

Intersectionality

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INTERSECTIONALITY; TRAVELING THEORIES; ECOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGES; GEO-BODY POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE; INTERSECTIONAL PRAXIS



The picture shows the wrapping up ('arropada') of the building of the Truth commission in Bogotá with a weave made of several pieces of cloth that the Unión de Costureras sewed. The Unión is a network of Black women who are victims of the armed conflict and who sew these weaves to deal with painful memories and denounce past and ongoing violence against women and marginalized communities in Colombia.

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More than three decades on from its inception, 'intersectionality' continues to be a puzzle for researchers, activists and practitioners in many fields looking for a coherent conceptual framework and concrete methodology via which to apply it. This entry proposes an approach to intersectionality which recognises the value of the travels and translations of this concept across multiple contexts and power asymmetries. That, while persisting in efforts to operationalise it in ways that stay true to its original purpose as a tool for social justice.

Abstract

Rooted in Black feminist and anti-racist social movements in the United States, 'intersectionality' is a perspective on inequality which identifies the simultaneous and inseparable dynamics at the basis of people's unequal social positionings and experiences. Although Kimberlé Crenshaw originally developed this term in the legal field, her work aligns with a rich legacy of Black feminist thinkers and activists more broadly. Social movements in different contexts have taken intersectionality up and reinterpreted it in varying ways to address the particularities of their respective struggles for social justice. Intersectionality has also become popular in scientific, non-profit and corporate discourses and practices, leading to numerous debates regarding problematic and proper uses of this knowledge vis-à-vis its original purpose as a tool for social justice.

Peacebuilding and transitional justice measures in contemporary conflict contexts where coloniality and colonial legacies still play an important role have demonstrated the need to go beyond 'add-on' gender approaches focusing on a homogenous grouping called 'women' (Bueno-Hansen, 2018). Mainstreaming intersectionality in these scenarios carries the promise that it can help expose the most serious yet unseen consequences of repression and violence in the social sectors experiencing the greatest marginalisation (Ní Aólain & Rooney, 2007). However, intersectionality is still conceptualised and implemented mostly as a universally applicable method for structural analysis, resulting in both ontological struggles which expose profound levels of incommensurability and in the unintended erasure of the knowledge and political struggles of marginalised groups (González Villamizar & Bueno-Hansen, 2021).

From a perspective sensitive to the perils of depoliticising resistance knowledge and further deepening historical power asymmetries, the entry conceptualises intersectionality as an 'ecology of knowledges' rather than as something whose definition is set in stone. This approach is based, on the one hand, on identifying intersectionality as a 'traveling theory' (Said, 1982), given its demonstrated capacity to circulate across multiple contexts. On the other, it recognises the origins of the concept in European and North American ontologies and highlights the power dynamics generated as it is successfully incorporated into different environments. Understanding intersectionality as an ecology of knowledges involves taking note of the constant dialogues, the translations and the interpellations occurring between the theorising of the

experiences of entangled inequalities by women of colour in several geopolitical locations, some of which potentially deviate from 'grid-like' understandings (Lykke, 2012).

In a second step, the entry approaches the operationalisation of intersectionality in peace and conflict research and practice, emphasising its potential as a 'critical praxis' which can help displace the dominant epistemology of abstract and universalist knowledge in these fields. As such, intersectionality connects with a decolonial sensitivity privileging relational and geo-body politics of knowledge and serves as a tool to undertake analyses of armed conflict and political violence which centre the experience of historically marginalised sectors. In this way, intersectionality can contribute to shifting the focus of peacebuilding and transitional justice measures from people's experiences of violence as objects of study and intervention to something from which we can unlearn, relearn and transform the world.

The travels of intersectionality, and some controversies around its definition and application

'Intersectionality' is a critical perspective on the simultaneous and inseparably interlocked nature of various dimensions of inequality, as based, among other things, on gender, race, social class and heteronormativity. It also helps shed light on the varying impacts of inequality on people's lived experiences according to their social positioning. Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) first developed the concept within the legal field to capture the structural dynamics to the discrimination produced by converging patterns of stratification against United States women of colour, which anti-discrimination laws had failed to address. While Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality was not meant as a general sociological perspective of inequality, her work draws regardless on a rich legacy of Black feminist thinkers and activists: to name just a few, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, the Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde and Angela Davis.

Social movements in different contexts have taken up intersectionality to address the particularities of their respective struggles for social justice. Given its demonstrated capacity to circulate across multiple contexts, being transformed and translated by every new use in a previously unfamiliar position, time and place, intersectionality is often referred to as a 'traveling theory' (Said, 1982). As explained by Sonia Álvarez (2014), the concrete experiences faced by feminist movements in diverse contexts show that such translations are essential to the

dialogues and negotiations occurring across multiple borders where the goal is building solidarity. In engaging with the concept of intersectionality, those aligned with decolonial, critical and autonomous strands of the feminist movement in Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, highlight the inseparability of gender, race, social class and heteronormativity further to their historical co-constitution in the project of modernity. This accounts for Indigenous and Black populations, as well as sexual and gender dissidences, becoming the subordinated and othered parts of the exploited classes in 'América Ladina' (Gonzales, 1988; Lugones, 2005; Espinosa Miñoso, 2019). The conviction here is intersectionality should serve to 'construct a social movement that addresses all types of oppression, exclusion and marginalization' (Viveros Vigoya 2016, p. 13).

However, the translations of intersectionality in each new context are also embedded in relations of power and in the asymmetries existing between languages, regions and peoples (Álvarez, 2014). More recently, these power dynamics have drawn vigour from the fact that the concept has been successfully incorporated in scientific, non-profit and corporate discourses and practices, as evident in the growing number of publications, research projects and policy developments which apply or revolve around intersectional approaches – especially in feminist circuits in Europe and the US. This has given rise to a series of controversies regarding the definition and application of intersectionality, especially as concerns the question of whether it is being used with proper attention to its history, roots and original intentions or instead instrumentalised and depoliticised to support agendas opposed to finding collective solutions to prevailing social-justice problems (Knapp, 2005; Nash, 2008; Luft & Ward, 2009; Lykke, 2012; Bilge, 2014; Carasthesis, 2016; Hancock, 2016; Curiel, 2020). These debates show that theorising and applying an intersectional perspective involves numerous complications from the point of view of the geopolitics of knowledge within and between feminisms in different regions of the world (Roth, 2013).

In the context of peace and conflict research, Stephanie Kappler and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert (2019) propose an 'intersectionality of peace approach', which seeks to make feminist viewpoints useful for a critical peace and conflict studies perspective on 'the local' – as helping identify power imbalances in peacebuilding situations. In transitional justice scenarios, in particular, Eilish Rooney and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin (2007) highlight how the promise of applying intersectionality to truth-recovery processes lies in its potential ability to expose the most

serious yet unseen consequences of repression and violence in the social sectors experiencing the greatest marginalisation. Despite being valuable theoretical insights, however, in peacebuilding practice intersectionality is still conceptualised and implemented mostly as a universally applicable method for performing structural analysis.

This obscures, though, the political dimension of intersectionality. Namely, as a tool for social transformation – which requires not only the disposition among differently situated groups to engage in solidarity and coalition but also a context-sensitive approach recognising and facilitating dialogue between the multiple resistance knowledges, cultures and histories which colonisation practices seek to eliminate. In consequence, intersectionality becomes a continuous site of ontological struggle around the experience of and fight against entangled forms of inequality. Profound levels of incommensurability are hereby exposed, resulting in the unintended erasure of the knowledge and political struggles of marginalised groups such as Indigenous and Black women (González Villamizar & Bueno-Hansen, 2021).

In lieu of a fixed definition: Intersectionality as an ‘ecology of knowledges’

According to Ochy Curiel, ‘intersectionality is just another sophism’ (2020). From a decolonial perspective, she critiques the liberal and multicultural logic permeating the use of Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality in state and legal scenarios. Namely, as focusing on the recognition of differences of gender, race and social class, among other things, while leaving unaddressed the systems of oppression creating such forms of othering in the first place. Curiel pleads, therefore, for us to abandon intersectionality altogether.

While her critique is certainly useful, it is worth highlighting that many other feminist authors and activists have approached intersectionality as a framework via which to foreground the compound effect of overlapping structures of oppression. That while also identifying the ways in which colonial power relations are made functional within those very structures (Davis, 1983; bell hooks, 1984; Hill Collins, 1986; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Lugones, 2005). As Crenshaw (2011) argues, instead of discarding the concept entirely the challenges surrounding its deployment can also be an invitation to develop more nuanced methods and reflections, as well as to engage in interpretive work enabling it to function (better) in each new presenting context.

Peacebuilding and transitional justice endeavours often take place in scenarios marked by colonial hierarchies, including forms of epistemic violence which subordinate and continue to exterminate autochthonous knowledges. While intersectionality's origins in the structural feminisms of US women of colour should not be overlooked, it is also important to adopt an epistemic sensitivity preventing the concept's transference or imposition on contexts alien to it – namely, to avoid re-inscribing asymmetries of knowledge (Roth, 2013). Recognising semiotic forms from the margins of dominant epistemologies, intersectionality can be described as an 'ecology of knowledges' (De Sousa Santos, 2007¹) composed of different genealogies of reflection on entangled inequalities. They are in constant dialogue, tension and interpellation with one another according to the various cultural, epistemological and ontological backgrounds in which the concept is taken up.

In such an ecology of knowledges, incommensurability is not necessarily an obstacle to communication or the establishment of complementarities. However, these outcomes require effort on both sides – ultimately as regards recognising the partiality and incompleteness of any individual point of view, no matter how strong it may be. Two different genealogies of intersectionality in the Colombian peacebuilding scenario serve as an illustrative example here.

Genealogies of intersectionality in the Colombian peacebuilding scenario

<p>Afro-descendent women working mostly in national-level organisations or from an urban background enact a genealogy which is closer to the theories and political stakes of Black feminists in the US in its emphasis on categories, structures and social positions. It highlights different levels or domains of power in the institutional, the symbolic and</p>	<p>The genealogy present in Indigenous and Afro-descendent women's activism within ethnic and grassroots organisations questions individual approaches to women's experiences and emphasises a relation of complementarity with men, as well as collective identities and struggles, including the identity between body and territory and</p>
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¹ In the course of writing this entry, accusations of sexual harassment and abuse were made against Boaventura de Sousa Santos, which also involved a lack of institutional response and support (Viaene, Laranjeiro & Tom 2022). In the face of these events, simply removing references to De Sousa Santos erases these women's voices, too, and the unacceptable behaviors they expose. While continuing to cite his work in this text, I acknowledge the seriousness of these accusations and insist it is impossible to "separate the art from the artist" (Mansfield et al. 2019).

the individual arenas; adopts notions of imbrication, hybridisation or mutual constitution of inequalities rather than additive and static models which erase the historical processes by which interlocking inequalities are produced; and understands intersectionality as a tool for structural analysis as much as a politics which promotes solidarity and coalition among differently situated groups. However, the concrete meaning of gender, race and class, among other divisions, as well as their particular articulations varies from the US context. They refer to this perspective as the 'anti-racist gender approach':

'An antiracist gender approach requires that we comprehend the historical contexts that redefine racism in the framework of all the power relations that sustain inequality, discrimination, exclusion and denial of certain beings. This approach draws on critical positions that evidence, analyse and act to transform the ideologies, discourses and behaviours that justify and perpetuate relations of power that distinguish between superior and inferior human beings on the basis of race. The subordination of Black women will only disappear whenever the social imaginaries that turn us into an instrument for the use of men, that define our bodies in terms of a sexual or domestic labour

the production of the common through the interweaving of women, men, boys and girls, elders and ancestors in daily life and in the struggles for land and physical and cultural re-existence. They call their perspective the 'gender, woman, family and generation approach' (GWFG):

'When we talk about woman, family, and generation, Indigenous women are thinking about Mother Earth and our deep relationship with the Moon and its phases. We are thinking about the way in which we secure the survival of Indigenous people, because we are in charge of sustaining our communities' lives. This is our legacy as Mother Earth and Moon. This approach is our opportunity to claim that we approach public policy from a gender perspective, but that we understand it differently' (Dunén Kaneybia Muelas Izquierdo, National Indigenous Women's Commission and Special Gender Instance for the Implementation of the Peace Accords).

The GWFG approach is part of a broader effort to examine and fight against the patriarchal and oppressive impositions that have developed in our communities, and which generate exaggerated privileges for men. So that men can understand, too, that they are victims of these processes. The system imposes many things on them to sustain an

<p><i>function, as inhuman beings, objects of touristic observation or as a pretext for charity, are transformed' (La Comadre - National Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians AFRODES).</i></p>	<p><i>oppression system that is only convenient for the system itself' (Yobana Millán, Women Returning to the Roots - Ethnic Commission for Peace and the Defence of Territorial Rights).</i></p>
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Peacebuilding and transitional justice mechanisms have tended so far to perpetuate the Western model of civilisation through the application of a linear temporality and by framing the aims of the transition within Europe's development towards modernity (Gómez Correal, 2016). Approaching intersectionality as an ecology of knowledges helps displace, then, the dominant epistemology of abstract and universalist knowledge characterising global designs. It can achieve this by introducing a relational and 'geo-body politics of knowledge' (Icaza, 2017), one which both honours the knowledge informing the positions of social movements aimed at transforming all dimensions of inequality and oppression and recognises the cognitive aspects of social justice. Moreover, as peace and conflict researchers seek to incorporate intersectionality into their work, engaging with theorisation from other geopolitical and epistemological reference points can contribute to the blurring of the deep divide between subjects and objects of knowledge. The dominant practices of scientific knowledge are characterised by this deep divide that feeds into the subordination of 'theory takers' in activism, art and feminist discourse in non-Western contexts to 'theory givers' in the West (Wynter, 1990).

Intersectional praxis in peace and conflict research and practice

Conflict and peacebuilding scenarios necessarily involve memory struggles between competing narratives on the violent events that occurred. Moreover, especially in contexts marked by long-term patterns of abuse based on racist, patriarchal, heteronormative and class-based hierarchies, such narratives usually rely on concepts of time and memory beyond the framework of liberal modernity and, as such, tend to go against the grain of the implicit goals and horizons of state-led transitions. This is evident, for instance, in the demands of Indigenous and Afro-descendent women in Colombia that the Truth Commission established to clarify the origins, patterns and persistence of the factors underpinning the decades-long armed conflict

investigate the colonialism and structural racism ever-present in their daily experiences of violence. It is also apparent in their emphasis on how certain memories remain undisclosed or be addressed through rituals aimed primarily at healing the body and doing justice to the Earth (González Villamizar et al., 2021). Through an intersectional lens, the stakes involved in dealing with the past in conflicted societies transcend simply achieving a break through on an unified account of events and thus require as well recognising the political endeavours taking place around peacebuilding operations and transitional justice institutions as 'epistemic struggles' (Icaza & Vázquez, 2013).

Although intersectionality has become popular in the last few decades as a framework for researching social inequalities, both in its earliest articulations and in its subsequent travels praxis has been a key site of intersectional critique and intervention. For Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2020), intersectionality as a 'critical praxis' has to do with the way in which people produce, draw on or use an intersectional framework in daily life. In line with the political dimensions of intersectionality, such praxis enhances intersectional inquiries insofar as it positions groups marginalised by multiple inequalities as knowers and active participants in the research process. In fact, intersectional knowledge is only possible to the extent that the inequalities inherent in the knowledge-production process are transformed (González Villamizar, 2023). In scholarship and practice, intersectionality can serve thus as a valuable tool in undertaking analyses of violence which honour the onto-epistemological reference points of differently situated groups to understand politics, community, peace and conflict within the framework of epistemic struggles for memory.

Operationalising intersectionality as praxis is rooted in acknowledging critical epistemologies according to which research and practical problems are always framed and addressed from a particular location and in the context of specific relations of power (Hill Collins, 1986; Haraway, 1988; Espinosa Miñoso, 2014). From a situated perspective on knowledge, the privileged standpoint of individuals and communities at the intersection of multiple inequalities becomes evident. This should encourage researchers and practitioners to reflect on the limitations implicit in their particular positionality, as well as to interrogate their privileges and be willing to use them to mobilise support for the subordinate group and to take leadership from it (Luft & Ward, 2009). Intersectional praxis dovetails, therefore, with engaging in relationships of ethical solidarity based on mutuality, accountability and the recognition of common interests (Mohanty,

2003), as well as with designing collaborative methodologies which centre racialised knowers and their political agendas.

However, establishing dialogue with communities which have been able to preserve autochthonous knowledges in the midst of coloniality becomes a challenge for those of us who have been socialised 'within' the latter. Embodying epistemic vulnerability is a strategy which can help acknowledge the particularity of one's own logic and relinquish the safety of how one thinks about or knows something, as it carries the refusal to reproduce epistemic privileges of a 'subject' interpreting and representing reality (Icaza, 2017). In this way, unlearning and relearning the world together with our interlocutors become possible, rather than making their experiences of violence the object of research and intervention projects. In sum, such praxis commits to not simply drawing on the premises of intersectionality on a theoretical level but to demonstrating also a practical awareness of the political implications of producing or applying knowledge across relationships of inequality.

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