

Methodological Issues and Intersectionality in Gender Studies

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Overview

- Representation studies
- Intersectionality approaches
- Operationalising research
- Examples
- Researching gender

Representation studies

- Representation studies can be seen as an early phase of feminist work ‘documenting the absence of women’ (Shakeshaft, 1999: 522)
- They raise methodological and substantive issues, including:
 - choice of comparator population
 - homogenisation of women
 - interpretation of progress
 - Acting as displacement activity

Intersectionality approaches

- The concept has only relatively recently been explicitly named and discussed but is nevertheless longstanding.
- ‘there is no single identity category that satisfactorily describes how we respond to our social environment or are responded to by others’ (Shields, 2008: 304)

Insufficient attention has been given to the consequences of categorising.

Intersectionality theory may be clear, but how it may be put into operation, how we understand and respond to the experience of the complex lives of women remains unclear.

The challenge

- How can we analyse the way in which two or more characteristics in synthesis influence the response of others to women.
- How can we analyse the impact of identities when they are partly self-created, partly imposed, constantly changing, and effect the life chances open to any woman?

The bundle of characteristics that comprises each individual cannot be studied by simply investigating each characteristic separately and adding together the results. A leap in methodological capacity is needed.

Operationalising research

- Narrative and ethnographic approaches may offer data that are rich enough.
- Interpretation becomes not the mathematics of social justice, but listening to the dissonant music of inequality.
- Analytic methods are needed so that the music of many does not become a meaningless cacophony.

- Others may challenge the music itself, querying the validity of the voice of women.
- Women's values and beliefs are the product of an unequal society and therefore **may** lack validity to comment on the society which shaped them.

The feminist project and, with it, the analysis of women's voice, is so constrained by 'Greco-Roman, Christian, Western intellectual traditions' (Bajunid, 1996: 63) that accepting what women say – which may run counter to feminist thinking – is virtually impossible.

South African case examples

Example one – Lerato

‘Sometimes it’s in you to fear positions, thinking that maybe you won’t be in a position to manage. That was my feeling... this school was led by white people all along. So I thought maybe to be in their boots, it’s going to be very difficult for me. Only to realise that by acting for that year, I became successful. It’s then that I learnt that there’s a leader in me.’

Example two - Tabo

'I don't have to ask permission you know when I've got to go to this workshop, when I've got to do this. I don't have anyone to account to. So when I, if somebody can say there's a scholarship, just go and develop yourself. I'll definitely go. Without saying no, let me go and ask the husband and find how I am going to inconvenience him, no.'

Researching gender

How does the researcher interpret?

- Accept at face value the self-assessment of being largely successful and fulfilled in their professional role

or

- Women impelled by circumstance or poverty into teaching and then leadership, struggling to lead impoverished schools, constrained by community perceptions of an appropriate role for women and, in one case, exhausted by coping with childcare responsibilities?

- These two exemplar cases make it clear that simplistic gender representation studies would miss the complex interplay of poverty, gender, ethnicity and the context and how they expand or limit women's opportunities for development and leadership.
- Given that only two of 54 such cases **from a South African dataset** have been presented, the complexity of the analytical task using the approach of intersectionality is apparent.

Qualitative data in relation to women's lives might be analysed from the perspective of the opportunities and limitations that impact on women in a particular role, in this case as aspirants to and holders of an educational leadership role.

- Analysis might seek to identify critical incidents when a second or further characteristic relegates gender to the background or foregrounds it in terms of the response of others or assessment of leadership competence by another.
- A further strand of analysis would identify the negative attributes associated with gender and under which conditions they are intensified or diminished by the presence of another/other characteristics.

Research challenges

- Ontological – how do we position women's voices and our response?
- Methodological – how do we analyse intersections of characteristics in rich datasets?
- Political – what are the goals? Equal representation? Supporting capabilities?

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