

Introducing intersectionality – and the impossibility of doing so

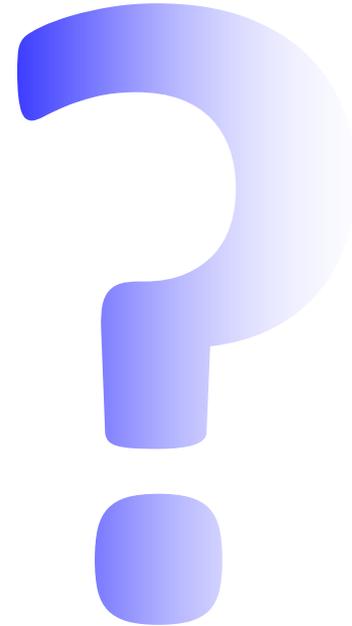
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Why intersectionality for student experience research??

- ▶ Questions you may be asking:
 - Why do some students make it into HE and others do not?
 - Why do attainment levels vary among students?
 - Why do some students seem to belong in HE more than others?
 - Why do some students withdraw from their courses?
- ▶ How intersectionality can help:
 - HE research often focuses on the analysis of one group or identity.
 - Intersectionality helps us to resist simplified category-based analysis
 - Intersectionality encourages a complex understanding of students' lives prior to HE and their experiences of HE



(Calitz, forthcoming 2019)



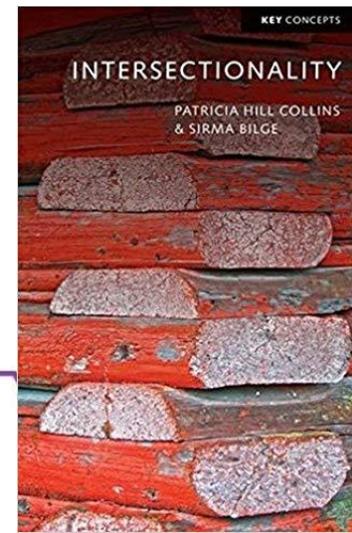
Intersectionality – this presentation

- ▶ Background and ‘origins’
- ▶ Intersectionality as theory or practice?
- ▶ Intersectionality – key questions

‘I suspect intersectionality is often simplified when it is taught in undergraduate classrooms’
(Levine-Rasky, 2011, p. 244)

Intersectionality: Background and Origins 1

- ▶ '[I]ntersectionality falls prey to widespread misrepresentation, tokenization, displacement, and disarticulation' (Bilge, 2013, p. 410; see also Carbado, 2013)
- ▶ Different origins stories
 - Kimberlé Crenshaw as 'mother' of intersectionality?! (legal scholar)
 - 1970s Black Feminism in the United States (US)
 - 19th Century Civil Rights struggles in the US
 - US? What about South Africa, India...
- ▶ Common features of intersectional approaches:
 - Representation, or **who speaks for whom**
 - Representation, or **how are people spoken about**
 - Over-simplifying human/social issues is damaging to people's lives and rights



Intersectionality: Background and Origins 2

- ▶ Kimberle Crenshaw origins story (see eg. Lutz et al. 2011 'Framing Intersectionality')
 - 'Demarginalising the intersection of race and sex: a Black Feminist critique of anti-discrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and anti-racist politics' (originally in *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139 in 1989; refs in these slides from Crenshaw 2011a, pp. 25-42)
 - Legal studies
 - Discrimination and marginalisation of certain groups (in particular Black, working class women in the US) could not be assigned to a 'single issue'.
 - Against 'the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience' (p. 25)
 - Hence the need for a way of examining social issues *across* different identity categories: 'multi-dimensionality' (p. 25)

Intersectionality: Background and Origins 3



‘If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them’ (ibid., p. 29)

NB example of rape – rape ‘as a manifestation of male power over female sexuality’ v. ‘weapon of racial terror’ (ibid., p. 35)

Intersectionality as theory or practice?

- ▶ How to use intersectionality? What it 'is' v. what it 'does'
- ▶ Crenshaw (2011b, p. 232): 'analytical tool' AND 'potential template for intervention' – 'we will only discover what it is by using it' (p. 233)
- ▶ Intersectionality as *method*: 'a distinctive way into reality that captures not just the static outcomes of the problem it brings into view but its dynamics and lines of force as well. It is this that makes it transformative' (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1024)
- ▶ Does looking *across* groups mean that we lose the nuance/complexity of our ways of looking at 'single issues', eg. Race or gender?
- ▶ **Decentre** v. **extend** gender/race/class? 'Additive and autonomous' v. 'interactive and mutually constitutive'? (Cho et al, 2013, p. 787)
- ▶ Can intersectionality be 'imported' from the US or does it need to be adapted to each context?
 - '[At a conference on intersectionality,] Germany was not alone in rejecting the category 'race' and it was noted by some speakers that the preferred term in many European contexts was that of ethnicity and/or culture' (Lewis, 2009, p. 207)

Intersectionality – key questions

What is the 'true' version of intersectionality?

- Black womanhood?
- Race, class and gender?

Where to start? What are the fundamental intersections?
Contextual issues?

Where to stop? Do some intersections matter more than others?

Can intersectionality be used to look at privilege as well as marginalisation?

Does intersectionality deflect from discussions of race?

Who determines which are the most important intersections?

References

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