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The present and future of intersectionality: Controversies and challenges

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the challenges related to the present and future of intersectionality. What started as a breadth of fresh air by illuminating new theoretical and analytical possibilities for discussions about the complexity of identity and offering a new lens to understand disadvantage, inequality and oppression experienced by black people and people of colour, seems to have been co-opted in ways that risk derailing its purpose primarily by treating it as an exhausted idea that has lost its relevance (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013; Cho, 2013). The only way forward is to go back to the question: "Where do we go from here?" (Rodriguez et al., 2001).

Despite what could still be considered a nascent discussion in the fields of work, organizations and employment (see McBride et al., 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2016), there is talk of internationality having run its course, with some scholars referring to a post-intersectionality turn (see Chang & Culp, 2002; Hutchinson, 2002). This post-intersectionality narrative has emerged from the critique of intersectionality's theoretical inability to "grapple with subjects who occupy multiple social positions and those with "partially privileged" identities in particular" (Cho, 2013:388).

Whilst we understand that the 'multidimensionality' of marginalized subjects' lived experiences leads to particular forms of disadvantage, inequality and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989: 13), we are still unable to use this understanding meaningfully to eliminate them in workplace settings. This has meant that intersectionality is seen as easier to theorise than it is to apply. In particular, the consistent problems of translating intersectionality's theoretical complexity into practical tools (see Mooney, 2016; Rodriguez, 2018) continues to challenge researchers to move beyond its rhetorical use and at times undermines its empirical validity (see Nash, 2008).

A phenomenon that has also contributed to the undermining of intersectionality is its co-optation to frame discussions about the marginalised that do not centre their racialised and gendered privilege (e.g. Coston & Kimmel, 2012). In the context of discourses of post-racialism, ideas about race fatigue have led to a systematic un-acknowledgment and rejection of privilege. In this way, the co-optation of intersectionality also serves the purpose of re-balancing the focus because in its original proposition, intersectionality proved a threat because it provided visibility to

oppressive dynamics and structures, making visible the struggles of people of colour, hence making them space invaders (i.e. they are everywhere!) and awarding them a degree of importance that some claim is now making white people an oppressed minority (Puwar, 2004; Flynn, 2015).

However, in a context where white supremacy is a global phenomenon, the reconfiguration of white power (e.g. what Tate & Page (2018) refer to as "whiteliness") has pushed back, and we see the development of new strategies, such as white fragility, that evidence the growing racial resentment at the ground-breaking theoretical and analytical work of intersectional scholars (DiAngelo, 2018; Tuch & Hughes, 2011). This is enhanced by the empirical void created by un-reflexive empirical intersectional work that whilst focusing on oppression, seems to want to move on from its racialised nature. With regard to this, Nash (2008) argues that intersectionality needs to be interrogated amidst its newfound status as "an institutionalized intellectual project, and the dominant tool for excavating the voices of the marginalized" (p. 13).

Given these developments, the scholarly agenda may no longer be about showing that people of colour are systematically oppressed but rather, fighting against arguments that claim that in highlighting the (structural, procedural, and relational) ways in which this happens, white people become the oppressed ones instead. The fear is that 'colour-blind intersectionality' may mute the experiences of people of colour in ways that minimize their continuing subjugation and marginalization in organizations (Carbado, 2013). Additionally, it raises the question of how to do 'intersectionality' in a post-identitarian or identity-sceptical theoretical milieu that maintains its possibilities for exposing racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, ableism and classism and interrupting oppressive power and privilege (Calás, Ou, & Smircich, 2013; Hekman, 2000; Nash, 2011).

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