
ASPECTS OF INTERSECTIONALITY: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the various aspects of intersectionality, focusing on the analysis of different methodologies that work towards making research more efficient. Intersectionality is an approach with many methodologies devised by many scholars who are engaged in research on social issues around the globe. Therefore, the process has many paths all aiming at making research more concrete and thereby seeking effective and efficient solutions. This article enlists a few of those pivotal methodologies propounded by scholars who are still at the forefront of combating social inequalities.

Keywords: Intersectionality, methodology, identity, inequality, inclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary social science finds rampant usage of the concept of intersectionality to identify and address issues relating to social discriminations and identity. Intersectionality operates within the interconnectedness of multiple categories like race, class, gender, caste, ability and so on. Kimberly Crenshaw, a US based critical race theorist is credited with the origin of the word and since then it has been applied to understand and interrogate various social issues. However, the approach is often criticised for its lack of specificity and clarity, an accusation that has often been combated through the devising of methodologies that eliminate ambiguities.

CONTENT

Intersectionality evolved into a theoretical framework for application and analysis of social discrimination through the efforts and analysis of many scholars and theoreticians. There are mainly four analytic benefits attributed to intersectionality as a research methodology and they are “simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility and inclusivity” (Carastathis). Instead of using an analytic category to study oppression, that favours the dominant and ignores the rest, intersectionality calls for a multiple analytic approach that are operational and viable in

theorising lived experiences and identities. Hence intersectional methodology works on simultaneity of analysis and experiences through its analysis of structural complexities. In spite of the availability of different methodologies to analyse social inequality, intersectionality scores on account of its better prospects for considering complexities. A consequence of simultaneity and complexity in methodology also ensures the irreducibility of experiences into monolithic categories. Inclusivity means a theoretical paradigm that does not subscribe to elitism, white solipsism, heteronormativity, ableism and such essentialist notions of social discriminations. Intersectionality in its essence is a methodology that is aimed towards the inclusivity of all through its multifaceted approach to identity and experience.

Crenshaw identified three aspects of intersectionality in her 1991 essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color” that explains the experiences of Black women. The three formulated aspects are as follows; structural intersectionality, which deals with the ways Black women experiences gender violence like rape and domestic abuse; political intersectionality which deals with the tendencies of legal policies to overlook the Black female situations and, representational intersectionality wherein the representations of Black women in popular culture are studied. Patricia Hill Collins has also framed intersectionality as a theoretical tool. Collins enlists three branches of intersectionality. Their focus of study includes, issues and conflicts within intersectionality and strategies that perpetuate social inequality in social institutions. Critical praxis that determines social justice also forms the basis of study. Thus, Collins introduced the notion of parallel interlocking system of oppression to illustrate the experiences of marginalised population. She describes intersectionality as, a means to understand the complexities of the world.

The social and political lives are constructed of multiple factors that shape the experiences. These factors work in mutual cognition. Experiences attain meaning through the simultaneous function of many factors. Hence, social inequality in people’s lives is shaped through organisations of power, present in a society. Single axis analysis of social divisions, will not bring out the finer nuances of this power politics. Be it race or gender, it is through intersectionality that the finer categories of power politics can be truly understood.

Intersectionality as a Core Analytical Tool

Patricia Hill Collins’ definition of intersectionality is from a utility point of view, where in intersectionality can be used to bridge the finer gaps in the understanding of social discriminations. Her framework of intersectionality as an analytic tool helps in dispensing the difficulties in evaluating complex experiences of social disadvantages. Thus, when it came to African-American women, their need to find new methodologies to describe and define their life experiences, called out for expert analytic solutions. Using intersectionality enables the understanding of the historical positioning of African-American women and there by prompts

a kaleidoscopic viewing of their present. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, put forth six core ideas of intersectionality that work as six core analytic tools. These six core ideas or yardsticks aid in the deciphering of complex experiences where, otherwise, the finer nuances of discriminations escape analysis through single axis categorisation. The six core analytic tools of intersectionality are:

1) Social Inequality

One of the prime focuses of intersectionality is social inequality, without which the whole purpose of intersectional analysis would fall flat. In fact, intersectionality is an end product of the deep-rooted concerns of people towards the existent social inequalities. Intersectionality provides a multidimensional view to the experiences of social discriminations; where in new perspectives become possible. This multidimensional view gives the study an extraordinary vantage point where in the interconnections between different social factors emerge to reveal the complete web of social inequality.

2) Power

Intersectional analysis devoid of power becomes incomplete. Power is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon in intersectional analysis. It exists in people's lives through mutually interconnected systems. "Moreover, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, disability, ethnicity, nation, and religion, among others, constitute interlocking, mutually constructing or intersecting systems of power" (Collins and Bilge). Hence power exists through mutually complementing structures of discrimination. Power relations attain meaning through the interlocked categories of racism and sexism and such discriminatory systems that determine the reality through their cohesive existence.

3) Relationality

Relationality refers to the development of coalitions through experience amongst social divisions. This idea of connectedness is important in analysing experiences. The relationality of multiple identities within a social structure of power or relationality of the interconnectedness of race, class, gender and so on to generate inequality, confirms the indispensability of relationality in addressing injustice. Relationality does not subscribe to binary oppositions, like either/or; rather it embraces the differences. Relationality does not compartmentalise experiences in terms of race or gender, rather it strives to find interconnections that fuels discriminations. This furthers the possibility of dialogues and analysis. Relationality is thus primary in the analysis of power politics since power is best constituted through the interconnections of different factors and power is never static.

4) Social Context

Social context determines power relations. Experiences need contextualisation to be studied for its inherent social inequality, power relations and relationality. Placing the context of an experience enables the use of intersectionality as an analytic tool. Intersectionality being multidimensional, seeks to reveal the different perspectives and interpretations doing the rounds. In fact, it is the context that makes multidimensionality possible in intersectional analysis.

5) Complexity

Complexity defines an experience that is muddled in social inequality, power, relationality and context. Complexity dwells within intersectional analysis, because of its multifaceted nature. Experience is complex and multidimensional, which makes complexity an indispensable part of intersectionality.

6) Social Justice

Justice will remain elusive in societies wherein differences are dealt with as a condition for discrimination. However, the path to justice is ridden with complexities and one that remains the prime objective of all intersectional analysis. However, intersectionality in itself does not beckon social justice, but intersectional analysis is almost always undertaken with the aim to seek justice. It is driven by the notion of justice as central to life experiences rather than as a peripheral quality. Intersectional core analytic tools, hence, involves the application of these standards of measurements to the experience in question. However, not all of these six core pointers need to be involved in the analysis, as per Patricia Hill Collins and Silma Birge. In fact, they can be used in different permutations and combinations to analyse the experience in question. Leslie McCall is another sought after name in intersectional analysis. McCall describes three types of methodological complexities: intercategory, intracategory and anticategory. McCall focuses on the complexity of multidimensional analysis, which if excluded fractures the end result. Hence methodologies that include complexities are preferred over those that are simplistic or limiting. Intersectionality responds to differences of perception through different methodologies that enable different understandings. The complexities are formulated through their approach to categories.

Anticategorical complexity

This method focuses on the overlapping tendencies of social life that is ridden with complexities. Hence this methodology deconstructs categories and deals with experiences and structures as fluidic and overflowing with multiple perceptions. Inherent to this methodology is the view that social categories are arbitrary constructions of language and history and has absolutely no bearing on the experiences or situations of people. Therefore, categorising will merely simplify and dilute the connotations and implications of lived experiences within a

power structure. Further, this methodology concentrates on the interaction of different categories as the source of oppression and therefore, suggests a dismantling of these categories as a solution for long-standing power hierarchies. Social life is a complex phenomenon and therefore, this approach negates the process of boxing up experiences into fine categories. Thus, the dismantling of categories is almost always taken as an undoing of social inequalities in itself. This methodology gains momentum in its very refusal to categorise and thereby homogenise experiences, which is in fact the primary objective of intersectionality itself. A prospect of social change is devised through the deconstruction of categories, since categorisation can be perceived as a process of discriminating. Of the three methodologies devised by McCall, this approach satisfies the need for complexity in analysis.

Intercategorical complexity

This methodology involves the analysis of existing categories to study the relationship between different structures that generate power equation. This process also includes the changing dynamics within these systems and documents inequality as a part of the social transactions occurring within a system. This is a categorical approach towards inequalities persistent in a society. The focus of this methodology is the imbalance in power dynamics between different categories. The focus is on the relationship between the categories and not the categories itself. The flux inherent in the nature of relationships that these categories engage in becomes the essence of this methodology. Hence, proponents of this methodology study the change occurring in such systemic interactions over a period of time, to understand the social dynamics of inequality. Thus, this approach expects an understanding of various categories at play and also an expertise in the process of documenting these interactions over a period of time. This methodology is criticised often for its predictability, since the process of analysis is not unique and is also a part of the other two methodologies.

Intracategorical complexity

This methodology conceptually falls in between the first two methodologies. Like the anticategorical methodology, intracategorical analysis rejects and questions categories but also makes use of them strategically and, like intercategorical methodology, it analyses the inherent flux between these categories that result in social discriminations. This methodology questions the boundaries that determine categories and also critically analyses these very categories. Being at the midpoint of the other two methodologies, intracategorical complexity could be called as a methodology that more or less addresses the shortcomings of the other two modes of analysis. This methodology also questions the boundaries, that are a part of the other two methodologies. However, there is not a total negation of categories in this methodology; rather, there is an understanding of its relevance in the process of analysing experiences. This methodology is adept in analysing human experiences that cross over boundaries and thereby falls into the intersections of overlapping constructed categories. Intracategorical approach is

at times criticised for being centred on the marginalised experiences like that of women of colour or queer. However, this approach is best suited for raising awareness about the social discrimination that emanates from different power relations. This also furthers a micro level analysis of social inequalities that generate visibility and also makes social justice, possible. “That is, since symbolic violence and material inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender, the project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of positive social change” (McCall).

However, not all research methodologies can be classified into any of these three approaches. In fact, methodologies can overlap and cross over into different modes of analysis. According to Leslie McCall, all the three methodologies are representatives of the contemporary intersectional approaches and different methodologies produce different kinds of knowledge. Thus, a broader range of methodologies are required to decipher the issues falling under the spectrum of intersectionality.

McCall’s aim at devising these three methodologies is to only increase the area of research on intersectionality. Many feminist researchers employ intracategorical methodology in their research analysis in the hope of seeking social change. “The point is that many feminist researchers employ this type of analysis because of their belief in its radical potential to alter social practices—to free individuals and social groups from the normative fix of a hegemonic order and to enable a politics that is at once more complex and inclusive” (McCall).

There are various other methodologies too that are very much part of research activities on intersectionality. Nira Yuval-Davis in her essay “Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality” talks about situated intersectionality as, given its multiple and multi-disciplinarian history, intersectionality is not a unified body of theory but more a range of theoretical and conceptual tools. As such, however, it is similar to all other major theoretical perspectives that have been developed by more than one theorist or space/time context, from Marxism to Neo-Liberalism to feminism, let alone sociology. This does not mean that we cannot debate what should be the right theoretical framing using intersectionality for particular analytical and political purposes. I call my particular version of intersectionality theory “situated intersectionality”, which is quite different from some of the other versions of intersectionality that have been popularized (Yuval-Davis).

Davis in this essay claims to have started developing this analysis in the 1980s much before Crenshaw’s invention of the term ‘intersectionality’ itself. Davis suggests the expansion of the application of the theory to include all people and not just the marginalised women to whom this analysis is historically linked to. For the purpose of avoiding essentialism and exclusions, Davis proposes this sort of an all- inclusive strategy because the essence of intersectionality, according to Davis rests in Stratification theory, and deals with differently

ranked locations of individuals and social groups on society's network of power categories. Davis regards intersectionality as the most effective method to the sociological study of stratification because of its quality of not reducing the complexity of power division into a single categorical social division like class, which is the customary clause in stratification theories.

Nira Yuval-Davis emphasizes on the social positioning of the subject and the researcher, as vital to the functioning of the intersectional methodology. She talks about how "Situated gaze, Situated knowledge and Situated imagination construct differently the ways we see the world" (Yuval-Davis). Davis advocates for Situated intersectionality, which "...is highly sensitive to the geographical, social and temporal locations of the particular individual or collective social actors examined by it, contested, shifting and multiple as they usually are" (Yuval-Davis). Transcendence, translocality and transtemporality are terms brought into intersectional analysis by Davis, to devise a strategy that is contemporary and all inclusive. There are still numerous types of methodologies constructed by researchers to better address and redress the complex phenomenon of identity and social inequality. Some authors like Walby speak on additional complexities involved with intersectionality. These are part of the multidimensional identities that are part of the various systems of inequality. Authors like Rodriguez and Halvino also speak on the focus on simultaneity of these interconnected systems of oppression. Intersectionality as a practice can be put to use in various fields like healthcare, politics, education, sports and so on to determine the faction of disadvantage that makes people vulnerable. Since the analysis is based on Standpoint theory, which centralises on the individual perception about an experience, it enables multidimensionality and rejects essentialism.

The intersections model has a hard time with contradictions or hard-nosed questions. It portrays all axes as equivalent, all lines coming together, all of the time. Could it be that stories do a better job than geometric models of conveying how race, class, gender, sexuality, and the like come alive? Embedded in stories are particular renditions of gender that are already raced and classed, renditions that show people in action, chasing down the curveballs that identity throws their way. The moral of the stories? Gender may assume a million shapes, but it is never just gender. (Weston 16)

CONCLUSION

Today, there are millions of women suffering from poverty, diseases, sexual exploitation, and existing as refugees, as migrants and as undocumented workers, all over the world. Feminism today, is in an endeavour to incorporate the experiences of these marginalised and suffering women, whose identity and experiences are much more complicated than the homogenous global sisterhood circulated through western feminism. Black feminist politics emerges at this juncture of dissociation from mainstream feminism. "As Black women we see

Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (Smith and Combahee River Collective). Intersectionality as a theoretical framework is still expanding its horizon and is evidently not limited to the academic circles. In fact, intersectionality has been heralded by fashion magazines and pop culture and embraced into almost every arena of social interaction. Gender has been introduced as an analytic category and a theoretical perspective due to the need to counter the tendency to neglect and misrepresent female experiences. Intersectionality thus imparts the analysis with depth which works towards better redressal of social inequalities and ensuing violence.

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