

Is the Concept of Intersectionality Merely A Fashionable ‘Buzzword’ or A Valuable Tool for Feminist Analysis?

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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality as an approach was first brought to attention by Kimberle`Crenshaw in 1989 and though it cannot be said that the theory was a runaway success, yet, it was discussed and used by Feminist researchers to understand the multidimensional ways by which identities shape the construction of hegemonic masculinities. This paper closely examines Kathy Davis article titled ‘Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful’ (2008) to understand the importance of intersectionality as an approach to deconstruct the notions of women, who by far, were considered as a single, unified, homogenous group. In her article, she incorporated Murray Davis’s (1986) work on success of theories and selected intersectionality theory as an example to comprehend whether intersectionality is a significant tool for Feminist analysis or merely a fashionable ‘buzzword’. Towards the end of this paper four intersectionality approach based studies have been brought in to critic and compare the merits and demerits of the approach. In order to reason the importance of intersectionality in feminist research and contemplate on the idea of it merely being a buzzword, one has to inquire into the evolution, progress and applicability of the theory. It cannot be denied that contemporary women studies cannot focus on gender alone because of the vast difference and diversity among women which cannot be ignored any longer. Such work will be rejected, that fails to inquire into ‘race’, ‘class’ and ‘sexuality’ along with ‘gender’.

Keywords:- Intersectionality, feminists, masculinities, race, class, gender

I INTRODUCTION

McCall (2005) regarded intersectionality as the most important contribution by feminist theorist. She indicates that feminist academics had embraced intersectionality wholeheartedly and had assigned an almost central position to it because of its advantage as a tool of research. In 1989, when, for the first time, the term intersectionality was introduced by Kimberle` Crenshaw, it was challenging many underlying notions of gender. Were all women the same? Or was there a need to look at more than one type womanhood? She had employed a ‘crossroad’ metaphor to explain intersectionality with relation to Black women workers. She states ‘because intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot address the particular manner in which black women are subordinated’(140). Thus when a black woman is harmed in a crossroad, where cars symbolising race, gender, class coming from all or any directions, it could be any or all kinds of cars that could possibly harm her. Thus, in reality a black woman might experience disadvantage due to her gender, ethnicity, class or any other intersection just like being hit by cars from different directions. The single axis framework of sex or gender had marginalised the Black women and pushed them towards the periphery, thus, it must be impossible to bring them back by merely including them in the existing analytical structure. Gradually, the importance of looking into differences in order to understand the social underpinning of the state of affairs and its role

in the construction of situation gained importance and was acknowledged. The next example shows that intersectionality did not just arise because it was a good theory, but rather there was a need, a collective voice which struggled to be heard for ages.

II DISCUSSION

Sojourner Truth’s (1851), a revolutionary Black feminist, in her famous speech at a Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio, provoked the white world with an important but never asked question ‘Aint I a woman?’ What she meant to challenge by this rhetorical question was the norm of the white women. Women who led the feminist movement and were considered the voice of all the other sisters as well. Truth, as a ‘Black’ had never experienced the same delicate treatment and confinement that ‘white’ women were subjected to. This made her question herself and the society whether she was brought up. Did she feel like a woman in the same way as that a white woman experienced it? Was not her life different from them, but could she still consider herself and her likes as woman? This flared up the argument of racial inequalities within the same gender where earlier everyone was tagged as ‘woman’. The Black Feminist challenged the homogeneity and argued to illustrate the differences present and persistent within the community ‘women’ depending on other intersecting factors. Thus, not all women were the same and their conditions were not similar, hence it was unjust to study them as an identical cohort liable to receive similar intervention. A fundamental need to look into

differences was realised and upheld which gave rise to a new era of feminist research that opened doors for the inclusion of real experiences of women.

In the previously mentioned article by Kathy Davis, she closely considers Murray Davis's theories of the sociology of science and reason for success of theories. The most important reason for the success of intersectionality as a concept was because it made an impression by addressing a very concern of feminism and this concern was the search for identity. The Feminist Movement was predominantly white and the problems of women were seen from the perspective of white women who had neglected the other groups of women who were not white and could not relate to them or their problems. This neglected group comprised of a very large number of women who did not identify with the predominant group. The interventions and ideas of liberation that was flaunted by the white feminists did not fit into the lives of this vast others. Black women did participate in the feminist movement of the 1960s but they faced racism and were neglected in the process. Not only were they invisible as women, but the identity of the term 'Black' was absolutely associated with men alone. Thus Black women faced sexism from Black men and racism from white people. This led to the invisibility of Black women in the western feminist cultural theory. This invisibility of the Black women in the western feminist theory, philosophy, and movement created a huge gap in knowledge and which in turn gave rise to the need for a critical, feminist consciousness that would begin a dialogue to address the experience and connect them to a larger political system. The previous theories of oppression did not have any flexibility but intersectionality provided an alternative to static conceptualisation of identity and had an inclusive nature that struck a chord with them.

Many scholars have added and improved upon the concept that Crenshaw had started. In 2003 Staunæs critiqued subjectification and subject position in relation with intersectionality and called it 'troublesome'. According to her, it is the lived experience and position of power which makes the method troublesome. Social categories, materialise as the fundamental basis for approaching a situation. Then intersectional method being neither static nor homogenised, rather 'reinforces', 'destabilizes', 'opposes' or 'counteracts' one another. Thus using social categories as a tool for selection is problematic unless power relation is engaged with and not just in the formulation of oppression but through a more dynamic approach. Creation of new 'subjectivities' could help in exploration of the same phenomenon from many different perspectives.

Yuval-Davis (2007) explained the shift from the concept of 'triple oppression' to intersectionality. Early feminist theories tried to examine the idea of oppression by adding up the differences which

indicated that with every increase in difference, the level vulnerability of the oppressed group significantly amplified and this gave rise to the idea of 'triple oppression'. The classic example of Black working class women was used, who seemed to face three times the oppression for the fact that she is Black, woman and working class. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1982, 1993) argued that the social divisions like race, gender, class cannot be tagged or added into one another. Though the concept given by Crenshaw is an improvement on the earlier 'triple oppression' model yet it only essentially looks at disadvantages by adding more intersections. Anthias (2002) developed a concept called 'translocational positionality' which organised the interaction of different locations relating to race, gender, ethnicity and also their occasional contradictory effects. Similarly Yuval-Davis (2006) pointed out that though each of these vectors had a separate existence, in totality, intersecting oppressions were mutually constructed by one another.

Another reason of concern for the Feminist, when it came to agreeing to a theory was its all pervasiveness. It might fail speak to all concerned and could thus be accepted initially but rejected later (Davis, M 1986). On one hand, there is this need for a theory that interweaves the political process of understanding and conceptualising the effect of race, class and gender to analyse 'how race is gendered and gender is racialised' and on the other hand is the post-modern theoretical perspective of 'deconstructing binary opposition' and 'universalism' that is inherent in western philosophy and scientific enquiry but needs reconsideration. Intersectionality successfully challenged the established hegemony of scientific and methodological archetype and made space for colliding multiple and shifting identities (Davis, K 2008).

There was another concern amongst the feminist scholars, who had worked to create women studies and bringing it to its present position. It was to build a common platform for women's voices. This appeared to get diluted by the flexibility of intersectionality as an approach (Spelman 1983). Intersectionality did not let this platform fall apart, rather it provided reassurance that focus on differences will not make it obsolete or superfluous, instead, through shared practice, intersectionality as a feminist method will find universal relevance. Under the aegis of intersectionality 'social practice', 'individual and group experience', 'structural arrangement' and 'cultural configurations' could come together to promote its applicability (Davis, K 2008).

Kathy Davis's acknowledged Murray Davis's concept that in order to be regarded as an important theory, it should be regarded as significant by both the theory specialist and theory generalist.

Specialists, who have read almost everything about the subject should bargain it a place for themselves to carry it forward instead of just filling up gaps and the theory generalist must not be repelled by the highly complex nature of the theory. Intersectionality successfully provides to both these groups. It is intellectually intriguing and has ample scope for specialist to carve their own niche and the generalist find it easy to understand and identify and to use it in their work. This is reflected by the rise of intersectional approach of research found in contemporary articles showing that authors have taken on this work making comprehension easier.

There has been a debate about the use of categories in intersectionality which was also considered vague by some scholars. It was argued that there were no guideline as to how many categories should be considered and the specific categories which were almost mandatory (Lutz 2002 in Davis K 2008). But this was also the pleasure of a theory like intersectionality as there were researchers who took the liberty of denying the need for use of any categorical approach at all, rather they proposed the 'transversal approach' (Yuval-Davis). But such was not without methodological problems.

McCall (2005) reasoned that intersectionality created methodological problems because of its expansive nature and desire to arrest a wide range of complexity. She explains three approaches to understand complexity. The first is the 'antecategorical complexity' approach. It challenges that race, gender, ethnicity or other aspects cannot be easily divided into categories because of the lived experiences. Thus, using it for analysis in a simplistic manner could be problematic. The second type is the 'intracategorical complexity'. This type looks at categories like as a group per say. However, just creating a group is not enough as within the group there will be dissimilarities. For example a category 'women' will not only include many different sub-groups, but these sub-groups would also like to identify themselves as 'black' or 'white' thus opting out of just the category 'women'. The final approach is the 'intercategorical approach' that accepts the existing categories and then documents relationship and changing configuration. McCall (2005) also emphasised that all intersectionality researches cannot be classified into these three approaches.

Among the other theorist, it is important to look at Joan Acker's work who has carried out a significant amount of writing on the relationship of organisation vis-à-vis gender and 'inequality regimes'. Acker (2006) defined 'inequality regimes' as 'interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities' (443). Inequality regime was related to economic decision making which was affected by local and global construction of inequality and had been very

dynamic in nature. Her work explored the intersection of power difference and its relation to inequality and hierarchy. She contrasted McCall (2005) in her approach by considering specific organizations and the 'local' and 'ongoing practical activities' of organizing work that simultaneously reproduced complex inequalities. The debate continues about the need for theorising identity or whether there has already been too much attention on theorising identity. This battle of conceptualising is the beauty of this theory and it propels the specialists and the generalists to keep going.

For example intersectionality theory has also been greatly criticised because of its ambiguity and incompleteness. It was advocated that the theory was incoherent and thus required more synthesis and detailed elaboration. Some presumed there was a requirement for hard and fast guidelines to guide and restrict intersectional research in order to make it synchronised and universal rather than a personal prerogative. Others argued that it is worth considering that the open-ended nature provides the opportunity for new findings and addition to knowledge instead of repeating the known. The unknown has always been vast and being open-ended makes its inquiry into the unknown an interminable process which could keep adding to the body and knowledge and not get exhausted easily. This created a chance for ceaseless critical insight and multidimensional understanding (Davis, K 2008). Thought of delving into unfathomable sea of knowledge fascinated many, yet, it is also a problem as adding each question would open new dimensions and this could keep going forever. However the scholar would find herself juxtaposed between what else to find, how to go about finding it and especially 'what to do after asking a question'. Kathy Davis supported the theory by saying that 'with each new intersection, new connections emerge and previously hidden exclusions come to light' (77) nonetheless she fails to arrive at a reasonable solution. To understand this problem, four intersectional studies have been discussed to questions arising out of such research. In one of them an instance about the failure to correctly use the theory for construction of methodology has also been included towards the end of this paper.

In 2011, a study investigated the complexity of inequality experienced by Bangladeshi, Caribbean and Pakistani women employed in health, local government and higher education sector used the intersectional approach (Healy et al, 2011). The respondents were employed in the three public sectors where a considerably large number of migrant and Black and Minority Ethnic labourers were employed. The study maintained that despite outlawing discrimination based on gender, race, religion, disability or sexual orientation, inequality persisted and was experienced differently by these women. A Pakistani interviewee claimed that Muslim

women were currently more likely to be discriminated against than Muslim men, because their clothing was a visible symbol of difference. Another Pakistani interviewee gave a contrasting response mentioning that being a woman and a Muslim; she was encouraged to take on new challenges. The complexity constructed by religious symbols, gender, ethnicity and importantly, hierarchy and its importance was reinforced in this study. It should also be noted that the study considered a number of the intersections which did not confuse the reader, instead printed a clear picture of the multi-dimensional oppression faced by women.

In the second study that was chosen for discussion was conducted by Mellström (2009) on the Malaysian case of women domination in Computer Science. Science and technology have been regarded as a masculine arena where women are positioned in the periphery. A study challenged the fixed idea of a 'global masculine culture of science and engineering research' and disputed the notion by showing examples of Malay women's presence in the field of Computer Science. When earlier studies failed to transcend cultural and national differences to look into the cross-cultural dimension where women might not be as inferior as they are assumed or expected to be this author successfully argued in favour of a need to carefully investigate and recognise patterns of masculinity and femininity in a cross-cultural perspective in order to understand the impact of intersection of gender and technology with other complexities.

Intersectionality as a methodology was not only being utilised in cultural and feminist research but also in Medical Science. In a study by Banks (2002) the large racial and gender based disparities that existed in mental health treatment has been looked into. Historically, health sciences have looked into each of these disparities separately without considering a close investigation of the factors related to mental illness across gender and race. An intersectional framework was used in this study to accounts for dimensional variation in ethnicity and gender identity and it incorporated the interaction of gender and ethnicity in examining psychopathology. The study acknowledged that the process of intersectional research in mental health required alternate methodological approach like ethnographic data collection, empirically established within-group profiles and analysis strategies; however, these challenges should not dissuade mental health researchers from attempting to represent the phenomenological complexity of African American women in their work as it is a crucial problem.

Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) reviewed the domestic violence literature and analysed it from an intersectional perspective taking into account race, class, gender, sexual orientation and its relation with

social structure, power and equity. The authors wanted to use the intersectional approach because the studies that were conducted earlier failed to look into the mutually interacting variables and had mostly tagged domestic violence issues together irrespective of the differences and had thus failed to estimate the multiplicity of the issue of oppression. The study took up the difficult task of comprehending and summarising each of the said interactions with relation to domestic in United States They had erringly blamed it on the universally accepted social construction of women subordination. It was important to consider for the purpose of research that each culture defined violence differently and the act of racism itself was not equally experienced by all.

After looking at the above examples where intersectionality approach was used to study smaller groups, the paper now aims to understand its applicability in the work of two important International Organisations. Before concluding this paper will look into the work of the United Nations and the Centre for Women's Global Leadership. The United Nations has also incorporated the use of intersectionality as an approach in its quest to understand women's lives. The Outcome document from the Special Session of the General Assembly in the Beijing Platform of action titled 'Women, 2000: gender, equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century' pledged to 'intensify efforts to ensure equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all women and girls who face multiple barriers to their empowerment and advancement because of such factors as their race, age, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, or disability, or because they are indigenous people.' This is an example of inclusion of hidden aspects of women's lives, which intersect and interact, to give rise to the issues as well as advantages that the lived experiences of these women reinforce, instead of the earlier immersion of ideas under the burden of generalisation, which was a result of other biased methods.

The second example is that of the Centre for Women's Global Leadership (CWIG) where a flawed attempt has been made to formulate guidelines for description of the elements of methodology for intersectional analysis. It addressed gender inequality and women empowerment through discovery of ways by which multiple identities come together to create women's subordination. For exploring the intersection of race, ethnicity, caste, citizenship and before plunging into the specific methodologies it is very important to understand that they have failed to comprehend the totality of concept of intersectionality and have considered it only in the context of disadvantage, subordination or vulnerability. This might lead to the dangerous trap of the same old mechanism of juxtaposition used by the scholars supporting 'triple oppression ideology'.

CWIG Working Group on Women and Human Rights document stated that intersectional methodology could have four distinct components. The primary requirement for intersection analysis is the availability race, ethnicity, descent, citizenship status and other identity wise disaggregated data. Secondly, most important task was to understand that the problem was a result of the confluence of different identities. To quote them, ‘that is to probe beneath the single identity to discover other identities that may be present and contributing to a situation of disadvantage. The contextual realities could include the legacy of slavery or colonialism or ancient animosities.’ Once again the emphasis is on disadvantage instead of the construction of the situation. This example shows that without in-depth understanding of the theory and by merely looking at its superficial relevance, it could be easily mistaken as the new saviour theory particularly for women. There is a probability that because intersectionality as a theory appeals to a very large audience it might be mistaken as a one-shot antidote to all the problems of patriarchy, racialism, poverty, class discrimination and many more. Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill (1996) said that intersections created both oppression and opportunity. In other words, being on the advantaged side offers more than avoidance of disadvantage or oppression by actually opening up access to rewards, status, and opportunities unavailable to other intersections (Shields 2008).

III CONCLUSION

Intersectionality is definitely more than a buzzword and hence it has found its rightful place in feminist literature as well as classroom teaching. A lot more scholarly work is yet to be undertaken with this theory and in the absence of any other theory which could sew Critical Feminist literature and methodology together as firmly as intersectionality; it will continue to hold its supposedly central position in Feminist Studies.

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