

Intersectionality and Diversity Research in Higher Education

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What is ‘intersectionality’ and why does it matter to teachers and researchers of diversity in higher education? In this text, we approach intersectionality not just as concept that allows a critical enquiry into how class, gender and race shape society but also as praxis for social justice (Birge and Hill Collins 2016). For feminist researchers working on/about diversity, intersectionality constitutes a way of doing, sensing and thinking about the worlds we inhabit and construct, as teachers and researchers in higher education (Ahmed 2012, Harcourt et. al. 2016, Icaza 2015). Intersectionality has allowed feminist researchers to consider people and groups’ nuances in their experiences of exclusion and inclusion as emerging from the intersections of race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, body ableness and so on, instead of as an effect of one single mark or category of difference (Harcourt, Icaza and Vargas 2016).

In education, researchers working with an intersectional approach “tackle questions of how interactions between social inequalities such as race, class, gender, sexuality and ability shape educational experiences and outcomes of disenfranchised populations. The synergy linking scholarship and practice affect not just teacher training, curriculum design and research on pedagogy for schools, but it also shapes the many sub-specialities within education scholarship” (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016:39). Meanwhile for Dill ‘intersectionality is the intellectual core of diversity work” (Dill 2009: 229).

This text is not so focused on explaining what intersectionality is but *what intersectionality does* to research on diversity in higher education (Birge and Hill Collins 2016). To do so, it is divided in the following 4 sections. The first section is a brief introduction to *what is intersectionality* and where it comes from as a term and approach to (feminist) research. The second section presents a personal reflection written by one of us (Icaza) on what means for the research process to embody diversity while conducting research in an academic setting (Icaza 2015; Icaza 2017 forthcoming). This reflection serves to illustrate intersectionality as a methodological backbone but also to enquiry what it means to embody diversity as a form of knowing in the research process (Harcourt et. al. 2016, Barbosa et. al. 2015, Icaza 2015).

The third section presents what intersectionality did to the research we conducted as members of University of Amsterdam (UvA) Diversity Committee¹ during the months of

¹ The other members of the Committee included: Professor Gloria Wekker (Chair), Marieke Slotman and Hans Jansen.

January-October 2016.² In that capacity, each of us coordinated small teams of young researchers. Rosalba Icaza's team "*Meanings of Diversity*" included young black female researchers to investigate the terms that circulate around the notion of diversity in UvA. Icaza's team objective was to make sense of the effects of these meanings in the everyday administration of teaching and research (Wekker et. al. 2016, especially chapter 3). Meanwhile, Rolando Vazquez's team "*Diversity in Teaching and Learning*" investigated the state of knowledge and teaching practices at UvA. Vazquez's team objective was to identify to what extent the knowledge practices at UvA enriched or impoverished diversity.

In this section, we focus on Icaza's team research and offer some reflections about how intersectionality as an approach to research taken up by a research team that embodied diversity in the specific context of UvA, informed this team's research objectives, questions and data gathering strategies leading to the main findings.³ The findings of the research on UvA's decision-making processes and their impact on diversity – of *who teaches* (instructors), *to whom* (students) and *what is taught* (curricula) – were that diversity is mostly associated to gender diversity and to internationalization. When diversity is associated to gender, the notion of gender is limited to women and that woman is limited to white woman. When diversity is associated to internationalization, diversity is represented discursively by 'Chinese students'. Non-white male able heterosexual bodies do count, but only in relation to the diversity of people in numbers. These same bodies stopped to count when questions about who is not included in the canon of a discipline were asked (Wekker et. al. 2016, especially chapter 3).

The question of intersectionality cannot be separated from that of positionality. Positionality indicates the awareness of having a specific location among the intersectional axis of discrimination. We found that a university education that eludes the question of positionality becomes complicit with the reproduction of the normative position. The findings of Vazquez team have shown that bringing about diversity not just as a principle but as a way of doing, means to transform the curricular content of the courses, to reveal the geo-historical positionality of what is taught and change the ways of teaching (Wekker et. al. 2016, especially chapter 4).

The closing section in this paper, offers some final remarks.

What is intersectionality?

It is well known among feminist researchers, that intersectionality as a term was coined by Black American lawyer Kimberley Creshawn in 1989 to address and make visible violence against Black women and the effects of the entanglements of classism, gender violence and racism on their lives. In this way, intersectionality as a concept named the complex inclusions/exclusions by class, gender, race/ethnicity in society experienced by individuals and groups. In other words, inequalities grounded on gender differences between men and women do not stand alone, but intersect with other social identities such as race, class, age, ethnicity and so on. This was an important contribution to feminist theorizing in the sense

² Following the students' occupation of the Maagdenhuis, the administrative building of the University of Amsterdam, in the spring of 2015 the Diversity Committee was established. The full mandate of the Committee and final report can be access at: <http://commissiedd.nl/diversity-commission/>

³ In another co-authored article we explore Vazquez's team research outcomes in relation to intersectionality and positionality. See Icaza and Vazquez 2018 forthcoming.

that intersectionality made possible to speak about oppression(s) in plural as these intersect generating complex exclusions of individuals and groups while questioning homogenizing and universal understandings of “woman” and “womanhood” (Collins and Bilge 2016).

Intersectionality as a framework helps to make sense of both complex structures or systems of oppression and privilege, but also of individual and collective experiences facing or resisting these oppressions. Furthermore, intersectionality as praxis is seen as embodied, which means that we know and do research from places, bodies, ecologies, trajectories, histories (Harcourt et. al. 2016).

As Collins and Birge (2016) emphasize, intersectionality as a relational way of thinking that rejects binaries (i.e. theory vs practice, woman vs men, etc.) and has allowed feminist researchers to consider the limitations of approaches that emphasize “*either this/or that*” mark of difference (i.e. gender *or* class *or* race) by opening the possibility of a “*both/and*” perspective (i.e. gender class race). “Within intersectional frameworks, there is no pure racism or sexism. Rather, power relations of racism and sexism gain meaning in relation to one another” (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016: 27). In this way, intersectionality is a conceptual tool but also an epistemic position in feminist research that allows a comprehensive reflection on the sources of exclusion and discrimination that can not be collapsed into one single social category (race) or power relation (racism).

Moreover, intersectionality is not simply the adding of fixed or essential identities (e.g. woman+black+poor+lesbian, etc.) but a way of questioning how marks of difference in specific contexts and places operate to intersect in ways that oppress and exclude some but not all people in the same way and with the same intensity. For example, Hill Collins and Bilge describes what intersectionality lenses brings forward in relation to the wealth and health gaps in the US in the following way: “these [gaps] are not only racialized but also simultaneously gendered. The wealth gap is generally analyzed through an either/or lens, race or gender, but with noteworthy exceptions, less often through an intersectional *both/and* lens” (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016:15).

An example of how intertwined exclusions operate in historical contexts can be illustrated through the words of UvA Executive Board Chair, Geert ten Dam, who reacted to UvA Diversity Report’ public presentation with the following message: “*I hate to say that I participated more or less in the same kind of discussions [on diversity and inclusion] thirty five years ago in this same University*”.⁴ These words invited us to ask which kind of exclusions were operating to marginalize and/or exclude people such as the UvA Executive Board Chair thirty five years ago that do not operate in the same way today? Something has changed, but what and for whom?

To date, it is not too adventurous to also affirm that intersectionality contributes to the visibility of what is produced as inexistent, for example, by a dominant legal order that in the case of Creshawn rendered invisible the Black female body in which white man was the norm and woman and womanhood was reduced to white women experiences. In the case of UvA, the needs, aspirations, knowledges of non-white non-male non-heterosexual non-able

⁴ Professor Geert tan Dam discourse can be accessed at:
<http://webcolleges.uva.nl/Mediasite/Play/34deeca7b8a849429de36482734485aa1d>

bodies have been produced as inexistent by a dominant framework of egalitarianism and meritocracy: “We are all the same” mentality. As a result, not everybody feels at home at UvA (Wekker et. al. 2016). As such, intersectionality as an approach to knowing social phenomena such as the state of people and knowledges diversity in higher education has the potential to contributing to the visibility of what apparently is not ‘there’ and as such is also a means for epistemic justice (Icaza and Vazquez 2013).

II The University as a site of research

A vignette

Q: Who are you?

A: Space Invaders

“On a bright morning of May, two women of color walked into an office to have a conversation about diversity. They were the grand daughters of first generation migrants coming some year ago from Surinam to the Netherlands and from rural Mexico to Mexico City. These two women are the first women in their families to attend University. These two women were there to ask questions about diversity to those responsible at the University to deliver research and teaching practices conducive of it. These two women were there to ask questions. Or at least, they thought they would.

These two women had properly scheduled the appointment, followed all the access protocols, sent the requested information, dressed accordingly, and studied their questionnaires. They were expected at the time they arrived. Or at least they thought they would.

“*Who are you?*” was the question that received them together with the so-well-known-to-them body language of someone trying to make sense of what he was seeing. More questions followed and these two women of color found themselves, once more, given the so-well-learned explanations and justifications of their presence in the University. Would they ever been able to ask the questions?”⁵

To make sense of the above-shared vignette, the work of Nirmal Puwar (2004) on the complexity of diversity in institutions becomes necessary. Puwar has been conducting research on the arrival of women and minorities in institutional spaces where white male power is firmly entrenched. The places to where these new comers go, according to Puwar, are not neutral or empty but full of history and meanings: the founding father, the rituals of welcoming or passage, and so on. Accordingly, institutions such as universities imbue a pressure to succeed and survive by conforming to the norm (Puwar 2004:150). To conform might take the form of preparing for an interview according to the learnt research protocols or dressing and acting in a particularly expected way including a formal attire, a firm hand shake, looking directly into the eyes of the interviewee and so on. Codes of conduct that are of course, contextual.

However, one might wonder what happens to people that embodies visible marks of difference? What to do with a brown female body or an Afro-hair style in a black female body? Are we expected to hide these visible marks of difference too? Precisely, Puwar

⁵ Rosalba Icaza personal field research Diary Notes, May 31st 2016, Amsterdam.

reflects on how people that do not conform to the norm manage their marks of difference – femininity, blackness, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, etc. – in predominantly white male heterosexual contexts. These reflections lead her to speak about those non-normative bodies as *space invaders* as those that disrupt what are deemed as ‘normal’ or ‘expected’ (Puwar 2004). “*Who are you, why are you here?*”, these are the questions that bodies that do not conform to the norm, *space invader bodies*, often receive by people in institutions that are not modeled to welcome non-white non-male no-able non-middle class non-heterosexual bodies, including Universities (Ahmed 2012; Ahmed 2016).

Feminist sociologist Sarah Ahmed has been writing on the University as an institutional context that involves both structures and feelings, which are constructed through social relationships (Ahmed 2012). In her work, Ahmed tells us about the idea of institutions as spaces in which “some more than others will be at home in institutions that assume certain bodies as their norm” (Ahmed 2012, p. 3). Women and minorities have not been ‘the norm’ in Universities and these institutions’ practices were not designed according to the increasing diversity of peoples and their knowledges coming into them (Arashiro and Barahona 2015, Ahmed 2012, Wekker et. al. 2016).

The Diversity Commission founded that: “In 2015/2016, 14% of all students registered at the University of Amsterdam had a non-Western background, understood in the sense that at least one of their parents was born in a ‘non-Western’ country. When we exclude international students, this share is 13%. Although this roughly equals the national average (12% of university students in the Netherlands have a non-Western background) this 13% is relatively low when compared with the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (21%) and Erasmus University Rotterdam (22%), which find themselves in cities with comparably high shares of youth of non-Western descent. Of the employees who filled in the survey, 11% have a non- Western background, which drops to a mere 4% when we exclude the international professionals. For a university that presents itself as firmly rooted in the city of Amsterdam – which has recently become a majority-minority city – this is unsatisfactory (Wekker et. al. 2016: 5).

Therefore, the opening vignette also aims to share the context faced by women like Icaza’s team and herself while conducting research on diversity in one of the two Universities located in the highly diverse city of Amsterdam. The above numbers and the experiences shared through the vignette lead us into asking the following question: what kinds of mechanisms are operating within Universities in highly diverse cities such as Amsterdam to the extent that non-normative bodies remained questioned?

Icaza’s team as carriers of visible traces of difference, as carriers of female black/brown bodies, were deemed outsiders, visitors and as such provoked suspicion in the context of a research process. To be aware of this meant a twofold realization in relation to research and knowledge generation: a) this team was employing intersectional lenses to explore meanings associated to diversity; b) and as team that was embodying diversity, from that specific positionality, they were generating knowledge on UvA’s state of diversity.

By becoming aware of this in the early stages of the research meant that Icaza’s team was able to develop a research strategy attentive to how information and data was gathered, by whom and when and how these was interpreted. But, it also meant that Icaza’s team constantly reflected about the member’s emotions. It can be said that for this team self-reflectivity was crucial but also a systematic effort to create moments and spaces for a ‘self

in question': as she is questioned by power she seeks to freely express herself in the company of others like her (Icaza 2015). Inspired by feminist decolonial philosopher Maria Lugones, Icaza's team sought to build itself as a coalition of selves in question, selves that have experienced oppression and exclusions but that nonetheless, are also resisting (Lugones 2013).

More concretely, this took the form of conversations after each interview, expert consultation and attended event in the framework of the research Icaza's team was carrying out together. Through these exchanges Icaza's team critically reflected about their interpretations and shared thoughts and feelings. In addition to this, each member of this team wrote a letter to tell to each other about personal and professional trajectories and the expectations each of them had on the research process and expected outputs. Through these exchanges, Icaza's team recognized biases, questioned initial impressions and identified relationships between meanings on diversity and of decisions-actions or the lack of them. As collective self-reflective moments these were not only consistent with Icaza's feminist and intersectional approach but also an important element in the research cycle of this team's research. To some extent, for Icaza this way of working sought to teach in the doing "intersectional research intersectionally" to paraphrase feminist sociology Nancy Naples (2009) as all the praxis involved in the research cycle was considered opportunities to teach and learn from each other.

III What intersectionality did to our research?

Having the institutional context of UvA, the conducted research was situated in an emergent field of social enquiry that is concerned with the role that Universities play to promote levels of fairness and inclusiveness in highly diverse societies (European Commission 2015, De Oliveira 2014, Vazquez 2015). An intersectional perspective was deemed as a good point of departure because it could contribute to identify and explore the complexities and nuances of diversity and inclusion/exclusion experiences in higher education.

In Icaza's research on diversity meanings, intersectionality allowed her and her team to deploy a research strategy that illustrated interactions between two domains of power: subjective and the institutional. As the only non-Dutch researcher/speaker, Icaza was particularly curious about how the intersections of class, gender, race/ethnicity, body ableness, sexual orientation, religion, and so on operated at the subjective level in the context of UvA. Her team sought to understand who was assumed to be the recipient of diversity policies and initiatives in higher education and how 'this person' was represented in key policy guidelines dealing with 'diversity' and spoke about in conversations with academic staff.⁶ This research focus on subject formation allowed Icaza's team to track down how certain configurations of meanings (i.e. diversity as a challenge to quality) have been (re)produced institutionally (i.e. standardized criterias) and by whom (i.e. examination boards) (Wekker et. al. 2016).

Icaza's team conducted their analysis with a question-led framework that helped them to unpack key assumptions (or patterns of assumptions) regarding an implicit subject within a

⁶ The analysis of EU, NL and UvA policy guidelines on diversity included the text analysis of key documents produced by the European Commission, Dutch National Legislation on Higher Education and UvA Institutional Plans that have in the last years explicitly address the question of diversity in relation to higher education

given institutional context (higher education and curricula) and the rationalities informing those assumptions. But in order to gain deeper insight into the temporal and spatial trajectory of meanings associated to diversity in the institutional context of Dutch Higher Education, Icaza's team carried out consultations with academic and policy experts. The consultations took the form of open-semi-structured interviews. To complement this, the team conducted participatory observation in national and international conferences dealing with diversity in higher education organized at the time of the research.

Finally, Icaza's team conducted semi-open interviews with UvA academic staff responsible for 'dealing with diversity' in the everyday administration of teaching and research activities (i.e. Deans) and in designing curricula (teachers, course leaders).⁷ Through these conversation Icaza's team sought to identify tensions and/or consistencies between subjective and institutionally informed meanings attached to diversity.

Feminist critical development studies approaches informed by intersectionality helped Icaza's team to pose questions about the construction of 'the subject' of (diversity) policy (Harcourt 2009, Griffin 2007, Bergeron 2004, Mohanty 1998). By paying attention to how this imagined subject - as a recipient of diversity initiatives - is imagined, described, referred to in texts and conversations, Icaza's team managed to identify the potentials and limitations of ongoing actions, initiatives, and decisions taken (or not taken) to prescribe changes (or not) within UvA.

Interestingly, the data that Icaza's team gathered displayed that the meanings around diversity affected how academic staff responsible of everyday decision-making envisaged the relationship between diversity and curricula. To be more precise, diversity was reduced to its embodiment in people who differ from a (rarely spoken) norm (white male Dutch) and then conflated to gender and internationalization. The effect of the conflation between diversity and gender was spoken as a positive aspiration to attract more women or retain them as students and members of the staff, where "woman" was a homogenous category. The effect of the conflation between diversity and internationalization was spoken as an inescapable trend brought by globalization in which more non-Dutch students were part of the institutional life of the University.

Following Sara Ahmed (2012), it can be said that bodies do count in these meanings associated to diversity; however, they stopped counting when diversity of knowledges in curricula was discussed. To be more precise, canonical knowledge of a discipline was deemed to be out of diversity discussions for those responsible of making decisions of *who teaches what*.

So, if diversity was equal to gender or international students, and if gender equals (white) woman, what happens to black/brown people and their knowledges at UvA? In their analysis of Brazilian national discourse of racial democracy as one that has 'effectively eliminated language that might describe the racial inequalities that affected black Brazilian people's lives' Hill Collins and Bilge (2016:21) remind us of how the erasure of blackness 'as a political category allowed discriminatory practices to occur against people of visible African descent in education and employment'. If the erasure of black and brown bodies

⁷ In total Icaza's team conducted 22 semi-open interviews that were documented through transcripts, which were sent to the interviewees for their verification.

knowledges in the context of curricula decision-making is not discussed or addressed, then how can the University contribute to more diverse and inclusive societies?

Although the curricula of universities can be overlooked in policies and everyday talk about diversity, it seems fundamental to understand how the curricula is related to a deeper self-reflection of the university and its key role in knowledge production that carries a responsibility to acknowledge its position in society. This seems to call for a reflection on how knowledge production is inextricably linked to geo and body politics (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006, Icaza 2017 forthcoming). This means to ask how certain histories and embodied knowledges become authoritative at the expenses of others and which is the role Universities have historically played in (re)producing this erasure (Vazquez 2015).

For example, the analysis that Icaza's team conducted on policy guidelines identified that diversity policy often refers to dealing with a diverse student body that reflects changing societies; with less to no reference to the diversification of the curricula as part of a broader institutional change (Wekker et. al. 2016 especially chapter 3). It is often forgotten that when a student body becomes more diverse, it is inevitable to engage with the creativity and perspectives of different students, which leads to insights that there is also diversity in knowledges.

During the interviews conducted by Icaza's team with UvA decision-makers, diversifying the curricula to varying degrees was spoken about: from no changes to a crucial aspect for intellectual development in universities in the XXI Century. Icaza's team was also able to identify that when diversity is defined as a reality of contemporary Dutch society and the world or as enhancement of quality and a pre-requisite of excellence, the emphasis lays on the need to build upon a more explicit relationship between curricula and diversity through various types of interventions informed by international best practices. But if diversity is understood as a problem and a threat to the academic quality; then a relationship with the curricula is simply rejected (Wekker et. al. 2016 especially chapter 3).

IV Concluding remarks

In contemporary dominant views on higher education, there seems to be a strong sense of reliability in its fairness as one that judges its participants on their quality and ability, hence not on their 'marks of difference'. An intersectional perspective questions this as it allows researchers to explain one's full experience, and to consider intersections instead of separations or compartmentalized views over inequalities and exclusions.

An intersectional gaze to social phenomena such as the state of diversity of both, people and knowledges, in the context of the University not only opens the possibility of a more comprehensive panorama on the effects of inclusion and exclusion of certain bodies and the knowledges generated by those bodies, but most importantly, it opens the possibility of formulated research decisions that can potentially contribute to epistemic justice.

In figuring out this, intersectionality as the chosen approach to research complex social phenomena such as diversity in higher education and Icaza's team own self-consciousness of the embodiedness of diversity, play a role in the research process. This essay is an effort to critically unpack some of the characteristics of such a double role - epistemic and embodied. This effort has lead us into give attention to concrete 'practices that make

intersectional knowledge possible' (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016: 32) in the context of the research process with the aim of inspiring other research processes on diversity as teaching/learning opportunities.

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