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Intersectionality and Sexualities: Multiple trajectories, empowered selves

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Introduction and acknowledgments

- What is intersectionality theory?
- Why so topical?

- Acknowledgements to:
  - ESRC
  - Diane Richardson (University of Newcastle)
  - Research contributors
  - Camillo Tamayo Gómez
  - Ahonaa Roy

Aims and objectives

- To outline some approaches to intersectionality theory
- To ground discussions in empirical material
- To outline a key debate about the use of categories
- To leave you thinking critically and reflexively about what intersectionality theory means for your practice/research/scholarship/policy making etc.

Structure

- Introduction to intersectionality theory and key aspects
- Leslie McCall's work
- Southern aspects
- UK BME analysis
- Class aspects
- Labels – their role in perpetuating inequalities
- Labels – their strategic use
- Summary and conclusion

The empirical basis

- Research about Indian genders/sexualities (2003, Leverhulme)
- ESRC project ‘Organisational Change, Resistance and Democracy’ (2007-2010 with Diane Richardson - known as SELG project)
- Research about UK bisexualities for monograph: Bisexuality (forthcoming Palgrave Macmillan 2015)
- Interviews with Colombian bisexual people conducted via skype in Spanish by Camillo Tamayo Gómez (2012)
- Collaborative work with South African colleagues (Prof Vasu Reddy - Human Sciences Research Council and Zethu Matebeni – University of Cape Town) – current
- Life – observing…..micro-encounters….

Introduction to intersectionality theory

- Sojournor Truth's statement:

'…ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm. I have plowed (sic), I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. And ain't I a woman?' (Speech recounted from Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851 (Brah and Pheonix 2004))

- US scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) introduced the term 'intersectionality' to mean a crossroads where different identities (in her case, race and gender) intersect
- Enables understanding of intertwined identities… relationships along multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations (McCall, 2005)

Key issues

- There has been a tendency for intersectionality studies to have focused mostly on gender, class, and race (see Crenshaw, 1997; Hurtado and Sinha, 2008)
- Intersectional studies foregrounding sexuality include Julie Fish's (2008) research on LGBT identities and health care
- There are concerns about the transposition of intersectionality theory from its roots in critical race and black feminist thinking
- E.g. Devon Carbado (2013)'s critique of colour blind intersectionality Some people use the term to mean 'diversities' or multiple marginalisations

Key social forces/characteristics that can be considered

- Race/ethnicity
- Gender
- Sexuality
- Ability/disability and health status
- Location (national and urban/small town/rural)
- Citizenship status
- Socio-economic class, caste
- Aesthetic capital
- Age
- Caring/no caring responsibilities
- Partnership status
- Faith
- Etc. etc….

Leslie McCall's work

- McCall (2005) *anticategorical complexity* deconstructs identity categories (deconstructionist)

'...an alternative of course [to bisexuality] would be a more ambiguous identity which referred, which could accommodate multiple desires and multiple sexual engagements and also the struggle for same-sex desire could be queer...' (Christian Klesse bisexuality project UK)

- It is relevant to those who critique categories on political grounds:

'it is a privileged position that allows us to do so [consider sexual categories] *...asylum seekers, from...the global south, and their choice to be gay, or bi, its a matter of life and death for some people'* (Lena, bisexuality project UK)

Fluid, unnamed, or liminal sexualities and intersectionality

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'…with male saunas, it's all done with eye contact or just a touch, people don't speak, with the [pornographic cinema] screen it's usually the back row where stuff happens, and if you are sat next to someone and they touch your leg with their leg or your hand with their hand that's a signal and if you let that happen that's a signal that you want to do something' (Andy, bisexuality project UK)

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Intercategorical complexity

- *intercategorical complexity*...[which] *requires that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions* (McCall 2005, p.1771) (strategically essentialist)

'…it is important to understand that there are a lot of different social structures, dynamics and conditions for white people, and different social structures for black people in Colombia that affect the issue of being a bisexual or not…you can find a really interesting thing at the same time: bisexuality is only accepted for men and not for women, reproducing some rules of the Colombian patriarchal society' (Mario, bisexuality project Colombia)

Intracategorical complexity

- *Intracategorical complexity* uses both deconstructionist and strategically essentialist approaches
- It can be used to understand within-group complexities
- It tends to focus on neglected intersections

'One of the real problems where bullying can come from, within education especially, if it's not discussed in classrooms or anything else, outside of that, 'cause I had some major problems when I was there, with, and shortly after I'd come out round here, somebody from round here gave me a death threat'
(young gay man, SELG project)

Intersectional invisibilities

'I know some bisexual families but I think they are more hidden from the radar, because in the Colombian catholic society is not possible to understand this new type of family and society is always waiting for the "perfect nuclear catholic family" and they cannot accept a bisexual family…' (Lucia, bisexuality project Colombia)

'...for many people you don't exist. It's the complete invisibility and erasure of bisexuality [pause] you need to be stronger, to say all the time "I am bisexual, I identify as bisexual" when other people tell you "you don't exist" or, if they recognise that you exist, then you are "greedy", you "can't decide", you are "not able to decide", you don't have the, you "lack the mental skills" to decide...but now I really feel that I have to say all the time, that I am bisexual. It's this constant battle...' (Merina, bisexuality project UK)

Southern aspects of intersectionality

Southern aspects of intersectionality cont.

- *'some Afro descendent communities from Cartagena (Colombian Caribbean Cost) or from Chocó (Colombian Pacific Cost) where polygamy and bisexuality are culturally accepted…'* (Mario, Colombian Bisexuality research)

- *'In Afro Communities if I say "I'm bisexual" it is less problematic than if I say "I'm gay", because if I say "I'm gay" people start believing that I cannot get back to being a heterosexual, but if I say "I'm bisexual" the same people start thinking that it is just a temporary condition and is just all right… and it is more as a strategy in order not to lose my role inside my community'* (Lia, Colombian Bisexuality research)

UK BME people's experiences - example

*… my parents were quite liberal about Islam, but according to the Islam we were brought up with lesbianism and gay or bisexuality was completely wrong...There were lots of women who had a big influence on me, there was this Asian girl and she had a girlfriend who had lots of piercings, I was so scared of her girlfriend but I was so attracted to this woman, she used to cycle, she would cycle down the road and I used to go, 'Oh My God, you are so gorgeous...' It wasn't that I woke up one day deciding to be bisexual, I think it was that was that those feelings were able to come out, I was away from my culture and my family [at university] and I was able to discover who I was and what I was feeling...(*Yaz, bisexuality project UK)

Socio-economic class - example

I used to be involved in online groups the online communities are just like [pause] cruising, they might be cheating on their wives, the discussions online were about what they were doing, and also about people making sense of their sexual orientation, communicating with other people, discussing the emotional side, that is an equally real side of bisexuality...for example it could be people who go to football matches, working men who would never go to BiCon, it's not on their radar (Lawrence, bisexuality project UK)

Labels – their role in perpetuating inequalities

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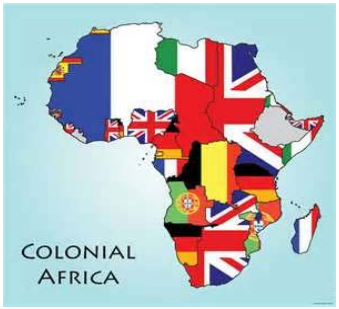
'From a Western viewpoint, sexuality constitutes an essential or core attribute of identity; individuals are said to have fixed sexual identities or orientations. Sexuality as it is understood in the United States and Europe, however, often bears little resemblance to sexual relationships and practices across cultures' (Blackwood 2000: 223)



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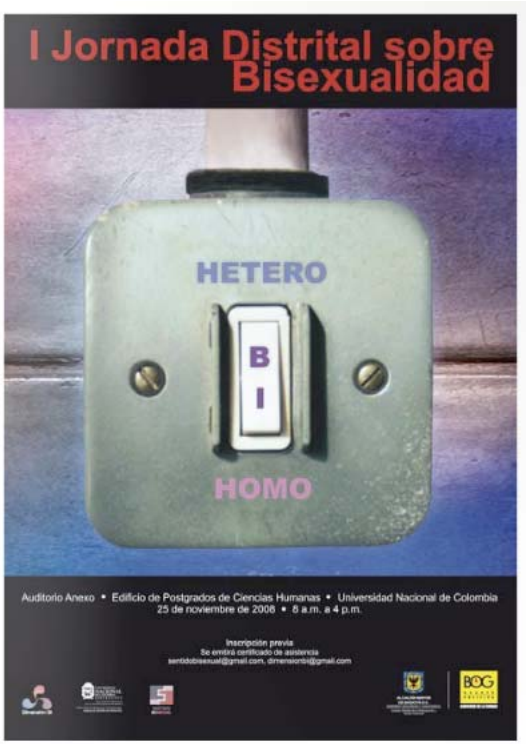
Cont.

...the word 'bisexual' is a very European word, and I really like the acronyms 'Men who have Sex with Men' and 'Women who have Sex with Women', just I can think about where I grew up...Black men would go to a sauna or a club and have sex with other men but they would never call themselves 'gay' or 'queer' (Jacqui, bisexuality project UK)

Bisexuality for me is primarily an attitude, a way of life, a mind set that privileges plurality and dares to tread beyond narrow one-dimensional binds of identity. In sexual terms, bisexuality has taught me to revere individual sexual autonomy over any specific collective identity. I understand bisexuality to mean an ability to relate to persons as persons – unconstrained by gender roles or norms, allowing such relationships to traverse different spaces, including the sexual (Banerjee 2009, p.105).

Labels – their strategic use

'Our principal needs are recognition, respect and dignity for this sexual option… recognition to overcome guiltiness, shame and to not feel judged… people say no! Wait a minute, you are not bisexual, you are gay or lesbian, take an option!!! and this is wrong and disrespectful… because bisexuality is not a thing that you can take off…' (Marcos, Colombian bisexuality research)



Poster of the First District Conference about Bisexuality in Bogotá - 2008

Concluding thoughts

- Intersectionality theory can provide a nuanced way of addressing identities
- It can help us to deal with tensions between deconstructing identity categories and reinscribing them
- It reveals areas of privilege as well as marginalisation, calling us to become empowered, and own privileges and use them for positive, activist purposes
- Alliances can be built across different social groups using intersectionality theory, but it is necessary to be mindful of avoiding approaches which could hide the realities of lived experiences and inequalities
- Context-specific analysis is crucial

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