

K13e01_Prasad_Izabiliza_translated_eng

00:00:05

Speaker 1: Welcome to the learning unit on intersectionality. I'm speaking with Nivedita Prasad today. And before we start with the learning unit, let's introduce ourselves. I'll start first, my name is Diane Izabiliza, I'm a trained social worker and I'm now studying for my master's degree in sociocultural studies and I'm a filmmaker.

00:00:31

Speaker 2: My name is Nivedita Prasad, I'm a professor at Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences in the field of action methods, social work and gender specific social work, where gender specific social work is always from my point of view an intersectional one. That's sort of the academic background, but also my activist background is from the Women of Color women's movement from the 80s, 90s. So that means I'm dealing with the issue of intersectionality in an activist and academic way.

00:00:59

Speaker 1: Thank you. And before we start the conversation, start the interview, I'll briefly touch on the learning objectives. And that would be, one, that the students know the origin of the concept of intersectionality, that you understand what is meant by intersectionality, and that you understand what difference there is between intersectionality and "multiple" discrimination. And on top of that, after that, students should be able to develop their own ideas of what they can then say in their own research work, find a way to deal with and work or do research in intersectionality. My first question to you would be when did you first hear about a concept or analytical model of intersectionality, and how did you come into contact with it, and how would you - so it's actually a three-part question - how would you explain intersectionality for the German context.

00:02:04

That's actually a very funny story, it's really not that funny, but it shows the problem with the term. So I think ten, maybe 12 years ago, a woman called me and wanted to invite me to a conference on intersectionality. And I was a bit surprised, I had never heard the term before and I thought, why is she inviting me as an expert on a topic I don't know anything about? And then I said, yes, I'll think about it and get back to you. And then I called Birgit Rommelspacher and said, tell me, intersectionality, do you understand that? What is that? Why are they asking me? And we laughed ourselves to death together, because she said, of course you know a lot about it, just maybe not under that label. That means that I first understood that what I had been doing for many years as an activist, namely as a Woman of Color in the women's movement in Germany together with Black women, with Jewish women, with migrant women and so on, that is, our shaping of feminism, so to speak, is what others are now suddenly calling intersectionality. And that's what I found quite amazing, that I have and had a lot to do with this, but I didn't know this concept. And I think that's also true today for many intersectional movements that are doing really good activist work, but don't know this term. And that's how I started to deal with this term. And that's why I often start with exactly that, to show the ambivalence with the term. Because many of the movements that are intersectional are either Feminisms of Color, but also disabled women and feminism, women affected by classism in feminism, who really do a lot of work, but in the academic context, I think there's a gap between intersectionality as a theory, which is often advanced by a lot of white academics, and intersectionality as a practice,

which is very rarely a white academic practice, actually never a white academic practice. And that is an ambivalence that simply remains. And with that I actually always start to really explain that actually the idea of intersectionality was indeed often shortened to multiple discrimination. And that's actually not what it's about, it's actually not an additive thing, it's actually another form of discrimination that comes about because of the interweavings. And I would like to show maybe on this one picture, about the question of: Who actually has sex or gender? There are feminist circles that say for good reason that we want gender neutrality, for example in toilets, which makes total sense because we know that there are more genders than just two. But if we look at the toilets for wheelchair users, they are never gendered and many people with impairments say that is exactly the problem, that people with impairments are always perceived as genderless. That is, for one group it's problematic to divide into gender. For one group it is totally problematic never to have a sex or a gender, because this declares them to be a neuter. And this second picture, there we see a wheelchair user, so where it is clear and there I think it becomes clear again, it is not an additive discrimination, but a different discrimination. And I think that's important, to show the differences again. And that's a small example now, maybe I'll make it clear with another example. If we talk about sexual and reproductive rights, the mainstream women's movement says abortion is an important right for all women - I would agree at first. But if we look into the group of women, it's very different. The moment the woman has a disability, her problem is not that she can't have an abortion, but rather her problem is that she has to make sure that she has the right to carry the child to term as well. If there is a Black woman, a woman of Color, who is perhaps also poor and already has several children, she has the same problem. That is, the idea of who needs the right to abortion, so to speak, and who actually needs the right not to have an abortion, even though others expect her to, that is not additive oppression, but really a completely different kind of oppression. And that's why I find the concept of intersectionality or Black feminism, as I prefer to say, so exciting, because it simply makes it clear that the category of woman alone is not enough at all, just as the category of person of color alone is not enough, but rather precisely the interweavings where different oppressive systems meet, in this case racism and sexism.

00:06:30

Speaker 1: Right, now you've already gone into what intersectionality means, can you briefly go into the origin or the history of the concept again?

00:06:46

Speaker 2: Because that's quite exciting because the person who created that name is Prof. Kimberlé Crenshaw, an African American feminist and activist and academic. And that, I think, is really not a coincidence. That's often a little bit neglected, she's then just declared a law professor. She is - but she is also a feminist activist. And Kimberlé Crenshaw at some point stated in a scientific paper, and this is actually almost absurd, but you have to realize that in a legal dispute - it was Degraffenheid versus General Motors - it was about who should be fired first. In the company there were Black men, Black women, white men, white women, and of course, the first thing that happened was that the Black women were terminated, or they were terminated first. And when they tried to take legal action against it, they said, well, what's the discrimination? Then they said gender, then they said, no, the white women are still there. Then they said racism, then they said, no, the Black men are still

K13e01_Prasad_Izabiliza_translated_eng

there too. And that showed the absurdity that there was no term for this intersectional discrimination. And that's what Kimberlé Crenshaw created. And that's important to me, that she didn't create this reality, but this concept. Many people are familiar with Angela Davis. Angela Davis didn't use the term, but her book "Race, Class, Gender" is a classic book on intersectionality. Patricia Hill, Bell Hooks, Audre Lord, so many, many Black U.S. activists. And there again it becomes clear, the African American activists we know. But we know that Black activists don't only live in the USA and Women of Color activists don't either, but it also becomes clear which language is accessible where and therefore the impression arises that this is a concept from the USA. As we know, that's not the case. And in retrospect, yes, quite a lot has been discovered into the historiography, so for example, yes, there was the Combahee River Collective, but there are also people there, for example, who say, well, in 1851, Sojourner Truth, who said, "Ain't I a Woman?" - so that means there's always an attempt to put the beginning somewhere. And I would say that's absurd. We don't need a beginning, but as long as there were Black women or there were women with impairments or just people where different characteristics of oppression came together, of course they were going to be intersectional. We can find stories now in hindsight, but actually that was always a reality. In the meantime, there have been many international contributions on this. And then Kimberlé Crenshaw just has this definition that we see here on the slide - I'll read it briefly in a moment, and I'll quote, "Let's take as an example a street intersection where traffic comes from all four directions. Like that traffic, discrimination can also be multi-directional. When an accident occurs at an intersection, it may have been caused by traffic coming from any direction - sometimes even traffic coming from all directions at the same time. Similarly, if a Black woman is injured at an 'intersection,' the cause could be both sexist and racial discrimination." End quote. And that's from 1989, so it's been a few years, too. And since then, it's kind of gone into the historical record a little bit. But after all, those are the U.S. contributions. I would, I'll say something about the German contributions in a moment, but I would like to ask you back - because you're actually almost the next generation - that was my view from the 80s, 90s, how I came into contact with the concept. How did you come into contact with the concept?

00:10:21

Speaker 1: I had to think a little bit to think about when the first time was that I came into contact with the concept. And the first thing I thought of was a seminar I had here, 'Gender and Queer Studies'. And that's when we got this introductory text by Katharina Walgenbach and I read about it, I was excited. That was one of the first times I read anything in a majority white seminar about Black activists and Black scholars. But it, in retrospect, I have to say, I didn't directly do anything with it, I didn't use it for myself, let's put it that way. And then I kept thinking about it and I noticed, I kept being confronted with it, without it being called intersectionality very clearly and distinctly and as prominently as it's called nowadays. So I also thought about the book "Farbe bekennen", about Audre Lorde, these are simply, well they are people, books that I have read and where I have discussed with my friends, but we have not really used the term or I have not used it, I have not used it for myself, so I sometimes make a difference between knowing a theory and being able to use a theory properly, that is, being able to feel it. And that came much later. And that came only in, I think it was in the research or, no, in the practical seminar, with you and Iris and Esra, that I

K13e01_Prasad_Izabiliza_translated_eng

started to deal with it more on a theoretical level. And then of course through my bachelor thesis, where I looked at the movement or where I looked at what intersectionality meant in the 80s, 90s in Germany, with a focus on Adefra.

00:12:15

Speaker 2: I think it's quite exciting. Do you have any idea why in the beginning, that is, when the Walgenbach text, well, I have an imagination, so I wanted to, what was the difference in the presentation of the Walgenbach text and what was the difference later, why you were able not only to take note of the theory but also to use it for yourself?

00:12:31

Speaker 1: Yeah, absolutely. So the first time I was in that sense, so I think that's several things: One is what space I was in, so learning also has quite a lot to do with relational work or with relationships and with the space you're in. And it was, the lecturers were competent, they were, so enough, they were competent, but it was a very white space and it was also a text by a white scholar who pointed out that there were others who were of color, who were Black, who did this and that. But she was at the spotlight and she was more at the spotlight with her analysis and with how she summarized it than the women who originally worked on it or who she quoted, who she briefly touched on. And that, of course, is different than reading the Combahee River Collective Statement in its entirety and hearing it from their mouths, what they were thinking about and putting down on paper at that time many years ago. That's one thing. And I've always found that, so we skimmed over that as well, so it was a, it felt like you bring it up once and it's important, it's relevant, but it's then also checked off and then it goes on, and it's something that you discuss in one session and then it's completed, it's nothing that carries through. And that's what I found different for example once in our seminars, it just dragged on. It's not like the multiplication tables that you learn once and then you've learned it and then it's over and then you learn something else the next time. And that's why I had such an initial distance with this concept.

00:14:18

Speaker 2: That was also my fantasy and I find it exciting, so imagine a man giving a seminar on the subject of social injustice, doing a session on gender with a text by a man on gender, how many women would be animated afterwards to work feministically with this text. And there it is totally clear that it makes no sense. And with intersectionality, that's exactly what happens. And Katharina Walgenbach mentions Black feminists not only in footnotes, but in the main text. But that's one of the biggest problems, there are intersectionality books where Black feminism as the origin of intersectionality, if at all, only appears as a footnote. And I think that's crazy, because the people who do that also call themselves feminists and so on. And then that's totally clear - so that if it's just as one theory of many, then you can check it off. But if you don't understand the political idea or the radicality and you don't understand the originator, then it appeals to other people. And that's the exciting thing, because there is now a wealth of literature, of academic literature, of white people on intersectionality. And it's interesting that you can make such a career out of it. And there's also the parallel: it's hard to imagine that only men, without asterisks, fortify their careers via gender. So I find that one problem. And I find that regrettable. But it's actually what remains. And the other thing is that with these origins, it's always just the U.S. origins. I have, for one thing, this problem with the language, so of course we can only teach that,

K13e01_Prasad_Izabiliza_translated_eng

which language. But in Germany there are also very, very many origins and you did exactly that in your bachelor thesis. You looked at Adefra, as Afro-German women in Germany, who have been doing classical intersectionality for 30 years. And I even remember that it was similar, that they didn't know the term and didn't understand what you wanted from them. And that's crazy, these are smart women who have been doing this for 30 years. And I think that's important again, to make it clear that intersectional perspectives don't just come from the US. And like your work, there was a similar work by Debora Antmann, who worked on Jewish feminism and intersectionality in Germany. And also all women's movements with women with disabilities, there were groups that called themselves cripple women's groups. And there were also some socialist women's movements. And there was a group that called itself "Prololesben" in the 80s, so all self-designations that of course do not work from the outside. But to make it clear again that the origins were of course also in Germany. And I'm sure that the origins would also be felt quasi locally in all countries if you were to do that. And I think that so many ambivalences with the theory become visible. So I sometimes make the joke that I say, well, if I were to do a seminar on Black feminisms, I don't even know if anyone would come, but I'm not so sure, I think enough people would come - but I don't even know if the panels wouldn't think, what is she doing here, this is activism and not science. And with intersectionality, it sounds scientific. And that's a dilemma I can't get out of either. I have to offer seminars that meet scientific criteria and, but honestly, it's a bit of a label swindle.

00:17:43

Speaker 1: And I totally agree with you on that. What else occurred to me, what was important to me, is that I had the feeling, in the contexts, in these university contexts, in the seminar, I often had the feeling that the examples of Black women, women of Color, that were mentioned, served to show that they were discriminated against. That the point is to say they were discriminated against and they were discriminated against multiple times, those were such crossovers, and that's why these theories exist. And I find it difficult to explain intersectionality in that way. So that it's not just about understanding this complexity, but that you just give certain women, so at that moment women of Color and Black women a place where they stay, as an example of people who experience racism and sexism - and then the theory comes after that.

00:18:41

Speaker 2: Exactly. The role is clear. The role is the oppressed woman, the double, so that's even worse then, and that's why there's the beautiful theory. And I think with intersectionality, if you think about it from the Black feminist root, a lot of agency of Black women and women of color becomes visible. And clearly Black women and women of Color are and can be victims of a lot of oppression, but they have a lot of agency at the same time or we have a lot of agency at the same time. And I think that is the strength of intersectionality, to make this agency visible.

00:19:11

Speaker 1: Exactly, now you already went into it a little bit at the end, and that is: How do you use intersectionality as a model of analysis in teaching? And are there situations where the model is rejected, questioned? And if so, how do you deal with that?

K13e01_Prasad_Izabiliza_translated_eng

00:19:31

Speaker 2: Well, in teaching, I actually find that when we look at the topic of social, well social work has a lot to do with social justice, with resource distribution, with access and barriers. And it's completely inexplicable to me that one should be able to look at these topics monosectionally. So when I look at the issue of poverty, poverty is not conceivable without 'race', 'class', 'gender', disability. If I look at the topic of gender, it is not conceivable without race, class, disability, and so on. That is, I hope that I will succeed in making it clear in my teaching that a monosectional reality is actually not true at all. I'll perhaps illustrate this with an example: If we look at educational opportunities, we know, for example, that the intersection of gender, religion, class and migration history is almost a guarantee that these boys fail in this school system. That is, it would be short-sighted to say that boys in this school system are failing - we know that boys who come from migrant families, who have names that suggest that they are perhaps Muslim and come from working-class families, the school system is a problem for them. At the same time, if we look at school success, we know that it is primarily migrant women who are very successful at school. But that alone does not explain it. That means taking a really close look at what it's all about.

And perhaps an example of what is always so omnipresent in social work: Very often, single parenthood is simply presented as a problem. And I'm always amazed and think: Excuse me? So single parenthood alone as a problem is a mono-sectional view. Single parenthood has a lot to do with what I can organize and how, and how much access I have to money, how many hours I have to work for money, and so on. This means that looking at single parenthood without looking at social classes doesn't make any sense at all. So because that simply simplifies realities very much. That means that I always try to bring together the complex realities, for example in the context of social work with intersectionality, because then the picture becomes clearer. Under the question of defense, there is a whole series of defenses. Well, one is that we are accused of cementing identity politics. So of course you can shorten it like that. And that's where I find the idea of strategic essentialism quite exciting.

So essentialism is the fixation on an otherness that is supposed to stem from an original entity. So the idea of "all women are like this and like that," "all those who have experienced racism share this and that experience" - of course it's absurd to claim that all Black women are like this and like that, totally clear, and that would be the critique of identity politics. But I find Spivak's idea of saying, well, of course there are ambivalences, but as long as society is structured in this way, you can use these group identities strategically to assert certain interests, namely political interests, and that's where I find the concept of strategic essentialism quite exciting, because it makes precisely these ambivalences clear. Of course, it is not a question of cementing it, but it is a question of using it constructively, so to speak, in the sense of the rights of these disadvantaged groups. That is a criticism. There is also criticism that says this is not theory, this is just activism. I don't think it's necessary to go into this at length; it's also what all gender theorists have been accused of. That is definitely a problem. And one thing is not a criticism, but a question where I really don't have an answer, is really the question of how arbitrary the categories are. And I think that's a really exciting

K13e01_Prasad_Izabiliza_translated_eng

question, because there are, I think Helma Lutz once opened up 14 categories, I don't think I would go that far. Crenshaw spoke of "race," "class," and "gender," and it is now clear that "disability" is of course one of them. So I think we need to talk again about how arbitrary these categories actually are? And are all categories equally effective, so that they should really be embedded in this theory? But that's like all living theories, it's never over, we're actually in the middle of it. But those are the critiques and the ambivalences that I have. Which ones do you know? Or which ones do you deal with and how?

00:24:12

Speaker 1: So I would tie in with the last point you mentioned, with the categories, how many categories are possible or conceivable within this model. And I can, so I also noticed this in my bachelor thesis phase, when I was researching and writing about it, understand that there is the question, that it arises, how many categories are there, how many are necessary to be able to analyze intersectionally, to be able to understand and to create moments of change or simply to create changes in itself. But I can only go along with it up to the moment - because at the moment when it's only or increasingly about discussing whether there are now ten or twelve or 13 or 14, I ask myself like this, so what are we actually about? So I had the feeling when I was writing that it was a kind of red herring. So it was no longer about, well, I do that, I find this model of analysis incredibly important to draw attention to voids, to understand how power structures function. But if I get bogged down in enumerating what else needs to be included in these categories or how many are actually needed and what is fair, then that distracts from what I originally actually want and what my intention is, and it doesn't get me anywhere. And that's why I realized at some point that this is going too far for me or that this is not my approach. So it's not my approach to sit down and say, okay, how many categories are there now, let's count them down. That doesn't help me incredibly much in my work, in my research, in my activism, in my thinking - or rather, it distracts me.

00:25:58

Speaker 2: Exactly - but the question is, I understand that - but the question is: What do you do when a student comes and says, "but this category is totally powerful, we have to consider it in intersectionality"? So I realize there, I don't have an instrument or a clear instrument where I can say, sorry, this is a very arbitrary category. So "race", "class", "gender", "disability" and really with gender as heteronormative thought, so the larger category, with disability body also thought, so these are already very large categories. Or, for example, the category of right of residence is always so important to me, and I don't want to subsume it under "race", because with Black people, too, it makes a big difference whether someone has the right to rights and the other does not. That is, this is a category that is totally important to me, and its effectiveness is, I think, indisputable. But there are definitely categories where I think, mmmh....

00:26:54

Speaker 1: I think I would always let it come down to that, or it's a matter of what the person wants to investigate with it, i.e. what is the intention behind it. Is there a concrete case, a concrete example, what she has in mind? And does that then make sense to think about whether this one category now still has to go in there or is relevant? Well, for me, I don't have a final answer to that either, but if it fits in the moment, in the moment that you say,

K13e01_Prasad_Izabiliza_translated_eng

okay, now we'll look at this concrete example, and there I have to look at "race" individually, as you've just mentioned, and then the right of residence or the Act on Foreigners, then I would say, yes, then that makes absolute sense, if you have an example where that occurs in it, where it's relevant. But if it is simply a matter of this, because I have also experienced such moments, that it was no longer a matter of discussing how we can deal with this model, analysis model, how we can bring this into our work, into our research, but that it almost became a moment of argument about how many categories are actually okay now. And that, for me, is a red herring.

00:28:07

Speaker 2: Yes, I would agree with you on that.

00:28:07

Speaker 1: And otherwise, I would just open up to that discussion at certain moments and ask, what is it actually about and what is the example, or what is the idea that you are pursuing behind it. Exactly. And the other aspect is what I've often had, and what I've noticed, is that - you also mentioned this briefly - that intersectionality is always shortened to identity politics, or it's somehow explained that it's about different identities that intersect. This is something that I always notice and that I find very problematic. And above all, I find that problematic, and we had that before, because it then creates a moment where Black women, women of Color get such a role of victims, who then tell, share their suffering and out of this suffering, the academy, the university develops a great theory, with which one can then work. And that's quite, well I find that very, very difficult.

00:29:17

Speaker 1: We've already gone into this a little bit, but I would still ask again how the debate has changed for you in the last few years and what exactly has changed and whether that change has had an impact on you as a faculty member, your work and your teaching in the last, let's say, 10, 20 years.

00:29:42

Speaker 2:

Well, it's exactly this that intersectionality is now academically crowned, there are books on the subject and so on, but the origins are becoming more and more invisible, that I really find a problem, a really serious problem. And that's why I realize that I'm even more stubborn now by insisting that when I teach intersectionality, that we use a lot of weekly lecture hours on the origins. Simply because it's also about making certain stories more visible or really ensuring that - and that's where another structural problem becomes visible: There are many women's projects in Berlin - thank God - that are well financed and so on, but there is not a single women's project in Berlin that is exclusively by women of Color and Black women and can advance intersectional feminism on a theoretical, practical, activist level. There was this project in Nozizwe, which is also, no, forgotten stories, interwoven stories, you see, but they are interwoven and also forgotten stories, that's why I always get confused there.

00:30:52

Speaker 1: That's right, one is the name, the sentence written out, where it's forgotten and

K13e01_Prasad_Izabiliza_translated_eng

interwoven stories, and interwoven stories is the name of the website. You're absolutely right about that.

00:31:01

Speaker 2: Exactly, and there it becomes so clear again, there was only very briefly this project in Berlin and we are talking about Berlin and not some village somewhere. And I think that's crazy. That is, there are intersectional realities, but there is no place where these can be properly financed further. They all kind of do it individually on the academic level, on the activist level, and they do very good work. But there is no such thing as a mouthpiece, an office, an opportunity to complain. And I find that bitter and try to counteract that a little bit through stubbornness or to counteract that a little bit.

00:31:38

Speaker 1: And compared to when you started teaching, do you feel like your students come in with a different set of knowledge?

00:31:48

Speaker 2: Yes, and that's the great thing, that I think you can see the success of Black feminism in Germany, or feminisms of Color. Students like you, when you came, I didn't have to explain certain things to you, but you were clearly feminist oriented, you were clearly anti-racist oriented as Black women or women of Color and you asked about these topics. So it was, I can't offer topics here that nobody wants, but you asked for them. And even among the white students there were many who said, yes, we really want to do that. So that means that there is a different self-image also from you, that is, from the new generation, to want these topics and also to have prior knowledge, and that always really moves me, because I think, okay, then it has all helped something. So especially on the activist level, things have not been lost, but certain self-evident things today have a lot to do with the work of the past.

00:32:45

Speaker 1: So then I would say thank you very much. We've had an interesting conversation and right, then we'll conclude now. Is there any final word that you would like to say?

00:32:55

Speaker 2: No, first of all, thank you very much and I hope that you succeed in making it clear that intersectionality is not just a theory, but has a very long history and if that sticks with this conversation, I would be very happy.

00:33:11

Speaker 1: Ok, wonderful, thank you!

00:33:12

Speaker 2: Thank you!