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The Significance of Intersectionality for Feminist Political Theory

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Intersectionality is most often invoked as a methodological approach, but what is its significance for feminist political theory?

The concept of intersectionality has made a significant contribution to feminist theory. In fact, McCall (2005, pp. 1771) has stated, “intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies has made so far”. Despite its popularity amongst feminist scholars intersectionality has also been subject to much contestation. Due to the ambiguity surrounding this concept, the exact definition of intersectionality, in addition to how the concept should be utilised, is a source of disagreement amongst feminist scholars (Smooth 2013). Nevertheless, as this essay argues, intersectionality is extremely significant for feminist theory and has made an important contribution to feminist scholarship.

This essay argues that intersectionality is significant for feminist theory for two main reasons. First, intersectionality allows for feminist theorists to account for the differences between women. Although this may appear to be a simplistic observation, it has important implications for feminist theory and practice. Second, as a result of the diverse applicability of intersectionality, it has been embraced by various strands of feminist theory, providing a means of cooperation between scholars who have differing theoretical stances.

In order to present these arguments, this essay is divided into two main sections. In the first section, it is argued that intersectionality rejects the possibility of universalising women’s experiences. This section points out that feminist political theory must take this into consideration; failing to do so may risk marginalising women who do not comply with specific conceptualisations. Additionally, intersectionality also has practical applications and can be used in the realm of policy making, helping institutions to address women’s diversity. In the second section, it is argued that intersectionality offers an academic framework within which feminist theorists can cooperate, whilst still maintaining their different theoretical viewpoints.

Intersectionality: Background information

Definition

It is beyond the scope of this essay to evaluate the different definitions of intersectionality; in fact, feminist scholars have suggested that establishing one fixed definition is elusive (Nash 2008). In order to avoid defining intersectionality in a way that obscures its multidimensional meaning, the work of Hancock (2007a) and her conceptualisation of intersectionality as a ‘paradigm’ form the basis for this essay. Hancock (2007a) shows that intersectionality, instead of being demarcated as a ‘contents specialisation’, should instead be theorised as a paradigm, which includes “normative theory and empirical research” (Hancock 2007a, pp. 251). This paradigm is, in her view, characterised by several key assumptions. These include the fact that categories such as gender, class and race play a role in shaping lived experiences. What is more, these categories are the effect of individual and structural influences, which interact with each other to produce political ‘reality’. Hancock’s (2007a) conceptualisation of intersectionality is a sufficiently inclusive definition because it acknowledges intersectionality as

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both a theory and research method. The arguments put forward in this essay draw on this conceptualisation of intersectionality, as well as on a number of feminist scholars who have contributed towards this academic paradigm.

Genealogy

Academics often trace intersectionality back to the activism of black feminists during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly to the work of the Combahee River Collective, a black lesbian activist group based in Boston, Massachusetts (Levine-Rasky 2011). Even before this however, feminist activists were addressing the complex social reality of marginalised women. Black activists such as Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett were instrumental in putting black women's experiences at the centre of their work and acknowledging the intersecting oppressions which informed their lives (Hill Collins 2000, pp. 44). What stands out about the Combahee River Collective is that they played a key role in bringing the complex reality of black women to the public forum at a time when the predominantly white middle class National Organisation for Women (NOW) dominated the public image of feminist activism (Thompson 2002). In the *Feminine Mystique* (1963), one of the founding members of NOW Betty Friedan claimed that achieving gender equality depended on women being active in "mainstream cultures of education, electoral politics and all public institutions" (Rudy 1999, pp. 38). Expanding women's access to formal employment and education was at the top of the NOW agenda at that time. In response to this, the Combahee River Collective (1977) were instrumental in highlighting that the white feminist movement was not addressing their particular needs. They pointed out that white liberal feminists were theorising about women's lives from a privileged point of view and therefore they were not taking the situation of women in marginalised social positions into consideration. The discrepancy between the political scholarship of Friedan and the Collective illustrates the political context within which intersectionality developed.

Differences Between Women

Before continuing, it should be noted that when referring to feminist political theory or scholarship, this essay does not mean to suggest that this is one undivided body of work. Rather, for purposes of clarification, intersectionality in this section will be used to critique liberal feminist political theory in particular because it is in relation to this strand of feminist theory that the advantages of intersectionality are most evident.

One of the fundamental contributions of intersectionality is that it points to the "limitation of gender as an analytical category" (McCall 2005, pp. 1771). Intersectionality shows how it is impossible to theorise about women's lives by looking at one part of a person's complex and multidimensional identity. Following from this, intersectionality decentralises gender as category of identity. This allows for theoretical consideration of other categories, such as race and class, the relationships between these categories, and how these relationships construct people's experiences. This is significant because it challenges the problem of essentialism in feminist political theory (Fuss 1989). The isolation of the category of gender and the implication that identity is exclusively determined by this category is reductionist, and it is not representative of women's experiences (Yuval-David and Anthias 1983). Young (1997) suggests that separating gender from other categories is exclusionary because it obscures other dimensions of identity. Furthermore, this separation also suggests that the category of gender is somehow superior to race and class, whereas intersectional research has shown that women's experiences are a result of the intersection between multiple social categories as well as the socio-cultural context in which this interaction takes place (Yuval-Davis 2007). This concept that gender is not the only defining feature of women's lives has not always been embraced by feminist theorists, for whom issues concerning gender equality were at the forefront of their political agenda. For instance, under Friedan, NOW notoriously distanced itself from the issue of lesbian rights, fearing that it would damage the 'image' of the organisation (Levy 2006). According to Phelan (1989) the white liberal feminists of NOW did not want to work in solidarity with lesbians because they saw sexuality as a personal issue, which should not be considered on par with the category of gender. This demonstrates that within the feminist movement issues such as sexuality, evidence that the experience of womanhood is not universal and that women each have different "personal and social histories and positions" (Silvers 1995, pp. 32), were not regarded as relevant to feminist activism.

However, universalising women's experiences is not limited to feminist activism; it is also evident in feminist theory itself (Bryson 1999). Feminist theorists have often based key concepts on the experiences of a certain group of

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women without considering that this is not reflective of all women's lives. The somewhat biased feminist understanding and explanation of the 'public/private dichotomy' illustrates this argument. Feminist scholars such as Pateman (1988) have suggested that the private and the public realm are highly gendered constructs. Feminist scholars have critiqued liberal political thought for equating the private realm with femininity and the public realm with masculinity and for the role that this has played in structuring gender relations in reality (Rudy 1999, Bryson 2003). Although this scholarship is useful in articulating the problems facing some women, it does not reflect the experience of all women, a fact that intersectionality accounts for (Carby 1997). For instance, it is important to question how useful this understanding of the public/private dichotomy is when considering the issues faced by working class women. Working class women may be required to spend a vast amount of their time working in the 'public realm'; spending time in the 'private' realm of the household may be a luxury (Hill Collins 1991). This understanding of the public/private dichotomy also obscures the way in which the participation of middle-class women in the public domain is made possible. It is important to note that women being able to take up paid employment often takes place due to the subjugation of women from ethnic and lower class backgrounds, who look after other women's children and homes during the day time (Glenn 1992). This highlights the limitations of equating more women working in the public realm with achieving gender equality. Here, intersectionality is instrumental in highlighting the way in which, due to women's different social positioning, key concepts in feminist theory do not account for the experience of all women and that categories other than women's gender need to be taken into consideration when formulating feminist theory (Smooth 2011). It also reflects the need for feminist theorists to be self-reflexive and acknowledge how their specific social positioning influences their work (Mohanty 1988).

Another significant aspect of intersectionality is that it shows how experiences of oppression are not the same for all women; it highlights the historical and socio-cultural contingency of oppression. This issue is discussed in the published work of the Combahee River Collective (1977), which highlights how the structural effects of the slave trade influences black women's lives in modern contexts. The Collective argue that it is not possible to fully understand black women's oppression without looking at how it has been constructed over time. This issue is also well articulated by Thompson (2002, pp. 347), who states "Listen to women's of color's anger. It is informed by centuries of struggle, erasure, and experience".

Highlighting the different historical contexts within which women's identities and experiences are constructed is very important for feminist theory. The work of the Collective shows that although their identity as black women is naturalised, their identity is the result of the historical constructions of what it means to be a woman and black and how these categories "interrelate and effect each other" in the present context (Yuval-Davis 2006, pp. 200). This is another point that feminist political theorists should take into consideration when theorising about women's lives. Not only does each person have a different epistemological standpoint, but also these perspectives have been shaped and re-shaped over time and in relation to different experiences of oppression.

Finally, accounting for the difference between women in feminist theory also has practical implications. Intersectionality allows theorists to make policy recommendations, which will more adequately address women's needs (Smooth 2011). Young (1997) argues that theory must address specific problems and have a practical purpose. In agreement, Tickner (2006) suggests that an integral element of feminist methodology is the awareness that theory cannot be separated from action. Intersectionality is a research paradigm, which provides an opportunity to construct theory whilst also implementing this theory into political practice (Hancock 2007b). For instance, Josephson (2002) shows that using intersectionality in feminist politics can be practically used in the area of public policy. Specifically, she discusses the problems associated with making the provision of welfare benefits for women dependant on them being formally employed. She shows that in many cases, women who apply for state-funded benefits are unable to take up work or be in employment for a prolonged period of time. This is because they are often victims of domestic abuse or suffer from serious health problems. In this piece, Josephson (2002, pp. 4) uses intersectionality to argue that services must be responsive to the "particular need of women". Her research points to how intersectionality exposes the way in which services are tailored towards providing for a certain category of women, which means that women who do not fit this model are not provided for (Josephson 2002). This also highlights the benefits of including the role of institutions and acknowledging the structural nature of women's oppression within feminist scholarship. Smooth (2013), in support of this, states that developing knowledge on how institutions interact with individuals is key to developing a better understanding of the women's position within

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society.

To summarise, intersectionality highlights the diversity that exist within the social category of 'women'. It does this firstly by showing how defining women's identity by their gender alone obscures the way in which other categories of identity inform their lives. Secondly, intersectionality challenges feminist theory, which claims to represent all women, but is in fact formed from a privileged epistemological standpoint. Thirdly, intersectionality points to how women's experiences are constituted in specific socio-cultural contexts and therefore should not be paralleled with each other. Finally, this understanding of difference can also be practically utilised and reflects the practical implications of intersectionality.

Grounds for Cooperation

As mentioned before, it is impossible to talk about 'feminist theory' per se because different theories and political agendas occupy this category. However, intersectionality has been characterised as a paradigm which allows for feminist theorists to communicate with each other. Paradoxically, it is the ambiguity surrounding this concept that in turn makes it so appealing in the area of feminist theory (Davis 2011).

Lykke (2011) has described intersectionality as a 'nodal point' in feminist political theory because it forms a basis for cooperation between feminist theorists who have differing theoretical stances. The idea of intersectionality as a 'nodal point' is exemplified by the discrepancy between feminist theorists and their views on essentialism. On one hand, liberal and standpoint feminist theorists, although they acknowledge the difference between women, believe that in order to reach a certain political aim, the category of 'women' needs to be maintained (Harding 2004). On the other hand, post-structural feminist theorists such as Butler (1990) reject the existence of 'gendered experiences' because according to her there is nothing essential about being a woman. These two views are a point of tension within feminist political theory. Post-structural feminists have been criticised for preventing feminist theorists from being able to speak for 'women' because they reject the existence of a gendered reality (Nussbaum 1999). Conversely, using the category of 'women' in feminist research has been criticised for being reductionist and exclusionary (Butler 1993).

Intersectionality is based on the presumption that identity is complex and multidimensional. As stated before, the basic presumption in intersectional scholarship is that the category of gender does not fully account for women's lived experiences. Intersectionality therefore de-constructs women's social positioning in order to show how it is informed by interlocking relations of power (Brah and Phoenix 2004). However in this research paradigm social categories can still be maintained. To completely individualise someone's experience prevents the possibility of looking at the way in which women are united by shared experiences of oppression. For example, the forced sterilisation of African-American women in the U.S. and the United Kingdom, is an issue which highlights this point (Waggoner 2012). Feminist scholars have pointed out how issues such as this are the result of women's experience of intersecting oppressions (King 1988). The issue of forced sterilisation shows how oppression should not be simplistically understood as a matter of racism or sexism, but should take under consideration the coinciding experience of race, class and gender (Carby 1997). Issues such as this show how it is important to recognise shared experiences while at the same time revealing their complex nature. This also shows how intersectionality can be utilised to achieve political aims and theorise for the purpose of improving women's lives (Egeland and Gressgard 2007).

Intersectional work shows the way in which different areas of feminist thought can cooperate, but also how this cooperation can be mutually beneficial. Intersectionality shows that problematizing women's identities and experiences does not have to take place at the expense of preserving women as a social category. Even post-structural theorists acknowledge that categories of identity must be maintained. Although they question the actual nature of gender, they also acknowledge that it is impossible to theorise without referring to certain identity categories (McCall 2005). The extent to which gender is a natural characteristic does not have to be agreed upon in order to theorise about women's specific social locations, as well as how this informs their daily struggles. Intersectionality is therefore beneficial for liberal and standpoint feminists, who have been criticised for simplifying women's experience in their work. At the same time, it provides post-structural theorists with an opportunity to show that their theoretical

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understanding can be used to improve women's lives, whilst maintaining their viewpoint about the construction of identity (Davis 2008).

This is significant for feminist theory because, as Lykke (2011, pp. 209) points out, it is "important to have a joint nodal point, a shared framework for the negotiation of conceptualisations". Intersectionality allows feminist theorists to maintain their differences and uncover similarities, and provides a way in which feminist theorists can cooperate in order to implement political change.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that intersectionality has made a significant contribution to feminist scholarship. First, it has highlighted the issue of essentialism in feminist theory and how when thinking about the category of women it is vital to take under consideration the differences which exist within this social category. Additionally, intersectionality highlights how not only does the intersection of social categories produce lived experiences, but also how experience is very much dependent on the historical and cultural context within which a woman exists. Keeping this in mind is instrumental to facilitating the implementation of policies, which can adequately address women's diverse needs. Second, for feminist theorists with differing theoretical backgrounds, intersectionality acts as "shared enterprise" (Davis 2008, pp. 72). This means that even though there may be certain disagreements between theorists, this research paradigm allows women to maintain their underlying beliefs while at the same time working towards a better understanding of women's experiences whether they are a source of oppression or privilege (Smooth 2013).

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