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Social geography I: Intersectionality

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Abstract
Intersectionality is an approach to research that focuses upon mutually constitutive forms of social oppression rather than on single axes of difference. Intersectionality is not only about multiple identities but is about relationality, social context, power relations, complexity, social justice and inequalities. This report reflects upon the use of intersectionality in social geography and emphasizes the complex histories of intersectionality that are often overlooked in geography. I argue for a greater embrace of the contribution of black feminists and some of the earliest work in geography taking an intersectional perspective. I also argue for intersectionality to be used ethically and with care in geography, rather than it being deployed in a way that unwittingly reproduces a white, colonialist, racist and masculinist discipline. I explore possible avenues for future research about intersectionality in social geographies including a focus upon residential segregation, transnational migration and embodiment.

Keywords
anti-racism, black feminism, intersectionality, power, relationality

I Introduction

Intersectionality is the focus of my first progress report on social geography. Geographers have not been as attentive to the contested histories of intersectionality as they should have been; greater care is needed not to invisibilize the contributions of black and anti-racist feminist academics and activists who have been so crucial to shaping the field of intersectionality (e.g. Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1982; Brah, 1996; Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Davis, 1983, 2016; Collins, 2000, 2013, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Hancock, 2007; hooks, 1982; Yuval-Davis, 2006). I emphasize three key points in this report: first, intersectionality emerged from activist and academic black feminism; second, this first point is often omitted from work in geography, which leads to the reproduction of our discipline as white, racist and colonialist; third, some of the earliest work in geography that adopts an approach informed by intersectional thinking also tends to be overlooked in much social geography research about intersectionality. Overall, geography could usefully adopt a more sensitive interdisciplinary approach to intersectionality that acknowledges more clearly the role of black feminism in its development.

II What is intersectionality?

Crenshaw (1989) observed that the dominant approach to discrimination tends to focus on exclusions occurring along a single categorical axis. She observed that this 'erases Black

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women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group' (Crenshaw, 1989: 140). For Crenshaw (1989), simply adding racism and sexism together does not address the ways in which black women are marginalized. Since this early intervention, intersectionality has been used in a variety of different ways by different scholars: as an analytical framework for social justice (Hancock, 2016), a political orientation, epistemological practice, and ontological framework (May, 2015); and an approach and a way of framing interactions (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Other versions include it being regarded as an emerging or major paradigm (Collins, 2013; McCall, 2005), a feminist theory (Davis, 2008) and an analytic sensibility (Cho et al., 2013). Cho et al. (2013: 786) note that 'it is more a heuristic device than a categorical one' and clarify that 'praxis has been a key site of intersectional critique'. Although there are varying and contrasting definitions of intersectionality, it is important to be aware of the ways intersectionality is being employed in contemporary work, why, and to what ends. Indeed, the diverse use of intersectionality has led to it being identified as a 'buzzword' (Davis, 2008) which is an important part of its popularity and political currency (Collins, 2015)

Crenshaw (1991) is often credited with introducing intersectionality into academia through her research about black women's employment experiences; she differentiated between structural, political and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality is about the ways in which black women have to deal with 'multi-layered and routinized forms of domination' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245) such as those associated with housing inequalities or employment practices. Political intersectionality focuses on the ways in which black women belong to at least two marginalized groups and so often have to engage with different political agendas. Representational intersectionality focuses on how images of women of colour – and debates about these – tend to overlook the intersectional interests of such women. Although applied to the experiences of black women, Crenshaw (1991: 1296) notes that 'intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics'.

Some are concerned that 'the word "intersectionality" triggers use, misuse, and critique in ways that reinscribe the very political relations intersectionality scholarship critiques and sets to transform' (Hancock, 2016: 4, see also Carbado, 2013; May, 2014, 2015). For this reason, misuses and critiques of intersectionality require critical scholarly interrogation. Intersectionality has a historical legacy that needs to be acknowledged and it also has a set of commitments that require in-depth engagement (May, 2015). One criticism is that there is no specific method or methodology associated with intersectionality (Nash, 2008; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). As Jordan-Zachery (2007) points out, intersectionality researchers have used survey data, content analysis, autobiographical and biographical approaches, in-depth interviews, narratives as well as discourse analysis. Researchers using intersectionality are urged not to adopt an additive approach and instead to look at how specific forms of inequality are mutually constitutive; yet sometimes the methods used result in an additive approach being used (Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Lewis, 2009). Walby et al. (2012) also point to specific challenges around the place of social class, the balance between stability and fluidity of inequalities and focus on marginalized intersections whilst keeping the role of the powerful in view. A further challenge is often presented around what is meant by 'interlocking' (Hancock, 2007; Jordan-Zachery, 2007) as intersectionality is often described as being about 'interlocking' forms of oppression with it not

always being clear what this means. Puar (2012) points to some of the limitations of intersectionality becoming mainstreamed, questioning whether it now enables white liberal feminists to maintain their central position. An important concern about the employment of intersectionality in a wide variety of contexts and disciplines – and one that I follow up on in this report – is a serious concern about the displacement of race as a key consideration of intersectional analysis (Bilge, 2013). Despite these criticisms, intersectionality is referred to regularly and is familiar to many social science disciplines, including geography.

III Challenges in using intersectionality

Cho et al. (2013: 785) note that there is 'a burgeoning field of intersectional studies' and Hancock (2016: 12) expresses concern about 'intersectionality's travel (both geographic and disciplinary) as replicating the very hegemonic politics that intersectionality was created to fight against' (see also Carbado, 2013; Lewis, 2013). I am sensitive to Hancock's (2016: 23) discussion of 'an interpretive community' which has been 'entrusted with the care of such a precious and complicated phenomenon like intersectionality'; geographers are permitted to use intersectionality but must do so ethically and with care. To ignore the origins of intersectionality and its relationships to black feminism would contribute further to the problematic reinforcement of geography as a white, racist, colonialist, masculinist discipline and risk the passive 'shrugging of the shoulders' response to accusations of geography being white (Mahtani, 2014). Geographers needs to pay more attention to the origins of intersectionality in black feminism and not only cite the work of white women and men. Mott and Cockayne (2017) refer to 'white heteromasculism' bolstering the status of already-powerful white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgendered and able-bodied men and how this often plays out in citation practices; they argue for 'conscientious engagement' with the politics of citation, seeing it as a 'feminist and anti-racist technology' (Mott and Cockayne, 2017: 3).

A review of geography's deployments of intersectionality suggests four key issues at stake. First, intersectionality has a far more complex and diverse history than is often represented in much geographical scholarship. Many accounts of intersectionality start in the late 1980s or early 1990s, yet outside of academia what Hancock (2016: 24) calls 'intersectionality-like thought' was being developed by racially minoritized women's activist groups and social movements in different parts of the world (e.g. Combahee River Collective, 1983; Nash, 2011). Hancock (2016) traces ideas of intersectionality back to as early as 1831 to Maria Stewart in Boston, while Collins and Bilge (2016) refer to the 19th-century work of Savitribai Phule, a first-generation Indian feminist, and to Frances Beal's (1969) 'Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female'. Significantly, there was Global South engagement with ideas of intersectionality without necessarily naming it as such (Collins and Bilge, 2016; see also hooks, 1982).

Second, related to this, intersectionality is too singularly associated with one specific field, year and person (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Collins and Bilge, 2016). Crenshaw's (1991) work is often cited as the source of intersectionality, yet others were working with the ideas of intersectionality well before this as Crenshaw herself is quick to acknowledge (Guidroz and Berger, 2009; Phoenix, 2006). Collins and Bilge (2016: 83) observe that the oft-made claims that Crenshaw 'coined' the term 'not only routinely neglect the writings and activities of many people who came before Crenshaw, but also misread the full extent of Crenshaw's arguments' (see also Tomlinson, 2013). Crenshaw 'put a name to ways of theorising that black feminists had long advocated and that working class and

lesbian feminists had promoted' (Phoenix, 2006: 21). That being said, her 1991 piece is a significant contribution, particularly given its commitment to social justice, its focus on relationality, its emphasis on how 'mutually constructing systems of power produce distinctive social locations for individuals and groups within them' (p. 82) and its attention to lived and embodied experiences (Collins and Bilge, 2016).

Third, as intersectionality has been used and applied in different contexts – often based on shallow misreadings or misunderstandings of it – there are concerns that the concept is depoliticized, separated from its social-justice focused origins (Bilge, 2013), and 'flattened' as people's lives are being separated from their political situations (Fine, cited in Guidroz and Berger, 2009). Such depoliticization encourages the superficial employment of intersectionality. This 'ornamental intersectionality . . . allows institutions and individuals to accumulate value through good public relations and "rebranding" without the need to actually address the underlying structures that produce and sustain injustice' (Bilge, 2013: 408).

Fourth, visibility and inclusion are imperatives for using intersectionality; yet, scholars have expressed anxieties about the whitening of intersectionality as the work of black feminists and other minoritized scholars are overlooked (Bilge, 2013). Here, the concern is that intersectionality is seen to belong to disciplinary feminism which displaces the key role of race. 'Claiming that feminism is responsible for creating intersectionality has become a normative, perfectly naturalized, taken-for-granted feminist practice' (Bilge, 2013: 413); this requires challenging in order to recognize intersectionality's important connections with critical race theory and racialization processes. Geographers need to be particularly cautious of this. Valentine's (2007) paper, for example, addresses feminist geography and locates intersectionality within feminist social science. This essentially connects intersectionality to gender studies rather than to antiracism and so centres gender rather than race as the focus of inquiry when the origins of intersectionality sit within both feminism and antiracism rather than only in the former. The whitening of intersectionality is, as Blige (2013: 418) suggests:

> . . . a grim irony: a tool elaborated by women of color to confront the racism and heterosexism of White-dominated feminism, as well as the sexism and heterosexism of antiracist movements, becomes, in another time and place, a field of expertise overwhelmingly dominated by White disciplinary feminists who keep race and racialized women at bay. (Bilge, 2013: 418)

My main point in all of this is that geographers need to show more sensitivity to the origins of intersectionality within black feminism. To ignore this issue risks intersectionality becoming depoliticized, flattened out and whitened, reinscribing rather than challenging geography as a white, masculinist, colonialist discipline. As a 'gathering place' (Cho et al., 2013: 788), social geographers need to be ethical, respectful and sensitive to the complex histories of intersectionality.

IV Intersectionality in geography

Around the time that intersectionality was being introduced into socio-legal studies and antiracist feminist sociology in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a small group of geographers were doing similar work. I highlight this work to make the point that social geographers have been thinking about issues relating to intersectionality for some time. For example, Peake (1993) investigated the entanglement of sexuality and race in understanding patriarchal urban spaces, Kobayashi and Peake (1994) discussed the connections between race and gender, Jackson (1994) wrote on gender, sexuality, race and the body, and Ruddick (1996) explored the intersections between race, gender and class.

Moreover, in a progress report on social geographies in this journal, Smith (1990) discussed the tensions associated with only focusing on gender to the exclusion or marginalization of matters connected to race and class. Valentine's (2007) paper is often cited as one of the first in geography to focus upon intersectionality even though her paper acknowledges some of this earlier geographical work. Longhurst and Johnston (2014) provide a useful overview of some of this earlier work, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality and the body, and Peake (2010) has an excellent overview of the intersections of gender, sexuality and race. Since this early work, the use of intersectional approaches in geography has continued to grow. In the late 1990s and early 2000s a number of social geographers focused on the intersections of, for example, youth, gender and religion (Dwyer, 1999; Hopkins, 2007) and youth, gender and class (Nayak, 2006).

Despite the concept being routinely employed by many social geographers, my argument is that we could be far more sensitive to the activist and intellectual (albeit contested) origins of intersectionality and treat it with more care in our work. Some geographers tend to overlook both the origins of intersectionality in black feminism as well as the earliest work in geography. Yet amongst the main contributions to intersectional geographies are notable examples that acknowledge the origins of intersectionality and pay attention to both gender and race whilst also being attentive to matters of inequality and politics.

Work in feminist geography and studies of sexuality in social geography often adopts intersectional approaches. For example, Schroeder's (2014) work looked at the intersections of sexuality, religion and class in relation to the cultural politics of LGBT neighbourhoods in Ohio, Rodó-de-Zarate (2014, 2015, 2017) has advanced geographies of intersectionality through mapping young lesbians' use of space in Catalonia, and Valentine et al. (2010) have explored the intersections of sexuality and religion and belief through a focus on the Anglican Communion Lambeth conference. Brown (2012) provides a useful overview of the intersections between gender and sexuality in an earlier review in this journal (see also Johnston, 2016).

Geographers interested in masculinities have also applied intersectionality to their work (Hopkins and Noble, 2009, Meth and McClymont, 2009). Intersectionality has been identified as a key mechanism from advancing geographies of age (Hopkins and Pain, 2007; Pain and Hopkins, 2010) and has been used in work about young people (O'Neill Gutierrez and Hopkins, 2014) and to explore the intersections between masculinities and older age (Tarrant, 2010). Work about racism and black geographies also employs intersectionality; examples here include Shabazz's (2015) study of black masculinity in Chicago, Joshi et al's (2015) critical engagement with whiteness and microaggressions experienced by graduate students and faculty, and Eaves' (2017) insights into the queer Black South in the US. Bastia (2014) provides an excellent overview of the import that intersectionality has in debates about migration and development (see also Bastia et al., 2011) and intersectionality has also been employed in research focusing on issues relating to water, nature and ecology (e.g. Nightingale, 2011; Thompson, 2016). More recently, Gökariksel and Smith (2017) provide an insightful justification for the need for intersectional feminism in the era of Trumpism.

A particularly notable contribution in geography is Mollett and Faria's (2013) conceptualization of postcolonial intersectionality which they develop in relation to feminist political ecology (see also Mollett, 2017). They note that:

> Postcolonial intersectionality acknowledges the way patriarchy and racialized processes are consistently bound in a postcolonial genealogy that embeds race and gender ideologies within nation

> building and international development processes. This concept reflects the way women and men are always marked by difference whether or not they fit nicely in colonial racial categorizations, as cultural difference is also racialized. (Mollett and Faria, 2013: 120)

Another important contribution to the geographical literature is Hovorka's (2012, 2015) work about feminism and animals. Referring to the case of Botswana, men and women are 'associated with and have access to certain animals that, in turn, come with particular opportunities and/or constraints'. Hovorka (2015) observes that cattle are associated with higher socio-economic status and can shape land-use as well as providing a source of employment; she points out that they tend to be associated with men 'who hold birthrights to and benefit from cattle ownership' (Hovorka, 2015: 5). In contrast, chickens have a lower status and tend to be more associated with women. Hovorka (2015: 6) finds intersectionality useful as it 'expands the nodes from which it is possible to unpack how power works in society by taking seriously species as a driver of social construction, experience formation, difference and inequality'.

A final example is Fisher (2015), who argues that the focus on the intersections of gender and race in geography has tended to conceptualize race and processes of racialization in relatively narrow terms. Based on her negotiations of her positionality as a student conducting fieldwork in the Philippines whilst being from New Zealand and studying in Australia and of mixed ethnicity (Maori and Pakeha), she uses an autoethnographic approach to explore how readings of her racialized body changed in different contexts. This work draws attention to the ways in which race, context and subjectivity are important when it comes to discussions about positionality and intersectionality. These three examples in particular all explore both racialization and gendering processes, are sensitive to the origins of intersectionality and show attentiveness to political issues and to inequality. In so doing, they avoid the omissions in some geographical work that risk whitening and depoliticizing intersectionality.

V Pathways forward

If geography is to challenge and overcome its racist and colonial tendencies and to ensure that intersectionality is not depoliticized and whitened, what are some ways forward? For me, this is about ensuring that matters of race, racism and racialization are not displaced. Collins and Bilge (2016) identify both social context and relationality as two of the key characteristics of intersectionality, alongside a focus on social inequality, social justice, complexity and power. It strikes me that in relation to social context and relationality in particular, social geographers have a potentially significant contribution to make. Collins and Bilge (2016: 197) clarify that 'social context has many interpretations' and they point to the importance of factors such as historic context, states and their use of power as well as social institutions as all contributing to 'social context'. Notably, they point out that 'the academy is an important institutional context for intersectionality' (p. 197) as well as the ways in which politics shapes how everyday places are constructed and arranged. Placing greater emphasis on the specifics of social context of 'local, regional, and national geography would provide a more nuanced discussion of global processes' (Collins and Bilge, 2016: 199). This is where social geographers have a significant role to play.

There are a whole host of knowledges, theories and approaches that geography could bring to bear on the issue of social context and relationality in intersectionality. Whether it be about understandings of scale, appreciations of place or time-space relations, spatial belonging and identities, social geography could usefully help to advance how intersectionality is theorized, applied in research and used in practice.

I now consider three areas that future work about intersectionality could productively focus upon: ethnic residential segregation, transnational migration, and embodiment and belonging.

1 Ethnic residential segregation and the city

Collins and Bilge (2016: 65) note 'in the confines of racially and ethnically segregated neighbourhoods and communities in the late 1960s, women of colour were in conversation/tension with the civil rights, Black Power, Chicano liberation, Red Power, and Asian-American movements'. The study of ethnic and religious residential segregation has a long history in social geography (e.g. Smith, 1989), yet the primary concern of such work continues to be about mapping, measuring and monitoring of patterns of ethnic and religious diversity and change. Reference to intersectionality within debates about residential segregation remains curiously absent and, at best, mentioned only in passing. A useful exception is Parker's (2016) 'feminist partial political economy of place' approach to urban research based upon her work in Milwaukee, USA. Parker finds that analyses of race and gender remain lacking in urban political research and 'intersectionality often lies unexamined' (2016: 1343). This approach includes focusing on both individual and intersectional structures of inequality and power, and crucially brings in the different components of intersectionality identified by Collins and Bilge (2016). A focus upon the ethnically segregated neighbourhoods from which ideas about intersectionality initially emerged provides fruitful ground for studies of intersectionality in social geography.

2 Migration and translocational positionality

A second area where geographers could usefully employ intersectionality is through our work about transnational migration and mobility, in particular to enrich our understanding of migrants' connections with multiple places and localities. Kynsilehto (2011) presents a rich insight into the ways in which intersectionality can be used to understand the labour market strategies of highly-skilled Magherbi women migrants. Anthias (2001, 2008, 2009, 2012) has discussed the idea of 'translocational positionality' drawing upon her research with Greek Cypriot youth in the UK. Although Anthias is a sociologist, many of the ways in which she frames her work will appeal to social geographers and could usefully be employed to develop further geographical work about intersectionality. For Anthias (2002: 499), narratives of location, dislocation and translocation are 'essentially stories about time and place'; they are also not fixed and unmovable but are 'emergent, produced interactionally and contain elements of contradiction and struggle' (Anthias, 2002: 500). Such narratives are also often about disassociation or denial, i.e. about rejecting what one is not a part of. Anthias (2008) refuses to see issues of migration and mobility as being only about dislocation. These ideas focus on location, translocation, dislocation and positionality in the lives of migrants. She suggests we focus on these issues in relation to gender, ethnicity, nationality, class and race (Anthias, 2008). Moreover, she suggests that the shifting locales of individuals' lives – and the movements, mobilities and flows associated with this – will offer enriched understanding of migrants' multiple locations and understandings of the world.

3 Embodiment and belonging

My third and final suggestion is for intersectionality to be employed in work about embodiment and belonging. Yuval-Davis (2011) employs an intersectional framing to think through the politics of belonging. In focusing upon contestations over belonging and how these are embodied and disembodied, geographers could usefully move beyond the simplistic assumption

that intersectionality is only about multiple identities. Yuval-Davis (2011: 13) notes that 'different locations along social and economic axes are often marked by different embodied signifiers, such as colour of skin, accent, clothing and modes of behaviour' (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 13). The politics of belonging is also about social location and emotional attachments and how these are assessed ethically and politically. Considering these 'embodied signifiers' may involve focusing upon issues of race, class, gender and sexuality, but it may also be useful to consider matters of embodiment such as those associated with disposition, habit, recognition and style (see, for example, Noble, 2009). Tse (2014) discusses work on geographies of religion that has adopted an approach informed by intersectionality; this builds on earlier work about religious youth that adopted intersectional thinking and links this with debates about the embodiment of lived religion. He notes: 'to study lived religion is to accord individuals within religious communities the agency to compose their own intersectional subjectivities' (Tse, 2014: 211).

VI Conclusion

I have argued that geographers are at risk of reinforcing our discipline as white, masculinist and colonial unless we treat intersectionality in a more sensitive and ethical way which includes paying more attention to its activist origins in black feminism. Ignoring the origins of intersectionality in black feminism and activism as well as associating intersectionality with feminism only work to reproduce geography, and the concept of intersectionality, itself as white. My suggestions for future research point to research areas that foreground matters of race, ethnicity, gender and locality – residential segregation, transnational migration, and embodiment and belonging – thereby making it difficult for the antiracist and activist roots of intersectionality to be overlooked. Geographers need to be careful not to depoliticize and whiten intersectionality; this means neither flattening it out by overlooking power relations nor ignoring the many minority women scholars who have contributed to its development. I conclude by suggesting that it could be useful to take intersectionality back to its origins – the practitioners, poets and activists who started to use ideas about intersectionality before it became written into academic work – and suggest that social geographers are ideally placed to think both about the academic import of intersectionality and also to work collaboratively with practitioners to do so (Collins, 2015).

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