moran>

³ Their websites are available online <http://www.sistersuncut.org> and <http://www.feministfightback.org.uk/about/>

⁴ See for instance Gal-Dem <http://www.gal-dem.com> and OOMK <http://oomk.net/about>, thanks to Leyla Reynolds for alerting me to these.

⁵ The National Union of Students launched their own toolkit for students who wanted to organise an intersectional Reclaim the Night march, see <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/reclaim-the-night-the-student-organiser-s-toolkit>

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