

Intersectionality and its radical roots: implications for the discipline of geography today

By Mary-Jane Farrell, University of Sussex

Abstract

Whilst the concept of intersectionality is becoming increasingly popularised, whether used as a 'buzzword', or more productively as a lens to look through, geography must respond proactively and radically. This article will define the concept of intersectionality, tracing its roots back to the 19th century. To investigate the implications of intersectionality for geography, the article will explore how intersectionality can challenge the discipline's racist roots. This will be followed by looking at how intersectionality can broaden geography's engagement with space, place and inequality, in the context of the current coronavirus pandemic which has highlighted pre-existing inequalities and intersectionalities. From key workers, including women of colour and migrant women cleaning and caring, to communities battling environmental racism and toxic pollution – these positions reveal the unequal nature of the pandemic. This article concludes that geography's engagement with intersectionality will be futile if the lived experiences of academics on the ground is ignored.

Note on terminology

The use of a range of terminology in relation to 'race' and ethnicity has been subject to various debates. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into those debates fully. As the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2005) make clear, many of the terms used in this article, such as 'people of colour' and 'ethnic minority' relate to particular geographical and historical contexts. The BSA document also provides a useful set of references for further reading, of which can be found here: <https://www.britsoc.co.uk/Equality-Diversity/>. Black British Academics also provides useful information here: <https://blackbritishacademics.co.uk/about/racial-categorisation-and-terminology/>. Where I used the term 'ethnic minority', this was specifically in reference to UK data on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on ethnic minority groups. This gal-dem article by Chanté Joseph <https://gal-dem.com/bookmark-this-are-acronyms-like-bame-a-nonsense/> is also useful in highlighting the problematics of the term 'BAME', and this article by Zamila Bunglawala <https://civilservice.blog.gov.uk/2019/07/08/please-dont-call-me-bame-or-bme/>, on the term 'ethnic minorities'.

1. Introduction

Intersectionality has become a popular term in academia and popular culture to describe the way in which multiple forms of discrimination interlink and overlap. As Audre Lorde has famously voiced: “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (BlackPast, 2012). This article will explore the history of intersectional activism from the 19th century onwards to help define the term and trace its roots. Geography must learn from the radical history of intersectionality to hold itself accountable for its racist roots, and engage fully with space, place and geographies of inequality. By understanding the unequal nature of the coronavirus pandemic, and the pre-existing inequalities that it has laid bare, this article will explore the ways in which geography’s engagement with intersectionality can be useful, whilst, however, questioning where the discipline may be failing.

2. Defining intersectionality and tracing its history

The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, speaking specifically about the way Black women’s experiences are framed in the American criminal justice system, as well as Black women’s exclusion from white feminism and anti-racist politics (Crenshaw, 1989; Kuppan, 2018). As Crenshaw acknowledges, her work was preceded by 19th century women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth, 1960s-1980s Black feminist movements, as well as writers and activists such as Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks (Narayan, 2019). Intersectionality is a term to describe the way in which different identity characteristics, such as race, class and gender, overlap to create unique and complex discriminations (Crenshaw, 1989), recognising ‘simultaneously interlocking oppressions’ (Brah and Phoenix, 2004, p. 78). Intersectionality is against a ‘single issue analyses’ that marginalizes the ‘multiply-burdened’ and ‘erases Black women’s distinct experiences’ (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140, 146 and 149).

The concept of intersectionality, despite being popularly attached to the work of Crenshaw, can be traced back to at least the 19th century (Narayan, 2019). Sojourner Truth, an American women’s rights activist born into slavery, exclaimed in 1851 at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio: “Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me – and ain’t I a woman?” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 153). That no white woman had experienced what a Black woman had under slavery, Truth ‘deconstructs every single major truth-claim about gender in a patriarchal slave social formation’ (Brah and Phoenix, 2004, p. 77).

By the late 1960s, Black feminist movements further drew attention to the intersecting struggles that Black women face. The influence of these movements seemed to fall 'between the cracks' (Springer, 2001, p. 155) of the more well-known civil rights and women's movements. The Third World Women's Alliance (1968-79), The National Black Feminist Organisation (1973-75), Black Women Organized for Action (1973-80), The Combahee River Collective (1975-80), and The National Alliance of Black Feminists (1976-80) were all Black feminist movements making demands for recognition of Black womanhood as a challenge to the exclusivity of white feminism (Springer, 2001). For geography to meaningfully engage with intersectionality, it must make visible the historical contribution of Black feminists (Hopkins, 2017).

The Combahee River Collective was unique in its anti-capitalist demands that addressed structural oppression (Springer, 2001). Meeting since 1974, the radical collective united Black feminists and lesbians committed to ending 'racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression...based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking' (The Combahee River Collective, 1977). Writer Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has spoken about the importance of the group's acknowledgement that the oppression of multiple identities links to capitalism, and that achievement of Black women's liberation requires complete system change (Democracy Now, 2018). As The Combahee River Collective states: 'The liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy' (The Combahee River Collective, 1977).

3. Challenging geography's racist roots

Having defined intersectionality, and summarised how it emerged, this article will proceed to question what intersectionality, if anything, contributes to geography. Intersectionality can prompt a challenging of geography's colonial and racist roots. By the 19th century, European geography had built upon evolutionary ideas that prompted the racist theory of environmental determinism; these ideas proposed that nature and climate determined social development, and was the cause of hierarchies in societies and groups of people (Casino, 2016). The work of W.E.B. Du Bois challenged these ideas, arguing that Social Darwinism and environmental determinism was 'justification for the oppression of black people' (Sibley, 1995, cited by Casino, 2016, p. 3). Ultimately, as Hubbard (2008, p. 5) recognises, 'geography as a discipline is based on a hierarchy of knowledge which privileges particular views of the world...and marginalizes other viewpoints'. Intersectionality works to spotlight marginalised voices and demands acknowledgement of the intersecting oppressions people face; if geography can tend to these demands, by fully confronting its racist history, it can be a radical discipline.

4. Broadening geography's engagement with inequality, space and place

Intersectionality can broaden geography's engagement with geographies of inequality, space and place, and the 'who gets what, where, and how' (Smith, 1994, cited by Casino, 2016, p. 1) questions. Casino (2016) shows how social geography in particular has responded keenly to the cultural revolutions of the 1970s – decolonisation, feminism, queerness and anti-racism. Challenges to the western discourse of feminism, coming from subaltern studies in India and Black feminism, were important critiques for social geography to acknowledge and thus partake in. Since the 20th century, the relationship between social and spatial organisation and demographics has also been of concern.

If geography stands to engage with the who gets what, where, and how, then social geography must respond to the inequalities and intersectionalities of the current global coronavirus pandemic. "We're all in this together" (Jones, 2020a) governments across the globe have cried, as anyone of us could be hit by the virus that has, as of 17th May 2020, killed at least 34,636 people in the UK alone (Gov.UK, 2020), having one of the highest recorded death rates in the world (Gutiérrez, 2020). This global pandemic, however, is not 'the great equaliser', but in fact impacts people in disproportionate, unjust ways.

In the UK, ethnic minority groups make up 14% of the population of England and Wales, but account for 35% of coronavirus patients in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Siddique, 2020). Black African, Black Caribbean and Pakistani people in the UK are most at risk from the virus, with Black Caribbean deaths recorded as 3.5 times higher than the white population (Croxford, 2020; Public Health England, 2020; Siddique, 2020). The deaths from coronavirus are disproportionately hitting ethnic minority groups hardest.

4.1 Injustice for Belly Mujinga at Victoria Station, London

One reason for the disproportionate impact of coronavirus is evident when looking at who occupies key worker jobs. In the UK, ethnic minorities make up for more than 40% of NHS medical staff (Hirsch, 2020), 44% of cab drivers and chauffeurs, 32% of security guards and 19% of bus and coach drivers and carers (Jones, 2020b). On April 5th, ticket office worker Belly Mujinga died, 14 days after a man claiming to have the virus spat and coughed at her. Despite a recent report revealing the man did not test positive for coronavirus, the injustice

is still clear (BBC, 2020). Belly's underlying health issues were known by Govia Thameslink who she worked for, but she was still sent to work without personal protective equipment in Victoria Station, London (Cowan, 2020). This is part of the violence facing Black people during this pandemic. Belly Mujinga is just one name amongst countless others. In its attention to inequality and justice (Casino, 2016), geography must amplify that this pandemic is a race and class issue – this intersection must not be separated.

4.2 Cleaners and carers on the frontline in the US

In the US, Ai-jen Poo, director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), speaks about the intersectionality of this crisis that puts predominantly working class women of colour and migrant women at risk from the virus (African American Policy Forum, 2020). House cleaners disinfecting homes, or carers looking after families, are vital workers during a pandemic, but also face huge health risks (African American Policy Forum, 2020). 2.3 million home care workers, mostly women of colour and migrants, are not adequately protected under US labour laws (African American Policy Forum, 2020). If geography seeks to become more radical, then it must engage itself in the intersectional inequalities that puts women of colour and migrant women at a disproportionately high risk from coronavirus.

4.3 Environmental racism along New Orleans to Baton Rouge, USA

Intersectionality can also push geography to understand and critique environmental racism more effectively. Along New Orleans to Baton Rouge in the US, the industrial Denka plant wreaks of pollution, causing nearly 50 times more air pollution-caused cancer in the country (Kasakove, 2020). Predominantly Black, Latino and low-income communities are hugely vulnerable to coronavirus as cases of asthma, heart disease and diabetes, are common for these areas of environmental toxins (Kasakove, 2020). Such vulnerabilities are not natural, but instead caused by the deliberate placement of toxins in these communities, whilst white privilege allows the white affluent to live elsewhere (Pulido, 2000). Geography's concern with geographies of inequality gives the discipline a responsibility to address the fact that low income communities of colour are more likely to be vulnerable to coronavirus because of the environmental racism that forces these communities to breathe in hazardous toxins.

Coronavirus amplifies and exacerbates existing inequalities (Jones, 2020a; Crenshaw, 2020). When Boris Johnson announced on 11th May 2020, that those who could go back to work

should, he was telling working class people to go back to work and risk their lives (Jones, 2020b). The disproportionate impact on Black people, people of colour, migrant women and working class people reflects the way in which the abandonment of these communities is embedded in the structure of our societies; 'when a crisis disproportionately hurts those who are already structurally marginalized, the structural neglect of these factors further entrenches pre-existing inequalities' (Crenshaw, 2020). Crenshaw says that we must "resist the idea that intersectionality is a luxury that we can only afford in times of relative clarity and prosperity" in other words "in times of a non-pandemic", and instead use intersectionality "as a prism for helping us see and predict and interact with the pre-existing structures that intersectionality can help us see and that COVID has laid bare" (Haymarket Books, 2020).

5. Teaching intersectionality versus on the ground reality

Finally, I want to argue that the contribution of intersectionality to geography as a discipline is questionable. Academia may speak of the importance of intersectionality, but what is it like on the ground? What are academics lived experiences of the consequences of non-intersectional approaches? Mahtani (2014, p. 360) writes that social and cultural geography must 'pay more detailed attention to the ongoing production of... toxic geographies, or emotionally toxic material spaces, for geographers of colour'. Increasing attention to issues of race and intersectionality often hides the existing prevalence of racism in the lives of scholars themselves. Emphasis on acknowledging the 'tired trio of race, class and gender' is what McKittrick (2007, cited by Mahtani, 2014, p. 361-2) calls a superficial approach that 'shies away from underscoring how human geographies...are integral to black ways of life'. Ultimately, the academy that geography acts within, is functioning under a neoliberal global economy (Tolia-Kelly, 2010) that upholds white supremacy, a system that is devoid of any intersectional acknowledgement. What, then, is the point of teaching the concept of intersectionality in an institution that does not actively engage in it themselves, so that marginalised academics are experiencing injustice at work?

6. Conclusions

In this article I have explored the way in which intersectionality has emerged from at least as far back as the activism of Sojourner Truth in 19th century slavery, through to Black feminist movements, writers and activists of colour from the 1960s-1980s, to the coining of the term by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. I have argued that intersectionality can challenge the colonial and racist roots of geography that upheld ideas about environmental determinism. I then argued that attention to intersectionality could broaden the disciplines

engagement with space, place and inequality, in relation to the inequalities and intersectionalities highlighted in the current global coronavirus pandemic. These inequalities are revealed through: the number of people of colour who have died in the UK, partly because of the high concentration of those in key worker jobs; the disproportionate number of women of colour and migrant women in the US working as care workers and cleaners; and the Black, Latino and low income communities in the US who have long been surrounded by toxic pollution. I finished by questioning the usefulness of teaching about intersectionality, if the university institution has not addressed the intersecting inequalities faced by academics on the ground. Ultimately, geography must look through the lens of intersectionality in all that it does, confronting crises that have long existed pre-COVID-19. If geography can meaningfully engage with these urgencies, it can involve itself in moving through what Arundhati Roy calls the pandemic's 'portal': 'a gateway between one world and the next', one that we must 'walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it' (Roy, 2020).

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