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Intersectionality: Multiple Inequalities in Social Theory

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Abstract

The concept of intersectionality is reviewed and further developed for more effective use. Six dilemmas in the debates on the concept are disentangled, addressed and resolved: the distinction between structural and political intersectionality; the tension between 'categories' and 'inequalities'; the significance of class; the balance between a fluidity and stability; the varyingly competitive, cooperative, hierarchical and hegemonic relations between inequalities and between projects; and the conundrum of 'visibility' in the tension between the 'mutual shaping' and the 'mutual constitution' of inequalities. The analysis draws on critical realism and on complexity theory in order to find answers to the dilemmas in intersectionality theory.

Keywords

gender, inequality/inequalities, intersectionality, social theory

Introduction

The theorization of the intersection of multiple inequalities has become a central issue in gender theory. These developments potentially have much broader applications for wider social theory. Feminist analysis has moved beyond the longstanding critique of the focus on class in classical sociology, beyond the construction of a special set of studies of gender parallel to sub-fields of ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation and

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religion and towards the theoretical recognition of the importance of the intersection of multiple inequalities, although there remain significant differences as to how this should proceed (Acker, 2000; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Bhopal, 1997; Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Felski, 1997; Hancock, 2007; Hartmann, 1976; Jakobsen, 1998; Lundström, 2006; Lykke, 2004; McCall, 2001, 2005; Medaglia, 2000; Mirza, 1997; Mohanty, 1991; Phizacklea, 1990; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006; Verloo, 2006; Walby, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The subject matter that is core to intersectionality is analysed in other social science literature using concepts such as cosmopolitanism (Beck, 2006), multiculturalism (Phillips, 2009), anti-racism, hybridity (Gilroy, 2004), identity and nationalism (Brubaker, 1996; Calhoun, 1995). There is a common interest in how to conceptualize and theorize the relationship between different social groups and between projects that shape each other. Recent gender theory has addressed these issues under the heading of ‘intersectionality’, though there has been a long tradition of similar analysis before this term was coined (e.g. Hartmann, 1976).

The theoretical questions concerning intersectionality are linked to debates in the ‘real’ world, of which the following are some examples. Has the merger of the equality commissions with the formation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission in the UK in 2007 led to more effective ways of addressing inequalities, because of greater organizational capacity to address their intersection, or has it reduced its functioning to the lowest common denominator? Are the particular forms of gender-based violence against women at the intersection of gender inequality, nation, ethnicity and religion (e.g. forced marriage, female genital mutilation, trafficking and ‘honour’ crimes), best addressed by focusing on the particularity at the intersection, for example with special legislation for each form of violence, or by their inclusion in more general policies and politics to address violence against women? Is the gender pay gap best addressed by paying attention to its gender specific aspects, for example through gender pay audits, or by focusing on class-led mechanisms such as the minimum wage?

In order to move the debates on intersectionality forward, this article draws on developments in critical realism (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1997; Sayer, 2000) and in complexity theory (Byrne, 1998; Urry, 2005). These theoretical developments offer new ways of thinking about ontological depth and the relations between complex social systems that are needed to address the intersection of complex inequalities (Walby, 2007).

This article addresses the theoretical debates that underlie different approaches to the analysis of intersectionality. It does not address the empirical detail of the substantive issues but is rather focused on the conceptual and theoretical issues that are interwoven through these discussions. The article starts by reviewing the major conceptual and theoretical literature on intersectionality, especially writings by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), McCall (2005) and Hancock (2007), in order to identify the main theoretical dilemmas in the field. Six dilemmas are identified, which are subjected to extended conceptual and theoretical discussion in order to resolve them.

Key Questions in the Intersectionality Debates

Three texts – Crenshaw (1991), McCall (2005) and Hancock (2007) – have become central to the debates about gender and intersectionality and hence are the focus of this

section which identifies the remaining dilemmas in the debates. These texts share a common starting point in the rejection of a focus on gender only and of generalizations from some women to all women (Mohanty, 1991), but diverge in how they conceptualize the relationship between multiple inequalities.

Crenshaw

Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) work in developing the field of intersectionality is sufficiently significant that her work is very frequently cited in later literature. She produced not only a critique of the invisibility of black women at the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity, but also a critique of identity politics, for its over-stabilization of discrete groups and categories. Crenshaw (1991) regarded the invisibility of black women in the domestic violence projects she analysed as a weakness for both the gender equality project and for the anti-racist project. Crenshaw (1989) also uses the concept of intersectionality to grasp the ways in which the interactions of gender and race limit black women's access to the American labour market, and how a lack of understanding of this intersection led to the marginalization of black women and black women's experiences. Crenshaw (1991: 1244) argues that the experiences faced by women of colour were 'not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood'. She suggests that previous academic, political and civil societal engagements with the intersections of gender and race/ethnicity have not been sufficiently careful. One identity category is instead treated as dominant; social power 'works to exclude or marginalize those who are different' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1242). 'Contemporary feminist and anti-racist discourses have failed to consider intersectional identities such as women of color' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1243). Groups at the intersection of two or more identity categories are left out of focus in both analysis and politics: Black women, ethnic minority women, or 'women of colour', groups positioned at the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity, become marginalized as a group and 'face limited options of political communities formed either around ethnicity or around gender, rather than political action that engages with the particular difficulties at the intersection'. In the example of domestic violence, the experiences of African-American women are made invisible, with activists not supporting the public release of data on this group at the intersection of gender and ethnicity for fear that 'the statistics might permit opponents to dismiss domestic violence as a minority problem' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1253). 'Women of color can be erased by the strategic silences of anti-racism and feminism' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1253).

Crenshaw makes a distinction between structural intersectionality and political intersectionality. Structural intersectionality concerns the intersection of unequal social groups. Political intersectionality concerns the intersection of political agendas and projects.

Crenshaw considered groups at the point of intersection to be mutually constituted, for example, by gender and ethnicity. Crenshaw's critique of the invisibility of domestic violence against black women focuses on two main actors – white women and black men – for their hesitation at publicly identifying this violence. However, in this focus on the agency of these two disadvantaged groups her analysis curiously loses sight of the actions of the powerful and the racist structures. Maintaining the focus on the larger structures is an issue raised by McCall (2005) (see next section).

Substantively, Crenshaw's analysis led the way to a host of studies of the particularities of groups at the point of intersection, which had been previously under-examined.

McCall

There are now many different approaches to intersectionality. McCall (2005) reviews the plethora of studies using the concept of intersectionality and identifies three distinct approaches: intra-categorical, anti-categorical, and inter-categorical (1773–4). The intra-categorical is concerned to 'focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection' 'in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups'. This approach draws inspiration from Crenshaw's work in order to examine groups, often small ones, which had not been previously analysed. This has the disadvantage of displacing the focus from the larger social processes and structures that might be causing the inequalities. The anti-categorical approach is 'based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories'. This approach considers the stabilization of categories to be problematic in essentializing and reifying the social relations that the analyst may be seeking to change. It thus prioritises fluidity over stability of categories. This is problematic in that it makes practical analysis difficult. The inter-categorical approach 'provisionally adopt[s] existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality among multiple and conflicting dimensions'. McCall recommends the inter-categorical, for its power in engaging with the larger structures that generate inequalities. McCall's (2001) analysis is interesting for its attention to inequalities within the categories, not only between them.

Hancock

Hancock (2007: 64, 67) also reviews the many studies of intersectionality in order to build a typology of approaches, but one that is different from McCall's. She identifies three approaches to the study of race, gender, class and other categories of difference: unitary, multiple and intersectional. In the 'unitary' approach, only one category is examined, and it is presumed to be primary and stable. In the 'multiple' approach more than one category is addressed and these matter equally; the categories are presumed to be stable and to have stable relationships with each other. In the 'intersectional' approach more than one category is addressed; the categories matter equally; the relationship between the categories is open; the categories are fluid not stable; and mutually constitute each other. Within this typology, Hancock places considerable emphasis on the issue of fluidity, suggesting that only in the last category is there any analytic presumption of fluidity of the categories. She presumes that a category is either dominant (unitary) or equal to other categories (multiple, intersectional); this omits any notion of asymmetry.

Unresolved Theoretical Dilemmas

The many studies of intersectionality inspired or reported by Crenshaw, McCall and Hancock show important differences in approach. Six major theoretical dilemmas remain unresolved in these debates.

1. How to address the relationship between structural and political intersectionality without reducing political projects to social structures. Crenshaw introduces this distinction, but it is rarely addressed in the subsequent literature on intersectionality.
2. How to conceptualize the intersections so that bringing the agency of the disadvantaged into focus does not leave the actions of the powerful out of sight. Crenshaw's analysis loses sight of the actions of the powerful and the racist structures, while McCall's (2001) early work deliberately looks at the inequality within 'categories'; much of the work that uses concepts of 'category' and 'strand' tends to obscure the powerful within them.
3. How to balance the stability and fluidity of inequalities so they are sufficiently stable as to be available for empirical analysis, while recognizing that they change. The emphasis on fluidity in Hancock poses challenges for practical analysis.
4. How to neither leave class out of focus nor to treat it as of overwhelming importance. Much current literature has addressed the previous neglect of ethnicity, but this is often at the expense of class.
5. How to bring into focus the projects of small minorities, while not making the normative assumption (as Hancock) that all projects are equally important.
6. How to simultaneously identify the intersecting inequalities while recognising that their intersection changes what they are. The notion of mutual constitution invoked by Hancock is in tension with the demand from Crenshaw that the component inequalities are made visible.

Critical Realism and Complexity Theory

In order to resolve these dilemmas in theories of intersectionality the insights of critical realism and of complexity theory are drawn on here. Critical realism has made important contributions to the analysis of ontology, of the constitution of the objects that make up the field of study (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1997). In contrast to approaches which prioritize the deconstruction and dispersal of concepts (such as gender) (Braidotti, 1994), critical realism engages in abstraction at a variety of different levels (McCall, 2001; Sayer, 2000). Complexity theory draws on insights developed in many disciplines and offers the potential of new ways of thinking about social systems and the complexity of their interactions, reworking the understanding of causality (Byrne, 1998; Urry, 2005). Common to both critical realism and complexity theory is the assumption of ontological depth, of levels that are linked within a social system, emerging from each other, but which are not reducible to each other. This helps to avoid the temptation of reductionism either to the micro level of agency or to the macro level of structure; allowing both their place in the analysis. The concept of social system is reworked; there is a rejection of the notion that a system is made up of parts and its replacement by that of a system taking all other systems as its environment. This more flexible concept of social system enables the analysis of the intersection of multiple regimes of inequality within the same institutional domains without stretching the concept of system to breaking point. This reworked concept of system also allows for the possibility of systems changing each other through processes of mutual adaptation, while not losing their essential identity (Walby, 2007).

Structural and Political Intersectionality

There is a tension between a focus on structural inequalities and on the political projects. One way of attempting to resolve this tension is by reducing one to the other, for example, assuming that political projects can be ‘read off’ from structural inequalities. This is one of the problems identified by Crenshaw in ‘identity’ politics. As Crenshaw (1991) notes, structural intersectionality is not the same as political intersectionality. They are not reducible to each other. Further, there are many actually existing intersections in social structures, but only some of these become the focus of political and policy attention. The relationship between ‘structural intersection’ and ‘political intersection’ (Crenshaw, 1991) and reasons for the selection of some intersectional strands and not others as politically relevant are significant for the analysis of intersectionality in equality policies. However, most writers on intersectionality focus on sets of unequal social relations, and insofar as they address political intersectionality assume that this can be derived from the associated social relations. Yet, not all intersectionality issues directly concern sets of social relations in the way discussed so far. There are also projects and policy fields, which are informed by but not reducible to strands.

A focus on the different constructions of policy projects and arenas provides additional insights to the analysis. Here there is interest in the implications of intersectionality for the constitution of the project and indeed of the policy field itself (rather than only the clients within that policy field). An example is the extension of the policy field of gender-based violence to include forced marriage, in which the constitution of the policy arena itself is structured by the approach to intersectionality within the policy terrain. There are projects where differently constituted civil society groups come together, for example, in the project to end child poverty in the UK, or to promote human rights. Projects are the sites of alliances and shifting coalitions of different social forces that come together on one issue and may stand in opposition on others. In many public services, such as health and education, there are policy fields that are informed by the interests of multiple equality strands, but which are not reducible to any one of these.

The tension between structural and political intersectionality is best addressed by noting that these issues are separate, as well as having a relationship with each other. They should not be conflated, or reduced to each other.

Categories or Social Relations?

What are the structural ‘things’ that are intersecting? Hancock (2007) uses the term ‘category’ in her summary table. McCall (2005) organizes her typology around whether writers are anti, intra- or inter-category. Crenshaw uses the concept of intersectional groups to challenge the concept of ‘identity’ that underlies identity politics, and most often speaks of ‘women of color’. The use of these terms does not focus on the nature of the social relations within the category, but rather on the relations between the categories, especially relations at the point of intersection. Further, in EU equality policy literature the term ‘strand’ or ‘ground’ is commonly used.

A problem with these approaches is the curious tendency to neglect analysis of the power of the actions of the dominant group within the ‘category’. The analysis of intersectionality has often focused on the actions of the disadvantaged groups. For example, there has been a focus on the actions of white women rather than white men in the context of an intersectional issue facing black women. Indeed Crenshaw (1991: 1258) in her analysis of violence by black men against black women states ‘Not only do race-based priorities function to obscure the problem of violence suffered by women of color; feminist concerns often suppress minority experiences as well.’ However, such an approach inappropriately ignores the role of the more powerful groups in these divisions. In relation to issues of ethnicity, it is important not to neglect the role of racists in the politics of silencing ethnic minority women in issues of domestic violence. Noting the importance of the powerful in each of the intersections might shift some of the focus from the inactions of white feminists to the actions of white racists. Indeed it is hard to understand the silence on domestic violence against black women outside of an account of the racist structuring of the policy terrain.

A further example of the importance of including an overt focus on the powerful can be found in the explanation of the process of merging separate equality bodies. If only the activities of the disadvantaged are investigated, then it is hard to see why they were merged. When the powerful are brought into view, an alternative account of the process emerges. Most of the countries that were early movers in the integration of equality commissions into a single body (O’Cinneide, 2002) were those where the balance of power between organized employers and organized workers was particularly tilted towards employers. In the UK, one of the most important organizations that wanted a single equalities body was the employers’ body, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 2003). By contrast, the separate equality commissions ranged from reluctant acquiescence (gender) to opposition (disability, race/ethnicity), softened by the offer of special provisions (e.g. a separate committee within the new commission for disability; and the extension to include gender in the duty on public bodies to promote equality).

It is important not to focus only on the disadvantaged people since this obscures the role of the powerful within sets of unequal social relations. Rather than using concepts such as ‘category’ or ‘strand’ that offer connotations of unified blocks, it is important, when the focus of the analysis is inequality, for unequal social relations to remain central to the specification of the units or ontology of the analysis. Hence here the term ‘inequality’ or ‘set of unequal social relations’ is preferred, rather than category or strand.

In order to understand the relationship between inequalities it is necessary to understand the nature, or ontology (Bhaskar, 1997), of the social relations through which it is constituted. The ontology of the inequality needs to be specified as a prior step to addressing the nature of the relationship between sets of unequal social relations. However, it is common in analyses of intersectionality for the ontology of inequalities to be left out of focus, with most of the attention being placed instead on the relations between them. The consequence of this focus of attention is that the ontology of the inequality is often too shallow and unitary. This means that the inequalities are treated in practice as if they were relatively holistic and leave out of focus the inequality that is central to this set of social relations.

The way forward draws on critical realism and its insights into ontology (Archer, 1995; Sayer, 2000). In order to conceptualize inequalities, it is necessary to systematically address the ontological depth of each of the inequalities; in particular, to bring to the fore the social relations of inequality. It is useful to avoid terminology, such as ‘category’ or ‘strand’, that gives the impression of a unitary object, and instead to use terms, such as ‘set of unequal social relations’, ‘inequality’ and ‘social system’, that draw attention to the complex ontology of the object of analysis. This would help to avoid the lack of focus on the inequalities within each of the intersecting sets of social relations.

Fluidity or Stability?

There is a tension between the use of stable concepts or whether the priority should be given to the use of fluid and changing ones. Hancock (2007) advocates fluidity, while McCall (2005) argues for stabilization. Hancock (2007) is critical of approaches to the relations between multiple inequalities that stabilize the categories. Indeed only analyses that treat categories as fluid are considered by her to truly merit the term ‘intersectional’. This is linked to her insistence that at the point of intersection both of the initial categories are changed beyond recognition. This account draws on feminist postmodern and poststructuralist analysis (Braidotti, 1994; Butler, 1990). McCall (2005), by contrast, argues for the use of stabilized macro categories in order to analyse ‘inter-categorical’ intersectionality. This is because the destabilization of concepts makes actual analysis of substantive matters very difficult (Felski, 1997; Sayer, 1997).

How is this tension between fluidity and stability to be resolved? The way forward is to recognize the historically constructed nature of social inequalities and their sedimentation in social institutions (Choo and Ferree, 2010; Ferree, 2009; Walby, 2009). At any one moment in time, these relations of inequality have some stability as a consequence of their institutionalization, but over a period of time they do change. The institutionalization of social relations often provides a degree of relative stability to the experience of social inequality. As social institutions change so does the environment within which specific sets of social inequalities are negotiated and struggled over. Changes in social institutions may be gradual, for example, as gendered rates of employment change, or they may be sudden, even revolutionary. It is important to note their historical dynamics, as well as temporarily stabilizing the categories for analysis at any one point in time.

Class and Non-class Inequalities

There is ambivalence as to the location of class in the analysis of the intersection of gender with other inequalities. In earlier debates on gender inequality there was interest in the intersection of gender and class relations (Acker, 2000; Hartmann, 1976), and indeed with the intersection of gender, ethnicity and class (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Collins, 1998; Davis, 1981; Phizacklea, 1990; Westwood, 1984), but this interest in class has faded, though not entirely disappeared (McCall, 2005). In consequence, the intersection of gender and class is relatively neglected in current debates. Much of the debate on intersectionality has been concerned with the intersection of gender and ethnicity (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Medaglia, 2000; Mirza, 1997).

There are several reasons for this ambivalence as to the significance of class for the debates on intersectionality. Class is not a justiciable inequality under EU legislation, while US writings have often (though not always) focused on ethnicity and race. In an EU context, the six inequalities that are the subject of legislation have been subject to the most analysis. The EU Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 and the consequent Directives to implement it name six grounds for legal action on illegal discrimination: gender, ethnicity, disability, age, religion/belief and sexual orientation (Council Directives 2000/43/EC, 2000/78/EC, 2004/113/EC; European Commission, 2009). Class is not a 'justiciable' inequality in the same way as the other six inequalities and has some important ontological dissimilarity with them. The attempt to include 'socio-economic' grounds in the UK Equality Act in 2010 failed. However, class is an important aspect of the structuring of inequalities, intersecting in complex ways with all inequalities (Hills et al, 2010). It is important in the structuring of the employment laws and institutional machinery of tribunals and courts that implement these laws. The implementation of the laws on non-class justiciable inequalities takes place in institutions that were originally established to secure justice and good relations for class-based relations between employers and employees. The institutions of tribunals and courts are still primarily shaped by class in the composition of the decision-makers which includes representatives of employers and workers as well as independent legal experts; they are not composed of representatives of men and women, black and white, disabled and able-bodied people. In Britain and elsewhere, issues of discrimination in pay and working conditions are still central to legal interventions in inequalities, despite their extension to the supply of goods and services. Class-based oppositional institutions, such as trade unions, have developed complex internal committees and practices to address the intersection of class with other inequalities. Class has continuing effects on the equality architecture.

The conclusion drawn here is that class should be systematically included in the discussions on the intersection of gender and other inequalities. However, it is also important that its significance should not be over-stated and to retain the distinction between different forms of inequality.

Competing or Cooperating Projects?

There is a tension between the normative position of treating all equality projects as if they are of equal importance and the analytic stance of treating their relative importance as a matter for empirical investigation.

Hancock (2007) is vehement in her claim that all equalities issues should be treated as if they were of equal importance. She is scathing about the development of an 'Oppression Olympics', in which some inequalities claim to be more important than others. She treats the construction of a hierarchy of projects in equality politics as a normative issue, and regards this as a pernicious practice to the detriment of equality overall. In Hancock's typology, either one project is dominant (as in the unitary approach) or they are equally important (as in the multiple and intersectional approaches).

An alternative approach is to analyse the actual relations between projects, so as to understand their implications. This opens up to view the possibility that the relations between different projects are highly varied, and do not fit neatly into a dichotomy of

'dominant' or 'equal'. This is the potential outcome of varied processes of competition and alliance of social groups and projects. Different equality projects may have different priorities for the use of resources and the shaping of the definition of an ostensibly common equality project. These may result in competition, alliance, hierarchy or hegemony.

There are different forms of competition among equality projects, ranging from competitive political organizing to active and acrimonious hostility. There has been concern that the integration of policy machinery on different equality grounds may lead to greater competition for a superior place in a hierarchy of inequality projects, and that competition would become more important than cooperation (Bell, 2004; Verloo, 2006). This may occur when projects associated with some inequalities have stronger legal powers for remedying discrimination than others (Bell, 2004; Hepple et al, 2000). There can be competition for resources within a single equalities body, as for example was felt by feminists during the early development of the Northern Ireland Single Equalities Body (O'Cinneide, 2002).

An example of discursively organized competition between projects is that of the agenda surrounding 'choice', which is currently associated with the neoliberal project, but has at some times been adopted by feminists, as in 'a woman's right to choose'. The choice agenda can be used in opposition to the agenda of equality in circumstances where women are deemed to have freely chosen options even though these options have implications for greater inequality (Hakim, 1991). For example, if women freely choose specific jobs because they are 'caring' and have part-time hours; then they can be described within the choice agenda as if they have simultaneously accepted the associated lower pay. The agenda of choice can also in some circumstances invoke the discourse of 'diversity', which tends to prioritize difference over equality (Hankivsky, 2005). This means that 'choices' made on the basis of 'diversity' may be claimed to take priority over claims on the basis of equality. Other forms of competition can involve a sharper clash of values; for example, in the UK in 2007, churches fought the application of anti-discrimination laws to adoption by gay couples.

Rather than competition, the relations between social groups and projects may involve those of alliance (Jakobsen, 1998), coalition (Ferree and Hess, 1995) or network (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Moghadam, 2005). In addition, they may take the form of a shared project, as in the case of some forms of social democracy (Huber and Stephens, 2001). Some alliances cross the boundary between state and civil society, as in the important alliances identified between elected women politicians, feminist bureaucrats, and feminists in civil society such as academics and activists (Halsaa, 1998; Vargas and Wieringa, 1998; Veitch, 2005), sometimes in 'velvet triangles' (Woodward, 2004). The development of practices and institutions at the inter-face of state and civil society is important in increasing the impact of feminist developments in civil society on the state (Walby, 2011).

Alliances and coalitions often involve partners that are asymmetrical in their resources. This may mean that one set of social relations or project (such as class) may achieve hierarchy or hegemony over the others. The movement of an equality project into the mainstream in order to secure the resources of the mainstream for the equality project is a common if contested practice (Walby, 2005). If successful, there are rewards for the equality project. However, there is a risk that the equality project merely becomes

absorbed or integrated into the mainstream, eroding its own project (Jahan, 1995). A parallel issue emerges if several equality projects merge; they may each gain from the support of the others but it is also the case that one can become hegemonic at the expense of the rest.

The implications of the varying forms of competition, cooperation, hierarchy and hegemony between inequalities, between projects and between policy fields are challenging for theories of intersectionality. It challenges the search for a single best way of characterizing these relationships. It is not a choice between intra-categorical or inter-categorical (McCall, 2005). Nor is it a choice between unitary or multiple or intersectional (Hancock, 2007). Rather, the extent of the separation or integration of the inequalities (and projects) is empirically variable by context. These are best thought of as variations in the extent to which sets of social relations (and projects) mutually shape each other, rather than as mutually constitute each other. These forms of competition and cooperation produce different types of relations between multiple inequalities.

In conclusion, while there are normative aspects to the relations between projects, it is important that these are addressed analytically. There are many ways in which projects may intersect, which are more complex than those of competition and cooperation including complex forms of asymmetrical alliances. Some social relations of inequality are more important than others in structuring the environment which shapes these social relations.

Mutual Shaping rather than Mutual Constitution

There is a tension over whether naming specific inequalities is the best approach in the analysis of intersectionality or not. Crenshaw is critical of the invisibility of domestic violence against black women and shows that this is bound up with the disadvantaged position of the intersectional group of black women. She treats black and women as relevant categories, as well as that of black women.

Hancock prefers to focus only on what she sees as a new category that is produced at the point of intersection, not on the prior components. She makes a distinction between an approach that is ‘multiple parallel’, and one that is ‘mutual constitution’. Approaches that adopt ‘mutual constitution’ treat the original entities that intersect as transformed into something new, which is not the same as either of the originating forms. For example, ‘black women’ cannot be understood as the mere addition of ‘women’ and ‘black’, but is rather a distinctive category. In the typology proposed by Hancock, only ‘mutual constitution’ counts as ‘intersectional’. This is contrasted with the notion that inequalities are simply added together at the point of intersection, ‘multiple’, and with the notion that there is one over-arching inequality, ‘unitary’.

The issue of ‘visibility’ sits awkwardly with the concept of ‘mutual constitution’. Writers that appear to prioritize the ‘mutual constitution’ approach to intersectionality nevertheless often also argue for separate naming; which might appear somewhat inconsistent (Crenshaw, 1991; Hancock, 2007). McCall avoids this problem by considering both ‘intra-categorical’ and ‘inter-categorical’ approaches to be types of intersectionality; mutual

constitution is not necessary for the relation between multiple inequalities to be counted as ‘intersectional’ in her account.

Further, the concept of mutual constitution is too simple and insufficiently ambitious to grasp the varying and uneven contribution of sets of unequal social relations to the outcome. For purposes of analysis it is useful to be able to specify the particularity that each inequality brings to each instance, without resorting to the notion of infinite variety suggested by the anti-categorical approach that precludes systematic and explanatory analysis. While it might appear that naming or not-naming is a simple dichotomy, in practice many concepts are in between, with inequalities implicitly named rather than erased or named explicitly. For example, in relation to gender, the concepts of ‘carer’ and ‘domestic violence’ are implicitly gendered, in that most speakers would understand the asymmetric gender relations implied by these terms. In relation to the gender/ethnicity/religion intersection, the concept of ‘forced marriage’ is implicitly gendered, ethnicized and religious, but not explicitly so. In the context of gender mainstreaming, where the goal is the inclusion of the gender equality project into the mainstream and the aspiration is to change the mainstream, it is as likely that the gender equality project will itself be modified (Jahan, 1995; Moser, 2005; Rees, 2005; Walby, 2011). Success may involve the submerging of the named project (gender equality) within a larger project (human rights, social democracy) in alliance with other projects, which, while including feminist goals, is not named as gendered. It is possible that in some circumstances making a group less visible can be an important strategy in optimizing chances of success. Whether de-gendering is part of a successful integration of a gender equality project into a larger project or part of its defeat depends upon the resources available to the gender constituency, the resources of allies and opponents, and the context.

Dichotomizing analysis into either additive or mutual constitution approaches is a mistake. In order to move forward in this debate it is necessary to develop the greater depth in the ontology of the intersecting inequalities as well as developing greater sophistication in the analysis of the way in which these sets of social relations, or systems of social relations, affect each other. This requires not only the depth of ontology that is developed in critical realism (Archer, 1995; Sayer, 2000), but also the analysis of complex adaptive systems that is developed in complexity theory (Urry, 2005; Walby, 2007). Complexity notions of the intersection of systems assume that each system is changed as a result of its interaction with other systems, but that it is not destroyed or turned into something totally new. There is mutual adaptation, or mutual shaping of these systems of social relations.

The way forward through the dilemma of both making visible the separate components at the point of intersection while also recognizing that social relations and projects are changed at the point of intersection is to adopt the concept of ‘mutual shaping’ and to reject that of ‘mutual constitution’. ‘Mutual shaping’ is a better concept than that of ‘mutual constitution’ since it enables the retention of naming of each relevant inequality or project while simultaneously recognizing that it is affected by engagement with the others. It acknowledges the way that systems of social relations change each other at the point of intersection, but do not become something totally different.

Conclusions

The analysis of intersectionality has been considerably advanced by Crenshaw, McCall and Hancock and many others, but six remaining dilemmas were identified. Resolutions to these six dilemmas have been proposed that draw on the insights of critical realism and complexity theory.

The first dilemma is how to address the relationship between structural and political intersectionality so that one is not simply reduced to the other even while recognizing that there is a connection. This is best addressed by separately identifying and addressing the intersection of sets of unequal social relations and the intersection of projects in addition to examining the relationship between structures and projects. It is important not to conflate a set of social relations and a related project, but to recognize the distinction between them.

The second dilemma is how to address the relations between the inequalities without leaving the actions of the powerful within each set of unequal social relations out of focus. The way forward is to draw on the insights of critical realism to deepen the ontological depth of the objects that are intersecting, so that the inequalities in these sets of social relations can be made more available for analysis. It is also useful to change the terminology, so as to avoid terms that carry the connotations of unity, such as 'strands' and 'categories' and to replace them with terms such as inequalities, sets of unequal social relations, regimes and social systems. When the focus is on the set of social relations of inequality rather than on a unitary concept of a 'strand' or 'category', then it is easier to identify the significance of the actions of the powerful as well as of the disadvantaged.

The third dilemma is how to balance the stability and fluidity of the concepts capturing the sets of social relations. The way forward is to recognize that concepts need to have their meaning temporarily stabilized at the point of analysis, even while recognizing that their social construction is the outcome of changes and interactions over time and to note the historically varied construction of these categories. Identifying the historically changing relations between social institutions is important in providing the appropriate context of current inequalities. This approach draws on notions of ontological depth from critical realism.

The fourth dilemma is how to address class, which appears to be differently situated in intersectionality debates from other inequalities. It is important to systematically consider the reinsertion of class in analyses of the intersection of gender with other inequalities, even though there are differences in their ontological construction. Class needs to be included, without becoming dominant in the analysis of multiple intersecting inequalities.

The fifth dilemma is how to address the issue of the so-called 'Oppression Olympics' and the tension between a normative tendency to declare all inequality projects equal and an analytic stance that treats this as an empirical question. The way forward is substantive investigation and the recognition that the relations between the projects may be competitive or cooperative, hierarchical or equal, asymmetrical or hegemonic. Some projects may be more important than others in shaping the social environment in some contexts.

The sixth dilemma is how to address the preference for the visibility of each inequality in the context of an emerging hegemonic conceptualisation of intersectionality as 'mutual constitution'. The way forward is to reject the concept of mutual constitution and to replace it with the concept of mutual shaping of equalities and projects. This approach draws not only on critical realism, but also on complexity theory approaches to the intersection of complex adaptive systems. At the point of intersection complex systems mutually adapt, each changing the other, but they do not usually destroy each other. Each remains visible, although each is changed. It is thus more appropriate to conclude that inequalities mutually shape each other rather than mutually constitute each other at their point of intersection.

Underpinning this approach to the resolution of debates in intersectionality theory lies the utilization of a version of critical realism (in the approach to ontological depth; to social relations; and to the distinction between structural inequalities and political projects) and the selective deployment of complexity theory (especially in relation to social systems). This enables a move beyond some of the limitations of the previous debates on intersectionality, enabling their potential deployment to a wider range of social phenomena.

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