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Celebrating Intersectionality? Debates on a multi-faceted concept in Gender Studies: themes from a conference

In 2006 the *EJWS* published a special issue on the theme of intersectionality edited by Ann Phoenix and Pamela Pattynama. As the editors stated that issue was part of a burgeoning interest in and engagement with the idea as those involved in Women's and Gender Studies debated the relative strengths and limitations of the idea in theoretical, methodological and policy terms in various European contexts. The special issue was an attempt to bring together different approaches to intersectionality and contribute to the further enrichment and development of the idea as a central conceptual tool in the armoury of feminist praxis. Noting the ontological and epistemological complexity signalled by the term Phoenix and Pattynama brought together a selection of articles that explored the different emphases it highlighted on either side of the Atlantic, the relative balance shifting between systemic and constructionist inflections; the theoretical scope; analytical tensions; methodological potential; and policy implications of intersectionality.

In the three years that have passed since its publication the interest in and debates about intersectionality as a key concept in feminist enquiry has remained and it is in this context that Helma Lutz organised the international conference: *Celebrating Intersectionality? Debates on a multi-faceted concept in Gender Studies*, held at the Goethe-University in Frankfurt in January this year. Twenty years after Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term the aim of the conference was to bring together protagonists as well as critics to discuss the 'state of the art' with many of those who had been influential in debates about the term 'intersectionality'. Helma Lutz opened the main contributions with Kimberlé Crenshaw delivering the closing paper and over the two days between them, participants heard and discussed papers from Nira Yuval Davis, Kathy Davis, Gudrun Axeli Knapp, Myra Marx Ferree, Ann Phoenix, Gloria Wekker, Mechthild Bereswill, Dubravka Zarkov, Jeff Hearn, Paula Villa, Nina Lykke and Cornelia Klinger.

As with the earlier special issue this conference can be seen as an attempt to contribute to the further development of intersectionality as a theoretical and/or methodological tool, including exploration of the ways in which the concept has travelled and the various problem-spaces into which it is enfolded in this travel. Apart from being a significant and extremely rich intervention in its own right, it is this attempt to contribute to the on-going discussions within feminist thinking and Women's Studies scholarship that led to the decision to write a report of the conference as an editorial for this issue. In offering this brief report on some of these discussions we hope to extend the reach of those debates and also signal areas that continue to trouble feminist constituencies as they attempt to find ever more productive and usable ways of addressing multiple forms of inequality and disadvantage; complex ontologies; the idiosyncrasies of experience; and multi-dimensional epistemologies.

Held in continuous plenary format with simultaneous translation the conference was organised into four sections: *(Why) Are Gender Studies in need of intersectionality?* The focus of this opening session was the history of the term/idea and the relevant

research questions that arise within debates about intersectionality. A particular concern was to explore the specific conditions influencing the inflection and take up of the term in different historical conjunctures and regions of the world. The second session was: *Intersectionality – a transatlantic success story*. Here gender scholars from the USA and Europe discussed intersectionality as a travelling concept, examining what happened to it as it travelled and was engaged in the specific conditions of varying locations. Questions explored included issues of ‘translation’ and accommodation; the gains and losses associated with conceptual travel; and the extent to which use of the concept is limited by ‘methodological nationalism’. Session three focused on: *Intersectionality in different disciplines*, where the broad and multi-faceted use of intersectionality in various areas of gender studies was explored. Issues included whether there were specific advantages in using the concept of intersectionality in various disciplinary frames and approaches; the possibilities of using the concept empirically and how it might be linked to other theories or theoretical tools. The final session was entitled: *What is to be done? - Toward the development of a full fledged theory?* Here the focus was on missing areas of enquiry from intersectional analysis; ways through the tensions and conflicts in intersectional analysis in a gesture toward synergy and the limits of intersectionality as a theoretical framework.

It is not our intention here to offer a full scale conference report and go through each presentation by name and substantive content. Rather the aim is to highlight a number of themes that were particularly pertinent at the conference and which by extension speak to some of the enduring preoccupations, possibilities and dilemmas that continue to engage feminists in varying locations across Europe. These can be grouped as questions of provenance; travel and translation/transformation; and missing elements and limitations. Inevitably in the ebbs and flow of actual discussion this somewhat schematic ordering does an injustice to the texture and interweaving of these themes but the division is used as a way to facilitate reportage rather than an attempt to render palpable the process of discussion.

Questions of Provenance

One of the threads that ran through the conference discussions was the theoretical and methodological implications of the metaphor of the road intersection with its imagery of a meeting point of conjoining but nevertheless separate pathways to a particular location. Participants at the conference echoed what has become a repeated concern among some feminist scholars about the need to move beyond metaphors that reproduce a framework of addition (gender + class + race +++) as in a notion of triple oppression being the hallmark of black and/or other minoritised women of colour. This is to avoid the implication that the specificity of any particular group of women is the number of categories of oppression that they can lay claim to. This is by now a well versed critique among feminists on both sides of the Atlantic, especially (?) those who have been influenced by the anti-categorical thinking of poststructuralist and postmodernist theory. Among conference participants there was a general sense that the notion of the intersectional was capable of taking us beyond the metaphor of addition – not least because of its genealogical roots in the activism of African-American (lesbian) feminists such as the Combahee River Collective and the legal claims and feminist jurisprudence of Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term in 1989

Yet the debates at the conference served as powerful reminders of both the fact that the issue of additive thinking is not over and of some of the issues that are at stake in any given metaphor. So for example, there were arguments that stressed that the point was not so much an either/or in regard to categorical thinking but much more about the need to *always* pay consistent attention to the historical and social contexts in which the categories being invoked (analytically and/or experientially) are produced, made meaningful and deployed. The key point here is the need to address the *political* and this requires paying attention to which set of categories are brought into alliance and with what political agenda in mind. Framed in this way, debates about the pros and cons of the metaphor of the intersection are redundant because the focus is less theoretically abstract and more concerned with the development of a feminist praxis that is strategically aimed at particular political objectives.

At the same time there did seem to be a strand of thought at the conference that suggested that the provenance of the term precisely in the national/historical space of the USA and in the institutional sphere of the law and litigation, with both focusing on the social relations of 'race', gender and class, meant that the term had greater traction in some fields than others as it travelled to different national locations and institutional sites. For example, within the context of specific state institutions such as the law, an additive metaphor *may* provide the most leverage for the pursuit of anti-discrimination legislation. In part this is because it allows for analogical thinking in which the discourse of class, for example, makes intelligible a discourse of gender. German anti-discrimination law was cited as an example of this. This is not to reduce the latter to the former (i.e. gender to class) nor is it to hold each as separate but rather to allow for the drawing out of similarities and differences between them and thus identify the specific configuration of social situatedness that arises in any given historical context. In this respect then the concept of 'intersectionality' can precisely work in the way that Kimberlé Crenshaw envisaged, that is to expose and yet render inadequate (to the tasks of contemporary government claiming equality for its citizens) the structures of *thought* that meant some social subjects and social processes were invisible and how these were mirrored in *institutional forms and practices*. It can work to expose both structures and dynamics of social subordination and discrimination. Here the concept works to link theory to practice and as a reminder that theory and practice always needs to be located in particular historical, ideological, institutional, social, cultural, national contexts if together they are to provide a constellation in which to frame active claims.

Travel and transformation

In many ways the issue of what happens to the concept 'intersectionality' when it travels across state borders and socio-cultural formations is closely linked to issues of provenance and was something that the conference consciously sort to explore. Some of this exploration was in relation to the question of the implications of the metaphor and a discourse of addition but some extended into discussions of which categories were usable and significant in particular contexts. A connected theme was whether the term 'intersectionality' was theory, concept, method or heuristic. For example there was some discussion as to whether the category 'race' – so central to intersectional thinking and practice among feminists in the USA – had any real traction in European contexts, outside of Britain, where it palpably had been used as a category of feminist

activism and scholarship. In this regard attention was paid to Germany where, because of its history in a genocidal practice of 'race', there was a profound reluctance to work with that category, even in a politics of claim or theories of opposition and critique. Germany was not alone in rejecting the category 'race' and it was noted by some speakers that the preferred term in many European contexts was that of ethnicity and/or culture, and much more recently 'religion' had entered as a key structural and identity category.

This spoke to the issues of which categories are deemed to intersect and what is the impact of the shifts that may occur as the concept of intersectionality travels: a kind of 'what are the differences that make a difference' question. While these concerns are not new to Women's Studies scholarship and feminist thinking the fact that the issue was deliberately placed on the conference agenda suggests that there has been no settlement arrived at. Yet rather than focus on an attempt to produce a settlement that turned on identification of which and how many categories matter – and why and where, discussions were more concerned with what might be achieved by use of the term intersectional. There was discussion of the ground on which the integrity of the term 'intersectional' might be achieved: is it as a political and methodological tool, a theory or, less 'grandly' an heuristic device. There was no agreement on these, with different speakers (from platform and the floor) expressing different opinions that were broadly reflective of those in the published debates.¹ Thus the debates and opinions about the power and utility of thinking and working 'intersectionally' ranged quite broadly. Among the strengths were statements about the necessary reorientation in perspective that thinking 'intersectionally' requires because it involves thinking simultaneously at level of structures, dynamics and subjectivities; that it conjoins rhetorics of 'voice' and presence and rhetorics of discourse and institutional form; that it facilitates a form of feminist enquiry that aims to, and is capable of, capturing the complexity and multiplicity of axes of oppression.

At the same time there were notes of caution. One such note was the need to avoid foreclosing on the reach of intersectionality as theory and see it as if it were only a theory of identity and not also a theory about the workings and effects of the ensemble of social and discursive relations (themselves intersecting!) that make up the soil in which identities and identity positions are constituted. Attention was also drawn to the difference between theory as an analytical framework about the dynamic and structural forces at work in any given social formation and the pathway (i.e. methodology) along which one must travel to analyse these structural and dynamic forces. Thus clarity about what is being claimed when one names intersectionality as theory or methodology is important. Another cautionary note was that in the multiplicity of versions of what passes for intersectional analysis it can easily be used as a way to short circuit complex and nuanced enquiry and become decontextualised from the historical, social, cultural, ideological specifics operating in any given context. This can then arrest the process of interrogation rather than foster greater complexity and correspondence with the lived material realities of those whose interests the concept/method/ theory is meant to work for.

These were complex and pressing debates and ones that will continue to be rehearsed and revised in feminist constituencies in numerous locations – and we hope the pages of this journal! On a personal note one of the issues that I was left troubled by was what felt at times to verge dangerously close to the production of a hard binary divide

between a place called the USA and a place called Europe. In part (and I accept here that this hearing was that of a black woman living in Britain with its own particular historical and contemporary vagaries of 'race' discourse) this binary divide seemed to be constructed on the ground of 'race' as if this was only an issue of pertinence to Women's Studies scholarship and feminist enquiry in the USA (and perhaps Britain) and that the discourse that 'race' and racism did not *really* matter in the wider European context had been bought into. It was as if the anxieties about what constitutes the European in the wake of diverse and by now long standing immigrant and diasporic populations across European national spaces were not also anxieties about 'race' alongside and/or enfolded into anxieties and discourses about ethnicity, culture and religion. It is as though 'race' as a category of 'real' biological difference was believed rather than understood as an ideological category that becomes filled with specific content premised on a discourse of essential difference rooted in the genetic or biological but often spoken through a language of ethnic or cultural difference. Yet among the papers that we heard violence against men in war zones or about representations of black women's sexuality in the Netherlands indicated (implicitly or explicitly) how 'race' operated as a key technology of power, alongside or in assemblage with its cognate terms ethnicity and culture. Similarly, I was at times made slightly anxious in the discussions about whether or not 'intersectionality' was a theory or 'simply' a heuristic device. My anxiety here was not premised on the differences of opinion about this per se but rather that it seemed to me at times as if anything that emerged from within the structural experience of marginalised women (in this case African American and other US women of colour) it was always already incapable of being understood as theory, always only a category describing experience. Indeed at different points in the conference, and especially in the third session, we saw demonstrated the capacity of modes of enquiry that designate themselves as intersectional to deliver subtle, nuanced and sensitive analyses of the material and representational realities that constitute the lived for diverse, geographically disparate constituencies.

Missing elements

The final theme or area that I want to point to are some of the areas that are missing from the current field of enquiry carried out under the name intersectional analysis and some of its limitations. Within debates about the reach of intersectionality questions have arisen as to whether (whatever its designation – as theory, methodology, heuristic) it relates 'only' to women whose minoritisation includes more than 'just' gender: in other words does it apply to white, middle-class, heterosexual women in countries of the 'North'. Within the debates at the conference this issue was touched upon with most people arguing that indeed such women could be thought of as intersectional subjects and that enquiry into what that meant would involve the kinds of nuanced, historically and socially situated analyses described earlier. More significantly perhaps attention was drawn to the absence of men and masculinities in the intersectionality literature and the impoverishment of theory and research for both intersectionality scholarship *and* that on men, masculinity and patriarchy that this absence has led to. Attending to this missing element would involve more than just another addition to the subject positions and categories of division deemed core to the intersectional cross-road or conjunction but might also lead to a shift from 'intersectionalities' to 'transectionality'. A move that might be similar to the shift between inter and intra-sectionality.

These debates occurred within a framework which was generally favourable to the idea of intersectionality – wanting it extended in scope but open to change as a result. There was however a strand of discussion within the conference that addressed what was felt to be the profound limitations of the ‘intersectional’ as a framework of analysis but which did so from very different (and perhaps irreconcilable) stances. One such site was that of embodiment, or the empirical complexity of lived experience of embodiment and the other was the site of societal structures and power relations within a globalised context. In the first, participants were warned about the uneasy relation or even lack of correspondence between the site of the lived, embodied, experienced and the methodological and theoretical tools feminists generate to capture and theorise these realms. It points to the ‘excess’ that is uncontainable by theory and methodology – which cannot be disciplined by it – and thus might provide the terrain on which resistance to the repressive logic of ordering might be enacted. In this view intersectionality theory/methodology can be conscripted to such a repressive logic and thus is not to be regarded as (unambiguously) progressive (to stay within the modernist language that this approach disavows).

The second argument about the limits of intersectionality as tool within the armaments available to Women’s Studies and feminist enquiry did not regard intersectionality as approximating a theory at all. Instead it worked at the level of the individual – or individual identities and experiences – which precisely because it is descriptive at the level of the individual can be endlessly multiplying in terms of the categories that matter and the consciousness of processes of subjectivation. What it cannot be is an over-arching theory of oppression, marginalisation and thus cannot help to determine what might be done about it – and how. For that a structural theory is needed because that is how Women’s Studies scholars can begin to determine which are the structures and processes that matter – and here the categories or elements are not limitless. The plea was to avoid confusion of these two different levels of analysis and to see what the limits of intersectional thinking are.

Finally the pressing issue of whether the intersectional had a geographical limit, whether it was capable of travelling to the ‘global south’ and whether it was important for it to so. Important that is for the development of a more fully fleshed out and embracing but not colonising mode of feminist enquiry. This was not a major theme in the discussions but it did serve to highlight that even the ‘Europe’ that was invoked in the debates tended to be limited to the north, west part of the European land mass so that ‘Europe’ roughly equated with Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia and Britain, with the occasional gesture to states of the former Yugoslavia.

This then was a rich and thought-provoking conference pointing to pressing issues, tensions and limitations as well as helping to map and take stock of the current ‘state of the art’ of intersectionality studies in European contexts. As Women’s Studies scholarship and feminist thinking continues to grapple with the issues raised by the idea of the intersectional and explores its correspondence with and/or differences from ideas such as the transversal or the transnational we hope that debates and positions will be reflected in the pages of the European Journal of Women’s Studies.
Gail Lewis

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ⁱ The discussions at the conference echoed many of those in the published debates, see for example the contributions to the special edition of *EJWS* edited by Phoenix and Pattynama; McCall, 2003; Burman, 2004; Cooper, et.al., 2009