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The politics of intersectional practice: Competing concepts of intersectionality

The current moment is unprecedented in demonstrating the global need for ground-breaking policy approaches to address inequalities. The recent intensification of *both* intersecting inequalities (Hankivsky and Kapilashrami, 2020) *and* demands for radical change internationally calls for an approach which can account for the complexity of intersecting factors and processes structuring social relations, risk and outcomes (Bowleg, 2020). Yet, internationally the predominant way of addressing inequalities, a siloed one focused on single issues/identities, presents an enormous challenge to operationalising such an approach. This is because the siloed approach: presupposes that social groups are marginalised homogeneously and singularly; predetermines which factors and processes affect which social groups; effaces intersectional marginalisation; and serves the exclusive interests of those who are singularly disadvantaged. This single issue approach has produced little progress towards achieving equality for the most marginalised. Consequently, there is increasing recognition of the need for policies and organisations to engage with intersectionality, the Black feminist theory that social inequalities are simultaneous and mutually constituting (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Collins, 1990) and thus cannot be effectively addressed separately. This 'urgent' (Crenshaw, 2016) 'paradigm shift' (Hankivsky and Mussell, 2019) has never been more critical. Yet globally intersectionality is widely thought to be a challenging theory to *apply* (Hankivsky and Cormier, 2011), and represents a puzzle to policy makers and practitioners navigating the confines of policy area and equality strand silos (of e.g. race, gender, and disability). Examining how the theory of intersectionality works in practice is key, since practitioners are predisposed 'to engage intersectionality as critical praxis' (Collins and Bilge 2016, 42).

Based on the first empirical study internationally to explore how *both* practitioners and policy makers *themselves* understand 'intersectionality', and first in-depth exploration of intersectionality's applications in the UK, this article shares findings establishing different ways in which the theory of intersectionality is applied in practice, and their limitations and effects. The unique contribution of examining *understandings* of intersectionality is to evidence that *multiple applied meanings are named as 'intersectionality' and can simultaneously coexist in the same contexts*. This is important because specification allows for identification of the strengths and conceptual and practical limits of each one, and its implications for intersectionally marginalised groups: some concepts further entrench inequalities while others further intersectional justice. This article draws on my research primarily with three networks of third sector equality organisations (racial justice, feminist, disability rights, LGBTI rights, refugee organisations, and intersectional combinations) with documented

commitments to intersectionality, based in cities in England and Scotland. This sector plays a key and at times overlooked role in equality policymaking and implementation, and is engaged in *politics*, relations of power characterised by competing interests and conflict among and between actors from the sector and those of the state, in which the applied meaning of *intersectionality* is contested. Shifting theoretical meanings of intersectionality in the international literature (Hancock, 2016) and empirical ones in UK policy (Christoffersen, 2019), suggested a need to further examine meanings of intersectionality in ‘practice’ (the work of third sector practitioners in social action and interaction (Freeman, 2019) with one another, their constituents, policymakers, and those delivering services in the public sector), to inform intersectionality’s growing interpretation by policymakers: the Scottish government recently commissioned research on creating an ‘intersectional gender architecture’, an interest mirrored in other jurisdictions (Hankivsky and Mussel 2019) and increasingly in the international arena in a Covid-19 context (OECD 2020).

Intersectionality theory typically includes elements such as: mutual constitution of inequalities (Collins, 1990); different levels of analysis (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Dhamoon, 2011); relationality (Collins and Bilge, 2016); and focus on those who are intersectionally marginalised (in particular Black women and women of colour) (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). However, as I will show, in practice, different meanings are adopted. Intersectionality presents a huge challenge to the status quo of siloed equality work, and while some engage with this challenge, others subvert intersectionality for other purposes, or seek to incorporate it into the status quo, emptying it of its transformative potential in the process. I argue that ‘intersectionality’ is understood and used in multiple, contradicting ways: there is not one, but five, applied concepts of intersectionality in equality organising and policy.

In the article that follows, I first outline my methodology. Next, I share five ‘applied concepts’ of intersectionality derived from my data. I found that practitioners tended to articulate their understandings of intersectionality by thinking through and describing how they, or how they would, apply it in practice; or similarly, by the implications of what it means for how policy and the public sector should act (rather than by reference to theory). In other words, their practice (or imagined practice) drove their understanding, and in turn, the theory or typology of intersectionality’s operationalisation which I develop in this article. Practitioners that I spoke with tended to think through doing or imagining doing, though sometimes what they actually do may be different from what they say they do or think that they do. Their knowledge is transactional (Sullivan, 2017). This makes sense when we think about intersectionality as being largely a ‘praxis’ (Collins and Bilge, 2016). It is for this reason that I refer to these as ‘applied concepts’. However, this is not to say that practitioners by virtue of being practitioners have a privileged relationship to the ‘truth’ of how intersectionality should be applied. While it has been argued that the application of intersectionality

matters more than its definition (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013), I suggest that from the point of view of practitioners, these are inextricably interrelated and mutually constitutive. Within this typology of applied meanings given to intersectionality by practitioners sit a large range of more specific practices which both follow from and shape these concepts, and which can be usefully analysed in relation to them.

In naming the five applied concepts that I have found to be identified with 'intersectionality' as intersectionality, I aim *not* to further the association of problematic practices *with* intersectionality. For clarity, I would argue that three of these concepts be *disassociated* from 'intersectionality' (which of these I mean will become clear); in the meantime, I stress the importance of careful examination of the specific meanings given to intersectionality in policy and practice globally. I propose this typology, derived from applied meanings given to *the term* by both policy makers and practitioners, as a heuristic to analyse the ways in which intersectionality may be institutionalised internationally, and their outcomes, discursive and material. I also suggest that this typology i. aids in accounting for problems that emerge when practitioners seek to operationalise intersectionality; and ii. not only expands existing knowledge about the practicalities of grappling with intersectionality in siloed contexts which are the norm internationally, whether these are equality strand silos or policy area silos (or most often, both), but by examining intersectionality's meanings in and across a range of equality sectors, rather than exclusively feminist movements (Lépinard, 2014), may express the *limits* (the possible institutional configurations of in/equalities) of how intersectionality *can* be operationalised in not only siloed contexts, but the ontological silos that intersectionality scholars still grapple with (Hancock, 2016) and that set the stage for policy and practice.

Operationalising intersectionality

In the field of policymaking internationally, the few extant applications of intersectionality can largely be understood as limited to 'additively organized diversity policies' (Townsend-Bell, 2019, 735). In social movements and organisations, research on intersectionality's operationalisation has predominantly been conducted in the US, identifying important ways that intersectionality can be applied (Strolovitch, 2007; Chun, Lipsitz and Shin, 2013; Roberts and Jesudason 2013). Yet, precisely how intersectionality is operationalised remains a relatively under-explored area of research. To advance knowledge of intersectionality's operationalisation globally, further research on the decision-making of cross-movement actors on multiple inequalities is required (Verloo 2013).

Past studies internationally have not investigated the meanings given to intersectionality by those who apply it. They have alternatively i. assumed a shared meaning of intersectionality between

activists, practitioners and researchers (Chun, Lipsitz and Shin, 2013; Roberts and Jesudason, 2013)ⁱⁱ, so the *meaning* given to it by practitioners and activists was left uninterrogated; ii. pre-defined and operationalised intersectionality in a particular way (Luft and Ward, 2009) and applied this operationalisation deductively to practice (Strolovitch, 2007) that practitioners *themselves* did not necessarily understand as ‘intersectionality’; developed typologies with relevance to women’s organisations based on wider exploration of how they approach differences among women (Lépinard, 2014). The lack of research exploring what those who use it understand intersectionality *as* is both an important and a puzzling omission, given that as ‘travelling theory’ (Knapp, 2005), meanings of intersectionality are at the least fluid, if it is not a completely empty signifierⁱⁱⁱ. In contrast, my research in the UK explored what *meanings* of intersectionality are related to its practical application. Put another way, rather than taking as point of departure the *practice* or *intersectionality*, I began from *the practitioner*: what is intersectionality *to them*? How do they *perceive themselves* to operationalise it?

The UK is a particularly important case to study intersectionality’s operationalisation, since its internationally unique unification of equality legislation and architecture creates opportunities to consider the interactions of equalities (Squires, 2009; Parken, 2010; Hankivsky, de Merich, and Christoffersen, 2019). In light of debates in intersectionality studies internationally about white appropriation of intersectionality (Jordan-Zachery, 2013; Lewis, 2013) from Black feminism, the use of the term and the concept ‘intersectionality’ to describe social divisions and positions beyond those applicable to Black women and women of colour is politically contested. In the UK equality policy and third sector environment, the term intersectionality has been growing in popularity, driven by both public discourse as well as the multi-strand equality policy context (Parken, 2010). Particularly in policy, it tends to be used in an unspecified way, across up to nine ‘protected characteristics’ named in the Equality Act 2010: race; disability; sex; age; religion or belief; sexual orientation; gender re-assignment (i.e. transgender status); pregnancy and maternity; and marriage or civil partnership (Christoffersen, 2019). In this context, my research asked what intersectionality means, and how, and in whose interests, it is used.

Methodology

Researching how people, organisations and networks of them conceptualise a contested theory/idea, and how they perceive themselves to operationalise it as well as what they actually do, is inevitably complex. This particular project lent itself to a qualitative approach interested in perceptions, experiences, practices^{iv}, interactions, and accompanying texts (i.e. documents). To explore how equality third sector organisations (comprising voluntary and community, and social enterprise, organisations that emerged because of inequality related to markers of identity, and aim

to increase equality) and equality policy makers conceptualise and operationalise intersectionality, I therefore conducted mixed method qualitative case studies of intersectionality's conceptualisation and use within networks of equality organisations aimed at cooperation to address inequality, and advance equality. Equality organisations, which have been largely focused on single issues/identities do, variously: campaigning and policy engagement; community development/engagement; and service delivery. These networks bring together single issue racial justice, feminist, disability rights, LGBTI rights, and refugee organisations. Intersectional organisations are underrepresented in networks compared with single issue organisations, but were purposively selected to constitute 20% of the sample of network member organisations (specifically, organisations led by and for Black and minority ethnic (BME) women; BME women of faith (2); disabled women; and LGBTI refugees). As a general rule all other marginalised characteristics tend to be underrepresented among those who staff single issue organisations, and all sectors but the racial justice sector or intersectional organisations including work on race and/or ethnicity are white-led and predominantly white.

The case studies were conducted within an intersectional, feminist, and antiracist theoretical framework, which demands attention to context, positionality and experience in knowledge production, and views multiplicity, including the simultaneity and contingency of power, oppression and privilege, as logical rather than incoherent (Hancock, 2016). In light of debates in intersectionality studies about white appropriation of intersectionality (Jordan-Zachery, 2013; Lewis, 2013) from Black and women of colour feminism, as a white woman, I will contextualise what has led me to this topic (Christoffersen, 2018): my key point of entry to this project was my background as a practitioner in my sector of interest, meaning that I am complicit with and implicated in what follows. My practitioner background was key to recruitment of networks. I built relationships with participants by explicitly acknowledging both similarities as well as racialised and other differences.

The complexity of both intersectionality and the social world of the equality third sector means that one methodological approach or method on its own was insufficient to research the relationship between them, and to do so 'intersectionally'. My methodology drew principally on ethnography and participatory research. For about 1.5 years, I participated in the daily lives of the networks, which for most members means primarily, attending semi-regular meetings and events and participation in network email lists. The research therefore has particular ethnographic characteristics: at times my role as a researcher was (partially) obscured either to myself and/or to participants, and I influenced the social worlds that I participated in and thus the research narratives. Conducting ethnography allowed me to build relationships of trust across difference with participants over time. Networks were engaged at an early stage and had input into the

development of research questions and design. Some participants were involved in data collection and recruitment. Within the case studies, I employed four methods:

[Table 1 here]

In other words, I explored ‘meeting, talk and text’ (Freeman, 2019). The typology presented here draws on all of these methods: I asked participants directly what intersectionality means to them, sought out meanings in their wider narratives and in documents^v, and observed understandings at work in meetings and events. Many different meanings of intersectionality were ultimately inductively identified from all of these data, analysed first through preparation of preliminary case study reports, and subsequently in Nvivo using grounded theory and thematic analysis techniques. Yet, five emerged as being particularly prevalent, and having significant practice implications.

Job roles of third sector participants varied, from volunteers (1), to practitioners (20), to directors (15). In representing a range of equality sub-sectors, participants were diverse across: age; disability; D/deafness; gender; race; religion/belief; sexual orientation; and transgender status. For the purposes of the research which was predominantly concerned with practice in organisations, in terms of individual positionality the equality sub-sector that the participant represents is the most important characteristic to contextualise them alongside their data, included below. This is usually synonymous with an aspect or aspects of the identity of the participant (given that equality organisations are mainly led and staffed by their target communities). In order to ensure the anonymity of individual participants, individuals, organisations, networks, and cities are anonymised. I held several sessions to share and co-construct findings with participants, in which we discussed the typology I present here. Participants validated that they recognised these concepts. Our collective thinking from these sessions has informed the analysis to follow.

I will now turn to outline a typology of intersectionality’s conceptualisation and use among equality organisations and policy makers.

Competing concepts of intersectionality

[Table 2 here]

Generic intersectionality

Found among some policymakers, and the overlap of policy, the public and third sectors, ‘generic intersectionality’ is an applied concept of intersectionality wherein there is no focus, or very little

focus, on any equality strand or strands in particular. The same or similar work is delivered to benefit 'all'. Crucially, work aims to address issues that affect 'everybody', that is, not only or even primarily marginalised equality groups.

One equality network in particular employed an understanding and application of generic intersectionality. Network organiser Leanne^{vi} identified that one way the network practiced intersectionality was to structure work around issues, rather than equality strands:

We made the decision [at an event designed to input into the local equality strategy] to have discussions around themes rather than equality strands or communities of interest. That was a very conscious decision to have that intersectional focus without calling it an intersectional focus...[because]...those areas affect everybody from all groups...an intersectional approach...[is]...issues that do affect everybody...all people are at an equal standing in the network.

The network sought to avoid an essentialist framing of issues as belonging to certain groups, by recognising the overlap between groups. Framing discussion around issues is very different from a multi-strand understanding of intersectionality, in which discussion is framed around each equality strand, and these are addressed separately. Yet other networks have adopted an issue-led approach and still maintained a focus on marginalised, and particularly intersectionally marginalised, equality groups. In seeking to avoid essentialism, the network seemed to lose sight of structures of inequality and relationality between them, where not all issues do affect everybody in the same way. Moreover, working on issues that affect only the most disadvantaged is both foreclosed on, and constructed as being *not intersectional*.

An understanding of intersectionality as generic equality has several implications for practice. Work is addressed at and intended to benefit *everybody*, so in contrast to other understandings which employ targeted projects, intersectionality is envisioned as being 'mainstreamed', or a general approach. Since this concept treats everyone the same, work on specific inequalities is generally inconsistent with this understanding of intersectionality. As such, the network did not employ a targeted approach to any of its work, instead treating everyone the same:

We weren't grouping people by characteristic, or community of interest. It was just [undertaking the same work with everyone] ...the idea was for that to be intersectional and also inclusive and accessible.

Intersectionality as pan equality

Intersectionality as 'pan equality' means addressing broad issues that are common to all, or most, equality strands, or in other words, addressing issues that affect all, or most, marginalised equality

groups. The focus on marginality is what distinguishes this concept from the generic one (interested in issues that affect ‘everyone’), and is reflected in issue selection. The extent to which issues are perceived as common to equality groups is what in turn distinguishes it from multi-strand intersectionality.

Network organiser Nicola, for example, defined intersectionality as:

The commonalities of barriers and disadvantage faced by different protected characteristic groups.

While some conflate ‘pan equality’ and intersectionality, here network organiser Catriona reflects on the difference between the two.

I think...the difference is [between pan equality and intersectionality], effectively they're the opposite of one another, in a way. Within any kind of pan equality say campaign... if you're trying to reduce inequalities or reduce discrimination then actually the most effective way to work on that is to support intersectional communities within that pan equality issue to highlight their needs or lobby.

Here, Catriona feels that while these are distinct concepts, they also can complement one another, and views both as necessary for equality work.

Julie, director of a refugee organisation in England^{vii}, expressed a similar view.

In some ways a lot of work around equality is about looking at smaller and smaller and smaller groups, but at the same time it has to be balanced, by looking at the bigger and bigger more fundamental issues...but neither one nor the other is quite right.

Participants often gave the example of work on hate crime (campaigning, research, etc.), perceived as a common issue affecting marginalised equality groups, and worked on in networks and other coalitions in the context of ongoing reforms to the law, driven by this concept: including Jacqueline, practitioner in a disabled people’s organisation in England: ‘that’s one of the areas we’re very aware of intersectionality’. While some made a conceptual distinction between pan equality and intersectionality, others saw pan equality work (to jointly campaign for legal parity in hate crime legislation across strands) as their intersectional work.

Multi-strand intersectionality

‘Multi-strand intersectionality’ is addressing equality strands in parallel, separately yet simultaneously. It is distinct from generic understandings focused on ‘everyone’ effacing specific inequalities, in that equality strands remain very important and in primary focus. It is inclusive of an

idea that all strands *ought* to be included, and treated equally: accorded the same level of attention and resourcing.

This is an additive understanding of intersectionality: equality strands are conceptualised alongside one another, but not as affecting one another. As such, some with this understanding view intersectionality as interchangeable with multiple discrimination. A key practice example of this was equality network collaboration to input into local equality strategies. A substantial number of participants identified this as a good example of their network's intersectional work. Yet on careful analysis of the processes and documents constituting this, it often followed the definition of multi-strand intersectionality elaborated here. In collectively developed policy responses, network members emphasised that issues themselves for different equality groups 'differ significantly' (AD 18^{viii}); commonalities were thereby resisted, effacing intersectional marginalisation (which was not mentioned) in the process since strands were considered to be separate with no crossover.

Intersections within a strand: 'Diversity within'

'Diversity within' is addressing intersections within an equality strand, and was most prevalent in the women's sector: addressing differences among women. A particular strand remains the focus, and is viewed implicitly or explicitly as more important than others; this is the key distinction between this understanding and the final one, intersections of strands.

Here, Diane, a practitioner in a women's organisation in England, explains what intersectionality means to her.

Intersectionality is the new word...there are lots of issues that are emerging now that...[show] how that recognition of intersectionality impacts on women's lot. It's quite... insidious. The...prioritising of the individual I think is seriously damaging to women as a group. And those intersectional points...is why we need to be clear and articulate, how and when that affects, and keep the case going strongly for keeping those visible. That's my focus.

Intersectionality is constructed as something which has relevance sometimes, but not all the time; as well as something which is inherently individualistic. Recognition of intersectionality is 'insidious' for women 'as a group'. It is their task to narrow down exactly when intersectionality is relevant, implying that oftentimes, it is not. Like multi-strand intersectionality, diversity within is additive. Instead of being mutually constitutive with other strands, other strands are perceived as being only nominally relevant and only sometimes.

In practice, use of this concept often involved developing inclusion projects targeted at particular intersections within the strand. Because of the additive nature of this concept wherein inequalities are conceptualised as being legitimately able to be added and subtracted at will, rather than being viewed as mutually constitutive, projects were conceptualised singularly. Some single strand organisations may therefore have multiple targeted projects/programmes which may be deemed successful, but these are not always ‘layered’, and can be conceptualised and managed entirely separately within an (even quite small) organisation. One such (white-led) organisation with a race project developed one on disability which seemed to forget about race in its documentation, outreach and imagery, while monitoring information revealed that the project beneficiaries were c. 95% white (AD 42).

Intersections of equality strands

The final applied concept of intersectionality which emerged, ‘intersections of equality strands’, is work of and with specific groups sharing intersecting identities, e.g. women of colour and disabled women. The key distinction between this concept and ‘diversity within’ is that no particular equality strand is primary, or more in focus than the other (or others). In sharp contrast to those employing generic, pan equality, and multi-strand understandings, those with this understanding perceive their intersectional work as that with those who are intersectionally marginalised, belonging to particular overlapping equality groups. This is the only concept which positions intersectionally marginalised people as agents.

‘Intersections of strands’ concepts may be employed with the view that getting it right for the most marginalised will benefit ‘all’, the target of generic intersectionality; but in the long term, as network organiser Catriona described.

I think I've always felt that if you can work with and support the most marginalised, then really that should be able to be applied to any other community. If we get stuff right for disabled refugees and asylum seekers, then it should work for all other vulnerable refugees. It should work for all other disabled people. It should work for all other people.

Key practice examples employing this approach include ‘intersectional organisations’, focused on multiple mutually constitutive equality issues at their core (e.g. BME women of faith organisations), and formal and informal partnership projects between single strand organisations, or ‘intersectional alliances’. Kya, practitioner in an intersectional (LGBTI refugee) organisation, explains the difference between single strand, ‘diversity within’ approaches and this approach.

We already knew about the different challenges, the intersectional challenges that people have. This is what our work originally sought to address... so it's not a concept that is new to us but it is something that our work is already set on for a very long time.

While some organisations may seek training in or actively try to work with a view to intersectionality, intersectional organisations perceive themselves to have always done so. For organisations that are single strand in contrast, intersectionality is constructed as something that comes after the organisation temporally, challenges it and demands some change.

Beyond intersectional organisations, within intersectional alliances, this concept of intersectionality implies an aimed-for equitable partnership or relationship, since no strand is given primacy, whereas a diversity within understanding does not. For example, in one city a disabled LGBTI group emerged fairly organically from disabled LGBTI people, and was then supported by a disabled people's organisation and an LGBTI organisation, as well as the city's equality network. Due to the workings of intersecting structures of inequality, intersectional organisations and alliances have been particularly hard hit by austerity; many have closed. This was identified by participants as a significant barrier to operationalising intersectionality.

Origins of concepts

Competing concepts of intersectionality have distinct origins. The origins of additive concepts of intersectionality (diversity within and multi strand) relate to siloed equality policy and organising, while generic intersectionality may be understood partly as what happens to silos in austerity contexts.

'Diversity within' emerges from within single strand, siloed working; intersectionality stops here, otherwise organisations and practitioners would have to admit that they are not really doing intersectionality. The development of projects targeted at particular groups within the strand has often been driven by demographic analysis of service users by equality characteristics, frequently instituted as a funding requirement in light of the Equality Act. Single strand organisations have not then, always embraced intersectionality and developed projects out of goodwill. They have often been driven by requirements of funders revealing their exclusion of intersectionally marginalised people, though they are funded to serve 'all' in a given geographic community of identity. Those who practiced diversity within in organisations at times practiced multi-strand intersectionality in networks. 'Multi strand' is clearly related to the Equality Act, which created a multi-strand equality policy framework. Indeed, during co-construction sessions, participants recognised this approach in government templates for equality impact assessment, in which there is space dedicated to

consideration of each strand separately (with none to consider intersections of them). In this context it may be that organisations are 'stuck' at multi-strand understandings of intersectionality. These additive concepts of intersectionality were more prevalent in Scotland than in England. According to participants, the Scottish government's Equality Unit was influenced in particular by the women's sector to develop work around the term and concept intersectionality. This source is unsurprising given that the (white) women's sector enjoys a privileged relationship with the government. This sector was relatively opposed to a widening of the equalities agenda (to include for example faith). It championed particular ways of understanding intersectionality as *'the further complications, the further disadvantages and further discrimination that you can experience... if you fall into more than one group'* (interview with policy maker, 2018), wherein one inequality (gender) is considered primary. The government has absorbed particular meanings of intersectionality from specific third sector actors, and particularly since the Equality Unit is a key funder of equality organisations, these meanings then constitute a discourse in which other actors take them on.

At UK and national levels, meanings of intersectionality as 'generic' arose in contexts of a policy shift away from 'multiculturalism' toward 'cohesion' and 'integration' (Afridi and Warmington, 2009), as well as similarly, a multi-strand equality policy framework. At local level, meanings of intersectionality as 'generic' arose in contexts of austerity. Contemporary equality networks usually superseded strand-specific networks which were resourced by local government. In times of austerity, local governments stated that they no longer had the capacity or resources to administer the strand-specific networks: in the case of the generic equality network, a stated aim of establishing it was to reduce costs associated with local government fulfilling its legal obligations around equality. Intersectionality was used as a rationale for dismantling siloed networks, a rationale which obscures the material reasons of austerity (AD 2). Clearly, it is much less expensive for local government to fund one 'intersectional' network, than it was to fund three-nine strand-specific networks. While a generic approach to *equality* was perceived by some practitioners and scholars in the lead up to and following the Equality Act (Inclusion Scotland *et al.*, 2017), this research identified the way in which *intersectionality* is mobilised to give a new name to this approach, and a very particular meaning to 'intersectionality'. This meaning of intersectionality is not, however, only imposed top-down by policy makers. Networks themselves recognise and use the intersectionality-as-value-for-money argument in a context of austerity. Generic concepts of intersectionality were also more prevalent in Scottish cases than English ones. A contributing factor is the context of equality 'mainstreaming', one of the Scottish specific regulations of the Equality Act. In practice mainstreaming in a context of austerity often amounts to generic approaches. Equality organisations describe a generic approach as follows: 'to treat protected characteristics in an undifferentiated

way, glossing over or ignoring the specific disadvantage and discrimination faced by specific groups of people' (Inclusion Scotland *et al.*, 2017, 4).

In contrast, pan equality and intersections of strands intersectionality can be understood as emerging counter to siloed equality policy and organising: participants with these understandings cited personal experience as a key source of knowledge of intersectionality. The term 'pan equality' has a longer history in the sector than 'intersectionality', particularly in England. Pan equality work is an outcome of networks and coalitions of single strand organisations, the formation of many of which was driven by increased awareness of multiple inequalities due to the amalgamation of disparate equality legislation into one Act. It seems that as intersectionality has grown in popularity, it has assumed the meaning of this term. One possible explanation that this meaning of *intersectionality* has gained prominence is that, similar to generic approaches, pan equality approaches can appear cost-effective to funders, a view instrumentalised by one equality network. In contrast, many participants commented on the lack of dedicated funding for, and difficulty in acquiring funding for, 'intersections of strands' intersectional work. The latter is the applied concept identified which most closely resonates with wider academic and popular understandings of intersectionality. Yet among my research participants, it competes with the four other concepts identified in this article. Intersectional organisations are increasingly laying claim to 'intersectionality', recognising their work in the concept though the term itself may be newer to them. The formation of intersectional alliances is often driven by desire to work in more intersectional ways.

Intersectional practice: Ideas, politics and policy

Some, but not all, of these concepts are conceptually exclusive to one another. Yet in practice, the same networks, organisations, and even individuals may employ multiple concepts. Contradicting concepts were at times used within the same conversation. This may be instrumental, to gain funding for example. However, my conclusion is that for many this is because they are still exploring what intersectionality does mean and how to use it in practice. I also found that policymakers employed, and accepted the validity of, whichever of these concepts suited their interests at particular junctures. Yet some applied concepts of intersectionality have the potential to further intersectional justice, while others further entrench inequalities.

A generic concept of intersectionality effaces intersectional marginalisation. Recognising this, some participants resisted this concept, pointing out that although different equality groups may be affected by the same issues, they are likely affected by them differently. They argued that in a situation of inequality, applying a generic approach will reproduce and exacerbate those

inequalities. Moreover, a generic approach can serve to increase siloed attitudes, which are a barrier to practicing intersectionality. Treating ‘everyone’ the same compels practitioners to emphasise the difference of ‘their’ group from others, creating debates about who is more discriminated against which further entrench an idea of equality groups as being mutually exclusive (Christoffersen, 2020). Stephen, director of a racial justice organisation in England, explained.

If you create a spurious equality between different protected characteristics, for example, say they're all equally worthy of study and being addressed, then I think you're actually going to end up with the opposite of what good intersectionality does. Which is to say that actually these are multiple and you'll end up with a situation where people will end up constructing their own hierarchies of oppression if you're not careful.

Generic intersectionality empties intersectionality of its attention to power and marginality. It is employed in the interests of maintaining the status quo of inequalities. Yet, these effects and uses are not always conscious or explicit. This concept is employed not only by policymakers, but by well-meaning practitioners seeking to avoid essentialising tendencies inherent to the current siloed context. Generic intersectionality is highly significant because although scholars may easily conclude that it is not intersectionality at all, it goes far beyond uses of intersectionality as institutionalisation of diversity observed in the US (Nash, 2019) in further marginalising social groups, particularly along racial lines (Christoffersen, forthcoming); it propels equality as liberal sameness into the present and future under a new name. It is also quietly achieving common sense status in some policy contexts, and on its own terms it is being operationalised with tremendous success. From the perspective of generic intersectionality, working on issues that affect only the most disadvantaged is successfully constructed as being *not intersectional*, and out of date in the era of intersectionality.

Pan equality intersectionality shares similarities with some applications of intersectionality in policymaking (Parken, 2010), and recommendations for how to apply it in policy literature in the UK (Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012) and internationally (Hankivsky and Cormier, 2011). The concept of intersectionality as pan equality creates space for organisations working across different equality issues to come together, develop joint work and pursue policy change collectively, potentially heightening their impact. A key strength of pan equality intersectionality is that it avoids predetermining which issues affect which social groups; another is that in focusing on broader issues, it facilitates more structural understandings of intersectionality. In some cases however, it amounts to conceptualising issues as common to groups while the groups remain separately and unrelatedly conceived (thereby effacing intersectional marginalisation). The particular agendas of groups of intersectionally marginalised people may be lost when this understanding of intersectionality is employed on its own; common issues may be watered down in content to the

lowest common denominator, ignoring differences between inequalities. Similarly, when practitioners employed arguments that pan equality work is good value for money, this suggested that work employing other understandings is not. Yet this concept may also ultimately facilitate intersectional working, as Julie noted:

If we identify the big pan equality concepts...power and structure and hostility and hate and abuse and those things, then it becomes possible to work intersectionally...the pan equality stuff...provides a connecting mechanism for people who are working with...intersections between what in our minds are still separate issues.

Moreover, without a focus on intersectional marginalisation, pan equality practice can reproduce the status quo of power dynamics. Yet there were other empirical examples of work on hate crime which included *both* campaigning for parity in hate crime legislation across equality strands, *and* highlighting the intersectional nature of hate crime (for instance that disabled women of colour may be particularly subject to hate crime because of their specific, mutually constitutive social location, and in particular ways). Therefore, while pan equality intersectionality *on its own* may at times efface intersectional marginalisation, if efforts are made to highlight particular intersectional marginalisations within these wider issues it can both build solidarity and inspire coalition around the common issue, as well as prioritise intersectional disadvantage; yet this prioritisation is a matter of constant negotiation, as Catriona described: *'In [one of our coalitions], there've been a couple of instances where people maybe felt that one intersection was being prioritised over their intersection or their community...there are times when people might feel that...an agenda is going off in a particular direction, and...leaving them behind'*. However, importantly, pan equality intersectionality precludes work on issues which are *not* necessarily perceived as common.

Within additive multi-strand and diversity within understandings, intersectionality is constructed as something that happens *after* equality strands (understood singularly), both conceptually and temporally. Significantly, multi-strand intersectionality effaces intersectional marginalisation *per se*, since equality strands continue to be conceptualised singularly. It precludes focus on those who are most disadvantaged, since it is inclusive of an idea of equivalence between strands. There is little in this concept that challenges the status quo of single strand equality work, and the siloed thinking behind it. It reflects the collective vested interests which single issue organisations have in maintaining a siloed context, and effaces intersectional marginalisation. It has been theorised in the international literature (Krizsan, Skjeie and Squires, 2012), and felt by some of my participants, that bringing equality strands together, whether into one law as with the Equality Act, or into one network, creates opportunities to explore the interactions between inequalities, and thus to operationalise intersectionality. Multi-strand intersectionality may then, given the current siloed

configuration of equality work, be a necessary first step to practicing intersectionality collectively. Yet for some, it seems to stop there: *because this is in and of itself conflated with intersectionality*. To understand intersectionality as something else would be to admit that equality practitioners are not actually doing intersectionality. While bringing equality strands together into one law or network may *create* opportunities to consider the relationships between them, it is clear from my data that this does not automatically follow, or necessarily happen. Yet, multi-strand institutions such as networks are important places of learning about other equality issues, out of which other approaches to intersectionality may develop. On one hand, social groups are thought to have separate issues, while on the other, organisations somewhat childishly insist that ‘their’ strand be considered in relation to ‘other’ strands’ issues (AD 18). This may inadvertently pave the way for more useful applications of pan equality intersectionality.

Diversity within intersectionality characteristically predetermines which social group is affected by which social problems. One inequality is considered primary, and intersectionality is addressing differences within a pre-defined social group. These differences are however considered secondary, and so attention to them is occasional rather than constant: ultimately, these secondary inequalities may be subsumed in the supposed interests of advancing equality for the social group (thereby becoming privileged members of that group). Other aspects of identity shaping intersectional marginalisation may be able to be incorporated as ‘additional barriers’ but this tends to be limited to one at a time, and since marginalised people are viewed as solely oppressed, it manifests in projects lacking meaningful representation of intersectionally marginalised people in decision-making. Moreover, inclusion of intersectionally marginalised people as service users does not mean that there is any change in the issue agendas of single strand organisations (see also Laperriere and Lépinard, 2016). Diversity within bears all of the implications of gender-first approaches to equality which efface women of colours’ experiences that are widely critiqued elsewhere (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Hankivsky, 2005). Those organisations with diversity within understandings are sometimes reluctant to the intersectionality table, compelled there by funder equality monitoring requirements highlighting the exclusive nature of their services and activities.

Additive understandings of intersectionality restrict it to the level of individual identity and experience, focusing work on the symptoms rather than the causes of inequality. They obscure understanding of intersectionality as the ‘fusion of social structures that creates specific social positions’ (Bassel and Emejulu, 2010, 538), evidencing and reinforcing an additive view that these structures can be separated from one another. This fusion of social inequalities, while in constant

process, can also be conceptualised temporally as happening prior to person x occupying social position y, but this is invisibilised by additive concepts. It is in the interests of single strand organisations to conflate intersectionality with multi-strand and diversity within intersectionality. If intersectionality is conceptualised otherwise, then it becomes apparent that these organisations are not really doing intersectionality, though many are claiming to. Funders are also heavily complicit in this conflation and limiting use of intersectionality, since many recognise, encourage and expect these concepts *as* intersectionality.

Intersections of strands is found within some practice of networks, within intersectional alliances and among intersectional organisations. This is a concept much closer to what we may readily recognise as intersectionality, and bears similarity to operationalisations of intersectionality in international research (e.g. Cruells and Ruiz, 2014). It is nearly opposite to generic intersectionality, within which focus on particular intersectionally marginalised groups is constructed as niche, not value for money, and *not actually intersectional*. Organisations employing this understanding may have undertaken ‘intersectional’ work for some time, without necessarily thinking about it as such, though they increasingly lay claim to the term in a sector characterised by competing concepts of intersectionality, and increasing popularity of it. It is often less powerful actors (intersectionally marginalised people and organisations representing them) who hold this understanding, compared with those holding all other concepts of intersectionality. While much existing literature about equality organisations and intersectionality’s operationalisation has focused exclusively on single strand organisations (Strolovitch, 2007, writing of the US) (with notable exceptions including Lépinard, 2014, on France and Canada), an important implication is the need to consider intersectional organisations as distinctive, rather than subsuming them as subcategories of the latter where they are not omitted entirely.

Intersections of strands has the greatest potential to alleviate intersectional marginalisation, yet there are two key challenges for work employing this concept in relation to furthering equality for intersectionally marginalised groups. The first is individualisation. Similar to ‘diversity within’ approaches, work employing this concept can be disproportionately aimed at alleviating symptoms, rather than addressing causes, of inequality. Intersectionality may be viewed in mutually constitutive ways, but it is frequently conceptualised exclusively at the level of individual identity and experience, with no explicit reference to inequality structures (at times in spite of my best efforts to bring these into the conversation). A significant political implication therefore is the need for better articulation and awareness raising of intersectionality as the fusion of structures of inequality. Moreover, these projects and organisations face challenges of meaningfully accounting for *all* markers of inequality, particularly given that this is not the approach favoured by policymakers and funders. Nevertheless,

the model of mutual constitution facilitates this: once an organisation or project engages in work on a particular inequality, understanding intersectionality as ‘intersections of strands’ makes it more difficult to subtract inequality areas at will.

Politics

Policymakers have distinctive, contextual sets of interests in furthering particular concepts of intersectionality. Austerity gives policymakers clear interests in generic intersectionality, in which delivering little and the same to all is repackaged as being *innovative* by calling it ‘intersectionality’. When difference is not collapsed entirely and some limited attention is given to marginality, they have an interest in ‘pan equality’ intersectionality, in which attention and resources are ‘cost-effectively’ focused on addressing issues perceived to be common to marginalised groups (putting aside those less cost-effective issues which are not). Multi-strand and diversity within understandings are useful to maintain the status quo of the siloed sector, avoiding conflict with single strand equality organisations, good relationships with whom some policymakers (and political parties) gain legitimacy from. Indeed, the policymakers that I interviewed varied between these concepts in their narratives in relation to different objectives. Conversely, they rarely have or express interests in ‘intersections of strands’ intersectionality, since the implications of this would be funding a range of what they perceive as ‘niche’, ‘small’, ‘statistically insignificant’ communities, and a proliferation of projects and organisations focused on an ever expanding list of intersectionally marginalised groups.

Conclusions

While there are few ideal solutions to the problems of intersectionality’s conceptualisation and operationalisation in siloed policy and practice, from the perspective of thinking through the implications for intersectionally marginalised groups, some compromises and imperfections may be deemed more acceptable than others. I have outlined five distinct applied concepts *all funded and delivered under the name of ‘intersectionality’* in the UK. At times, this confusion is instrumental, to further particular interests. Yet overall, this muddle only serves to extend perceptions of intersectionality as ‘difficult’ if not impossible to apply in policymaking and practice, bolstering lack of political will to do so and contributing to inertia among those who seek to. Given that intersectionality is understood in multiple, contradicting ways, it can be interpreted as an underdetermined ‘floating signifier’ which is given meaning in practice. However, these meanings are sites of contestation. These actors have varying social positions and interests, and so struggles over intersectionality’s meanings are political. Competing concepts have significant material implications – for example, who receives funding for ‘intersectional’ work, who this work benefits and whom it disadvantages (or violently effaces).

There are now several studies in the US and internationally exploring how intersectionality is practiced in specific organisations, while this was the first to explore what *meanings of* intersectionality are at play among both practitioners and policy makers. Prior research has identified intersectional practices, while I argue that the definitions of intersectionality that organisations have present barriers *in and of themselves* to be *able* to practise these effectively. Explicit exploration of intersectionality's applied meanings among those who give it applied meaning is crucial. Amidst slippery uses in both international literature and in practice, specification of intersectionality (Jordan-Zachery, 2007) has been called for. This typology, observed empirically, departs from those based on typologies developed to operationalise intersectionality in empirical research (McCall, 2005; Hancock, 2007) which have been deductively applied to policy (Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012). The latter concern variables while policy is a complex constellation of perceptions and practices.

This research shows that: i. meanings given to intersectionality cannot be taken at face value when it appears nominally, and require interrogation; ii. meanings cannot be assumed to be shared with researchers; iii. applied meanings are not limited to those inferred or recommended by prior research (Parken, 2010; Verloo, 2013; Lépinard, 2014). I offer the first identification of generic intersectionality, while what I describe as pan equality intersectionality, similar to some policy applications and recommendations, is shown to be but one way of applying intersectionality with important limitations. Multi strand policy work (Parken 2010) is innovative, while when conflated with intersectionality, effaces intersectional marginalisation.

I have focused empirically on the UK, and offer interrogation of this typology in future research on intersectionality's operationalisation internationally as a heuristic to study intersectionality's institutional lives in other countries and sectors (e.g. policymaking, public service delivery and grassroots organising). Internationally, equality work has developed in siloed ways, and actors increasingly struggle with how to organise their work more 'intersectionally' in contexts of Covid-19 and organising against racial injustice, areas which will remain significant for years to come across many jurisdictions internationally. This is critical because this juncture presents an opportunity to break from siloed path dependency, and yet risks responses which efface and thus perpetuate intersectional marginalisation of those who are already most disadvantaged.

Given the range of meanings of intersectionality in policy and practice, it is not sufficient to state that we are 'operationalising intersectionality'. When it is used in three of the five ways that I have identified (generic, multi-strand, and diversity within), 'intersectionality' is mobilised in order to *not* do intersectionality: consistent with what Sara Ahmed names as 'non-performativity' (Ahmed, 2006;

Nash, 2019). There is a pressing need internationally for *organisations, practitioners and policy makers to: i. be much more specific about which particular concept of intersectionality they are employing when they mobilise the term; and ii. to advocate for 'intersections of strands' and pan equality concepts to the exclusion of generic, multi-strand and diversity within ones.* The implications of employing 'intersections of strands' concepts for policymakers may be that intersectionality cannot be generally applied, but need always be contingent, situated, and partial interventions. This specificity could be inscribed into policies, and it could be a requirement of funding programmes. Developing shared understandings of intersectionality could also form a basis of unity for more fruitful coalitions and partnerships between equality organisations.

Where take-up of intersectionality may be celebrated and become subject to investigation when it appears nominally or where researchers infer it (in so doing, often conflating it with just one of its applied meanings), my research shows that when we look closer, we may see that intersectionality is not being used in the ways which we may assume that it is – not just in policy and institutions, but even among feminist, racial justice, and disability, LGBTI, and refugee rights advocates. Which concept of intersectionality is at play is important since each has very different implications for intersectional marginalisation, and intersectional justice.

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Table 1 Research methods

| Method | Number |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| In-depth, semi-structured interviews | 41 in total <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 39 with representatives of organisations from 13 equality sub-sectors/intersectional combinations and network staff• 2 with policymakers |
| Focus groups | 1 in total |
| Participant observation | 9 network meetings and events |
| Documentary analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 24 national and UK level equality policy documents• 42 (total) equality network documents |

Table 2 Competing concepts of intersectionality

| Name | Meaning | Practice examples |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Generic</p> | <p>No focus or very little focus on any equality strand or strands in particular: the same work is delivered to benefit ‘all’.</p> <p>Addressing issues that affect ‘everybody’ (i.e. not only or even primarily marginalised equality groups).</p> | <p>Work is addressed at and intended to benefit ‘everybody’, so intersectionality is envisioned as being ‘mainstreamed’, or a general approach to the work. Since this concept treats everyone the same, work on specific inequalities is not consistent with this understanding of intersectionality.</p> |
| <p>Pan equality</p> | <p>Addressing issues that affect all/most marginalised equality groups.</p> | <p>Issues include mental health, hate crime, addressed through joint campaigning and research.</p> |
| <p>Multi-strand</p> | <p>Addressing equality strands in parallel, separately and simultaneously.</p> | <p>Some network collaboration and engagement on local equality strategies.</p> |
| <p>Diversity within</p> | <p>Addressing intersections within an equality strand, e.g. differences among women, etc.</p> <p>One strand/inequality viewed as primary.</p> | <p>How intersectionality is often addressed within single strand organisations: inclusion projects targeted at intersectionally marginalised groups.</p> |
| <p>Intersections of strands</p> | <p>Work of/with specific groups sharing intersecting identities, e.g. women of colour, disabled women, etc.</p> <p>No particular strand is primary or more in focus than the other(s).</p> | <p>‘Intersectional’ organisations (constituted at the intersection of equality strands, e.g. a Black LGBT</p> |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | | <p>organisation, as distinct from single strand organisations).</p> <p>Intersectional alliances (formal and informal partnership projects across equality strands; relatively equitable partnerships).</p> |
|--|--|--|

Tweet

This article establishes different ways in which the theory of #intersectionality is applied in practice. Intersectionality is understood and used in 5 contradicting ways in equality organising and policy - some of these advance #intersectionaljustice, while others serve to deepen inequalities.

ⁱ Policy makers in this study were civil servants.

ⁱⁱ This assumption may be present because these studies were co-produced by academics and activist-practitioners.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nash (2019) notes that intersectionality is simultaneously overdetermined in its relationship to Black women.

^{iv} Used to mean 'doings and sayings' (Schatzki, 2001, 48ff cited in Freeman 2019).

^v I rarely quote directly from documents, in order to maintain the four levels of anonymity described above.

^{vi} All names are pseudonyms.

^{vii} Where possible to ensure anonymity, participants are contextualised by their broad job role; the equality sub-sector in which they work; and the country in which the organisation is based.

^{viii} Each document analysed was listed in a database and renamed as anonymous document (AD) [number].