

Confronting White privilege

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Confronting White privilege: the importance of intersectionality in the sociology of education

Abstract

This article explores how White privilege and a hierarchy of oppression have resulted in competing identities in which gender has been given greater importance compared to race. I argue that the sociology of education needs to adopt an intersectional approach that travels in different directions if it is to remain valid. This paper examines how gender, perpetuated by White privilege continues to play a key role in the positioning of Black and minority ethnic (BME) staff, students and pupils within a range of stereotypes that operate to marginalise their life trajectories. It argues that if sociologists of education are unwilling to challenge White privileged populist discourses and their own positions of White privilege then they will become complicit in maintaining a socially unjust *status quo*.

Introduction

Sociologists of education have a long history of exploring and analysing the impact of inequalities on the educational achievements of specific groups. Inevitably much of this research focuses on inequalities associated with specific communities of pupils or students. Often such research fails to interrogate how intersecting identities impact on educational experiences and trajectories. Worse still when it does look beyond single issue inequalities it has a tendency to focus on a discourse motivated by media or political interests. For example, the recent BBC¹ row over pay conditions identified gender differences in pay that primarily affected White middle class women, rather than levels of pay for those on low skilled and precarious contracts (Waterson, 2019).

In this article, I explore how White privilege and a hierarchy of oppression has resulted in a discourse of denial in which gender as a competing identity has been given greater significance and prominence compared to race. I argue that the sociology of education needs to adopt an intersectional approach that travels in different directions if it is to remain valid. This is particularly true in an era of populist politics where broad-brush identities are often used as a means of delineating and inciting difference. Such an approach would document and account for different intersectional identities and provide more nuanced understandings of diverse experiences. It would also position intersectionality as a methodologically rigorous process that brushes aside the popular and folk wisdom that is increasingly promoted as substantive matters of fact. This article examines how gender, perpetuated by White privilege continues to play a key role in the positioning of Black and minority ethnic (BME) staff, students and pupils within a range of stereotypes that operate to marginalise their life

¹ The British Broadcasting Corporation is a British public broadcasting service which is one of the largest broadcasters in the world.

trajectories. It argues that if sociologists of education are unwilling to challenge their own positions of White privilege and White privileged populist discourses then they will become complicit in maintaining a socially unjust *status quo*.

Intersectionality: a trendy, buzz word?

Intersectionality has become a trendy, buzz word over used in both academic and popular discourse. Hilary Clinton used it to explain the Flint Water Crisis², famously tweeting in 2016 ‘Flint’s water crisis is an example of the combined effects of intersecting issues that impact communities of color’ (Robertson 2017) and journalists such as Julie Burchill have denounced intersectionality as ‘...a manifesto out of the nastiest bits of *Mean Girls*³, wherein non-White feminists especially are encouraged to bypass the obvious task of tackling the patriarchy’s power in favour of bitching about White women’s perceived privilege in terms of hair texture and body shape’ (Burchill 2014) resulting in a very public spat with the transgender columnist for *Vogue*, Paris Lees about the use of the term (Lees 2014).

Kimberlé Crenshaw who first introduced the term has said she is, ‘...amazed at how [intersectionality] gets over- and under-used; sometimes I can’t even recognize it in the literature any more’ (Robertson 2017). On the one hand, the term is over used and has suddenly become the buzz word for ‘woke’ White liberal feminists. Robertson (2017) noting, ‘...the enthusiasm with which intersectionality has been taken up by feminists suggests that it

² In 2014, the drinking water source for the city of Flint, Michigan (USA) was changed from Lake Huron and the Detroit River to a cheaper source of water from the Flint River. As a result, lead leaked into the water pipes of drinking water which exposed over 100,000 residents to high levels of lead. Critics have argued that the Flint water crisis is an example of environmental racism as 56.6% of Flint’s population is African American (Elgion 2016).

³ *Mean Girls* is a teenage black comedy broadcast in the USA which documents female high school life with friendship cliques and the damaging impact these can have on girls.

addresses itself to a real problem: the tendency in radical spaces to repeat forms of hierarchy and domination present in wider society' (Robertson 2017). On the other hand, it is not used enough, simply dismissed when explaining and analysing the oppression of certain groups when prioritising Whiteness and White identities and ignoring how gender, race and class affect experiences (Bhopal and Preston 2011).

Intersectionality used correctly is a useful approach to analyse how overlapping or competing identities affect the experiences of individuals in society. Discourses of inequality cannot be explained by any one single factor, rather intersectionality analyses how competing factors work to produce different outcomes of power relations. Kimberlé Crenshaw uses intersectionality to critically interrogate the essentialist model that one single axis such as race or gender is sufficient to explain and analyse individual experiences of oppression (Crenshaw 1989). Crenshaw argued that the multiple dimensions of difference which interweave and intersect provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of oppression. Crenshaw used intersectionality by applying it to a legal framework to understand the experiences of Black women in order to provide a critical analysis of racial inequality. Her emphasis was to highlight how the, '...focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed' (1989, 1243). She argues that a '...focus on the most privileged group members marginalises those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination' (1989, 140).

Critical Race Theorists (CRT) in the USA have used intersectionality to analyse and acknowledge that through racism people of colour and their experiences have traditionally

been, ‘...distorted, ignored, silenced, destroyed, appropriated, commodified and marginalised’ (Bell, 1995, 901). Race and the impact of racism are central to an analysis of oppression, particularly in relation to intersectionality, as Bell argues, ‘...we emphasise our marginality and try to turn it toward advantageous perspective building and concrete advocacy on behalf of those oppressed by race and other interlocking factors of gender, economic class and sexual orientation’ (Bell 1995, 902).

In the UK, intersectionality emerged from the feminist struggle in which Black women redefined, questioned and challenged how feminism only spoke to the experiences of White middle class women (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Brah 1996). Much of the Black feminist movement was based on challenging White racist patriarchal structures, as well as questioning who feminism was for and how the experiences of Black women in the labour market and family differed to those of White middle class women (Brah 1996; Collins 1990).

Conceptually, intersectionality explores how different forms of stratification have positioned women and their experiences and, according to Yuval-Davis it, ‘...is the most comprehensive, complex and nuanced and does not reduce social hierarchical relations of power into one axis of power, be it class, race or gender’ (2015, 638). McCall (2005) suggests that intersectionality must be applied to the use of appropriate methodological tools to address inequalities and proposes two different approaches to analyse the complexity of intersectionality in social analyses. The inter-categorical approach includes exploring how the intersection of different social categories such as race, class, gender affect behaviour and the distribution of different resources, whereas, the intra-categorical approach focuses on problematizing and questioning the boundaries of different categories. McCall argues for the

use of the inter-categorical approach, whilst others suggest combining the intra-categorical approach with the socio-economic focus of the inter-categorical approach (Yuval-Davis 2015). There are however difficulties when using the concept of intersectionality and Hancock (2016) rightly questions what intersectionality is and what it has become – she asks, is it a “meme”⁴, “intellectual property”, theory, politics or an activist strategy? Hancock suggests two complementary ways in which intersectionality can be an effective strategy; firstly as, ‘an inclusionary project designed to remedy specific instances of intersectional stigma or invisibility’ and secondly as, ‘an analytical project designed to reshape how categories of difference are conceptually related to each other’ (2016, 34). She proposes the concept of ‘stewardship’ which calls for an approach to use intersectionality in ethical ways so that it can be a useful tool for future generations of feminist activists and scholars. Stewardship demands an interdisciplinary focus, a global reach which links to distinctive practise as well as a recognition of the history of intersectionality and the impact this ‘historical arc’ has had on scholars and activists. The aim of ‘stewardship’ is ‘...to produce projects that hopefully leave intersectionality scholars better equipped to engage in knowledge production projects in intersectionality studies’ (Hancock 2016, 23). With this in mind, the remainder of this article will draw on quantitative and empirical evidence to demonstrate the nuances of different inequalities faced by BME groups in higher education.

Gender inequalities in UK higher education

⁴ A meme is an idea or behaviour that spreads from individual to individual by means of imitation to convey a particular phenomenon or meaning.

Whilst women constitute more than half of the higher education workforce (54.2%), they continue to experience disadvantages within it. In 2016/17 women were more likely to be over represented in professional and support services and under-represented in academic roles. In both academic and professional and support services women were more likely to be on fixed term contracts and on part-time contracts compared to men. They were under-represented in senior managerial positions, but over-represented in less senior academic roles. Amongst professors, 75.4% are men and 24.6% are women. In addition to these gender differences in levels of seniority, men were more likely to earn more than women; of professional and support services staff at the highest pay grade less than half (48.2%) were women despite women making up 62.6% of that workforce. Similarly, in academic roles, 71% of those on the highest salary spine were men (Advance HE 2018)⁵.

Race inequalities in UK higher education

Whilst there are differences within the BME category, the numbers of BME staff working in higher education institutions (both academic and professional services) overall has shown an increase in the last 10 years (Advance HE 2018). However, those identifying as BME academics were more likely to be on fixed term contracts compared to White groups. BME staff are under-represented in the highest contract level and over-represented in the lowest; only 0.8% of all UK heads of higher education institutions were from a BME background and only 5.5% of academic managers and directors. A larger proportion of White academics were on the highest pay range of £58,754 or more compared to BME staff (18.1% White staff compared to 17.0% BME staff). Furthermore, there are only 85 Black professors compared to 13,535 White professors (Advance HE, 2018). In summary, BME groups continue to be

⁵ The full details of these statistics are reported in Bhopal and Henderson (2019a).

disadvantaged by every measure in higher education institutions; they are less likely to be in secure posts, less likely to occupy senior managerial posts and be professors and are more likely to be on lower pay spines compared to their White colleagues (Bhopal 2016; 2018).

Intersectionality: gender and race

The statistics on gender and race suggest that White men, followed by White women continue to occupy advantageous positions in higher education compared to BME women and BME men. White men, followed by White women are more likely than BME groups to be professors and to be in senior managerial positions; only 1.4% of BME women were senior managers compared to 3.5% BME men. Furthermore, the mean salary for White women was higher than the mean salary for BME women (Advance HE 2018). The data suggests that White men and White women continue to occupy senior managerial posts, to be in positions of power and earn more (on average) than BME groups.

'A Tale of Two Charters': how a hierarchy of competing oppressions privileges gender at the expense of race

There is a plethora of evidence to demonstrate the presence of different types of inequalities in higher education. These have focussed on gender (Leathwood and Hey 2009); race (Bhopal 2016) and class (Reay 2018). A recognition of such inequalities has resulted in the move to remedy these, particularly from a focus which identifies and recognises the role of higher education institutions as being inclusive and socially just. Ways forward to address such inequalities have included initiatives addressing the representation of women in

academic science⁶. In 2005 the Athena SWAN charter (ASC) was introduced to advance the career progression of women in STEMM⁷ subjects. Higher education institutions are awarded a gold, silver or bronze award based on providing evidence demonstrating the representation of women, progression of students into academia, career milestones and the working environment. The achievement of an institutional award is based on providing a self-assessment of gender equality and an action plan including an organisational outline of how the proposed actions will be implemented. Applications can be made at whole or institutional level. Since it was introduced in 2005, the ASC has shown to be influential in progressing the position of women in STEMM subjects (Munir *et al* 2013; Ovseiko *et al* 2017).

As well as widening the scope of the ASC, in 2016 the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU)⁸ introduced a new equalities charter mark to address racial inequalities in higher education. The Race Equality Charter (REC) is similar to the ASC in terms of the process of self-assessment and the importance of an action plan to address inequalities, however its main focus is on race as well as an explicit focus on the experiences of students as well as staff. REC applications and awards are required to address ethnic differences in student retention, progression and degree achievement, particularly the BME attainment gap and addressing an ethnocentric curriculum. The REC however, is not tied to applications for research funding, as is the case with the ASC and therefore does not occupy the same imperative as the REC for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). At the moment institutions as a whole (rather than individual departments) can only apply for the REC. Currently, 48 institutions are members

⁶ This has included the Scientific Women's Academic Network and the Athena Project. Both of these were combined to create the Athena Swan Charter.

⁷ Science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine.

⁸ The Equality Challenge Unit is a registered charity in the UK which works to advance equality in higher education. In 2018 the ECU, together with the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the Higher Education Academy formed Advance HE.

of the REC, with a total of 10 holding a bronze award, and in contrast there are 159 members of the ASC holding a total of 766 institution-wide and departmental awards ranging from bronze to gold (<https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/members-award-holders/>).

There is evidence to suggest that in many HEIs, gender as an inequality has taken precedence over race (Bhopal 2018; Bhopal and Henderson 2019a). The statistical evidence discussed above suggests that White women have benefited more from inclusive policy making compared to Black men and Black women. For example, the ASC, by its very nature and its application to STEMM subjects, has addressed the needs of and has benefitted White middle class women, as BME women from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be under-represented in STEMM subjects and in STEMM professions (Bhopal, 2018; Macdonald 2014). ‘The introduction of the ASC was an example of the privileging of Whiteness and White identity since the main beneficiaries of the charter mark would be (and are) White middle class women’ (Bhopal 2018, 52). Furthermore, it is only recently (2015) that the charter has addressed intersectional identities. Our recent research which compared the ASC with the REC demonstrates that many HEIs see gender as a priority rather than race. We found that there was a greater commitment from staff for the ASC, as gender was seen as a universal category compared to race⁹.

I think there is a greater need to focus on gender than race, and in some respects that is more justified because we have to think that over 50% of women make up the academic workforce, so it works in the favour of the university if they want to address inequality (ASC bronze award holder).

⁹ See Bhopal and Henderson (2019a) for full details of the project aims and methodology.

It's an easier conversation to have about gender than it is to have about race. People can easily talk about those things to do with gender, like better provision for childcare for women, people taking time out and coming back to work after they've had children and things like that. When it comes to talking about race, it's much harder. And no one wants to go there in terms of institutional racism and you know that's a conversation that institutions don't really want to have, so it becomes more difficult (REC bronze award holder).

Another reason given for the precedence of the importance of gender over race was the composition of the local or regional population.

In an area where there are very few people of colour it's very hard to justify and explain the context – if it is a small area that is mainly White compared to the larger cities then the smaller area is disadvantaged – through no fault of their own. (ASC bronze award holder).

It depends on where you're located because we are in an area that is predominantly White, our geographical location is mainly White, our students are mainly White and our university is mainly White. So to some extent it doesn't make much sense for us both in terms of workload and resource to apply for the Race charter because it won't make any difference to us. Athena SWAN is different we can justify that and put resources into it, because it benefits a lot of people – it benefits 50% of our workforce (ASC bronze award holder).

This argument suggests that race is only seen as a concern where racial diversity *already exists*. Consequently, White-only spaces are perpetuated by the myth that the academic space *is and should be* White, and should only be diverse if it is *already* diverse. So if an area is predominantly White, there is little or no impetus to address racial inequalities. Such an

approach justifies the need to address Whiteness and White privilege through the continued perception that race – compared to gender – is *context-specific*, rather than a universal inequality (Bhopal 2018; Bhopal and Henderson 2019a). What is clear is the perspective that work on the ASC becomes the standard practice because gender is considered more important (and valued) than race, such work becomes the norm. In contrast, efforts to advance racial inequality are seen as secondary and geography specific. Such work on race is seen as an ‘add-on’ and the perception of the REC is seen as time consuming and adding to already overloaded workloads. In contrast, work on gender is seen as worthwhile and contributing to an equalities agenda. Consequently, higher education institutions use economising strategies to cater for this by combining roles which focus on gender and race *together* (which they report as intersectionality). ‘Even if it is couched as a simple accident of timing, the effects of the introduction of the REC after the firm establishment of the ASC are that the REC is a *secondary* equalities priority. While institutions can claim to be working on structural inequality by focusing on gender equality, there is little or no imperative to shift the focus to uncomfortable conversations about race and racism in the academy’ (original emphasis) (Bhopal and Henderson 2019b).

Consequently, BME academics who work on the REC are afraid that race becomes ‘lost in the equalities conversation’ and pushed at the back of the equalities agenda.

We want the specialist interest in race, because of the risk of dilution. We don’t want to dilute race amongst all the other characteristics (REC member).

The problem is, if inequality based on race is combined with other inequalities then it will be seen as not important. Gender would be seen as the most important characteristic – because it is one that everyone recognises and it is put before the

interests of people of colour because race is seen as secondary – and this is reflected in the ways in which universities work. You can see it through the policies and workings of the actual institution (REC member).

There is evidence to suggest that previous equalities work such as that related to the Equality Act has transformed addressing inequalities into a ‘tick box’ exercise designed to make higher education institutions comply, rather than confront inequality and inclusion (Bhopal and Henderson 2019b). Ahmed (2007) argues that equality policies encourage higher education institutions to fill in forms and audit sheets, with little or no understanding of how to actually use such policies to make significant changes in their organisations to address racism. Furthermore, in combining different types of inequality, the Equality Act has in fact masked specific racial inequalities evidenced by the marginal position of BME academics in higher education institutions, and the racism they experience (Bhopal 2018; Crofts and Pilkington 2012). This is also the case for REC work as evidenced above (Bhopal and Pitkin 2018; Bhopal and Henderson 2019a; 2019b). ‘Given the persistent and stark racial inequalities in UK higher education, it is crucial that these are not allowed to be conflated with or replaced by more familiar discussions around gender equality. Through such a conflation, HEIs could appear to be conducting work on redressing inequality, while ensuring that the very issues that exclude people of colour from the academy are further excluded from discussions within the academy’ (Bhopal and Henderson 2019b).

Ways forward?

Intersectionality can be used as both a conceptual and practical tool to address inequalities in higher education. As a sociologist of education I argue that an intersectional approach identifies the *hollow spaces* of White privilege where the narratives of social justice are not

matched by meaningful actions. This is a problem that can be evidenced throughout all arenas of education from primary, secondary and higher education (Bhopal 2018; Myers and Bhopal 2017; Myers 2018). Such research highlights the slow cultural change to challenge racism in education. What is needed in education is a radical shift to address clear racial inequalities in education; closing the BME ethnic attainment gap; addressing and confronting racism and White privilege; having a diverse representative professoriate as well as introducing a decolonised curriculum across all disciplines. In this sense, what is needed is a *recognition* and *acknowledgement* that, 'Whiteness is thus conceptualised as a constellation of processes and practices rather than as a discrete entity (i.e. skin colour alone). Whiteness is dynamic, relational and operating at all times and on myriad levels' (Di Angelo 2011, 56). White privilege includes the operationalisation of Whiteness in which '...processes and practices include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people' (Di Angelo 2011, 56). Within education, a discourse of denial has been evidenced by a failure to acknowledge racism and White privilege, which has resulted in a failure to act upon it and address the vast inequalities experienced by BME staff and students as discussed above.

Intersectionality can be used to unmask the racism in education, to shine a light on our own role as academics, to highlight the obvious and visible but also to highlight the underlying and so called 'invisible' aspects of racism. As sociologists it is our practices, our own inequalities and injustices that we must first confront, to ensure that we ourselves are aware of our own prejudices. In understanding how different histories and environments impact on individual experiences, intersectionality can be used '...as an analytical approach to understanding mutually constitutive (rather than additive) categorical relationships' (Yuva-Davis 2015, 637). At the same time, '...confining intersectionality only to address issues

relating to black women/women of colours...runs the risk of pre-assuming a uni-dimensionality of social and political marginality, invisibility and oppression' (Yuval-Davis 2015, 638). In this sense, sociologists need to address and check their own White privilege to enable them to question which knowledge is considered worthy and how such knowledge is translated as sociological. As Nash argues, the historical approaches to intersectionality are important and '...the rich concept of stewardship provides a vocabulary for considering mindful, ethical deployments of intersectionality that ensure the analytic's future vitality' (2016, 4).

The history of the sociology of education has been (and continues to be) dominated by White privilege – in its subject matter (class, gender, sexuality), in how it is represented (at conferences, editorial boards, publications) and in dominant occupied positions of power (professors, senior decision makers, power brokers). White privilege dominates the *construction* of knowledge and the *communication* of that knowledge. Such knowledge is communicated through a White lens perpetuated through White worthy normative experience and practice. In order for the sociology of education to challenge and confront populist, racist ideologies it must confront and address its own White (gendered) privilege. Only then can we move towards an inclusive sociology which welcomes and incorporates different modes of thought, knowledge and discourse. Such a sociology of education should question, disrupt and dismantle the *status quo* of White privilege.

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