

Week Eleven Reading Guide: Intersectional feminism

This week we examine the impact of intersectionality theory on activism. Developed by black feminist writers, the concept of intersectionality includes both a categorical element (a person's combination of multiple social identities) and a political one (the impact of overlapping systems of oppression). An example of the salience of the categorical element can be found in [this analysis](#) of MIT climate surveys. The political element, on the other hand, reminds us of the importance of movement spillover and coalition building. Contemporary activists working with an intersectional lens recognize that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King) and that single-issue activism often ends up further marginalizing oppressed peoples. As a result, intersectional activists focus on bringing attention to the systemic nature of oppression. They include several notable scientists such as Chanda Prescod-Weinstein and Ben Barres.

December 2, 2019

Prescod-Weinstein, C. 2016, [Intersectionality as a Blueprint for Postcolonial Scientific Community Building](#)

Chanda Prescod-Weinstein is one of the most influential natural scientists engaged in intersectional activism. She has had major impact within the field of astronomy through her identification of the role of overlapping systems of oppression within that discipline (described in the article above) and her role as co-organizer of the 2015 Inclusive Astronomy conference and its product, the [Nashville Recommendations](#). Recently she wrote a short article on [Grad School Activism](#).

In her 2016 article, Prescod-Weinstein notes that "the power dynamics at play and in particular the effects of economic and ethnic marginalization on the choices available to key players would be considered central to the analysis." This perspective comes from Critical Race Theory, which posits that race is socially constructed so as to maintain the existing social power hierarchy. How does she relate this analysis to multiculturalism, assimilation, and (neo)colonialism? (The glossary at the end is helpful.)

Much of the article deals with the reaction of astronomers to protests by Native Hawaiians on Mauna Kea seeking to block the construction of a giant new telescope. How did astronomers in the 18th century contribute to colonial exploitation of Haiti? What is the relevance of intersectionality (in both categorical and political senses) to the ongoing conflict over the Thirty Meter Telescope?

Roberts, D., and Jesudason, S. 2013, [Movement Intersectionality: The Case of Race, Gender, Disability, and Genetic Technologies](#), *DuBois Review*, 10(2), 313–328; <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000210>

This important article shows that intersectionality need not fall prey to identity politics, which, it has been argued, increases division and polarization, but instead can create solidarity and cohesion. The authors, who are both scholars and activists, detail a case study in effective movement building among reproductive rights, racial justice, and disability rights groups.

In what three ways do Roberts and Jesudason say that illuminating differences builds solidarity? How do they avoid the “Oppression Olympics” which can divide marginalized groups on the basis that “my oppression is greater than yours”?

Describe the two very different perspectives on disability held by the medical establishment and by disability rights activists.

What are the three main elements of the Generations Ahead model for outreach and collaboration in movement building? In this process, do the different movement representatives transcend their differences? What was the role of story-telling in creating a shared sense of belonging and purpose?

The authors describe a potentially fraught engagement between reproductive rights and disabilities rights advocates. One group’s position had emphasized a woman’s right to abort fetuses with genetic abnormalities which the other group found hurtful. How did these groups arrive at a shared set of values that enabled them to collaborate later on? Following legislative actions in the US Congress and in Nebraska, and a public controversy around abortion and disability, the alliance formed through Generations Ahead was able to bridge differences in a highly polarizing debate.

Although the authors do not mention the term, cultural humility seems to be one of the elements of success in their coalition. Developed in the context of health care, cultural humility “incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing ... power imbalances ..., and to developing mutually beneficial ... partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations.” (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1998) In the words of Roberts and Jesudason, an intersectional approach “can force us into a risky place of radical self-reflection, willingness to relinquish privilege, engagement with others, and movement toward change.”

December 4, 2019

Barres, B. 2018, pp. 3–62 and 103–115

Barbara/Ben Barres was an amazing neuroscientist and gender equity advocate, whose personal story was sufficiently compelling to break through the indifference of many scientists who have been trained to believe that science is a purely objective meritocracy. (Sadly, his/their story thereby sustains a harmful narrative of exceptionalism.) This short memoir, written while Barres was battling cancer, is a compelling story of persistence, integrity, and advocacy. Aside from the central section giving the science, the book is a fast read, although the topic is not easy—the injustices in the pages of this book combine with those the reader has experienced to create a bittersweet potion.

Although intersectionality is not named explicitly in this book, it is apparent through the overlapping oppressions of male domination, transgender non-personhood, religious dogmatism, and class-based marginalization. How does Barres experience these different oppressions, and how does this mix evolve through their life?

In her introduction, Nancy Hopkins shows a side of Barres that seems more forceful than Barres’ own account. What were the methods used by Barres to address systemic discrimination, and what was the impact?

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