



Intersectionality

Posted by: The Angry Black Woman

Category: Bigotry & Prejudice, Feminism, Race, Racism, Sex & Gender, Sexism, Society & Culture

August 2nd, 2009

In case you haven't been aware, this is International Blog Against Racism Week. It is, in fact, the fourth annual such week. A bunch of our posts this week have been tagged *ibarw*, but I did want to provide a pointer to the community where there is a massive collection of links from dozens, maybe hundreds, of bloggers taking part. As I say every year, we always blog against racism on the ABW but I still like to take part in *ibarw*. This time around I decided to tackle an issue I have not specifically written a post about.

Lately I've been thinking about intersectionality a great deal. In terms of my own work as an activist against racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression and in how I would like to see the anti-oppression structures and organizations around me behave. Recently I had a big intersectionality fail which set the gears in my head turning. The more I contemplate it, the more I feel as though I want to center my activism around this concept. Well, moreso than I am doing at present.

For those of you unaware, Intersectionality is a theory which "holds that the classical models of oppression within society, such as those based on race/ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, class, species or disability do not act independently of one another; instead, these forms of oppression interrelate creating a system of oppression that reflects the "intersection" of multiple forms of discrimination."¹ You've seen us talk about it a lot as concerns feminism, and how mainstream feminists relate (or don't relate) to women of color. How the issues that we face as people of color, as people of color from various cultural, ethnic and national backgrounds, AND as women are different to the ones faced by white women. They are related, but not always the same. We cannot divorce our gender from our race/ethnicity.²

As an antiracist activist I like to think that I am less prone to fail when it comes to issues of race and ethnicity, but as recent events have shown, I am not completely devoid of it. I hope that my experiences have helped me in that I can admit it when I fail and apologize and do better, but obviously not failing at all is the goal. I don't often recognize what I'm on about in instances like that because I enter territory where the oppression is not about me, it's about someone else. I can understand on one level and still not Get It on a deeper level.

This is why intersectionality is important — so that we can all strive to Get It on every level.

Striving for better understanding of intersectionality will help eliminate instances of Oppression Olympics — folks going on and on about who has it harder or better in this or that area is not going to solve the core issues. Focusing on just one oppression without considering how it intersects with others is alienating and often results in a lack of real progress.

This is true on the big picture level and all the way down to individuals. It's even harder for some people to grasp that the resolution to one group's problems may not lead to the resolution for everyone's.

When groups or individuals fail at intersectionality it can often lead to people who should be working together instead feeling resentful or hostile toward one another (see again: feminism and WOC). It gets particularly messed up when people who work against one aspect of prejudice engage in prejudicial or oppressive behavior themselves then get upset when folks call them on their problematic behavior.

A recent example: A few months ago during a coda to RaceFail (called MammothFail), a series of events

led a POC that goes by the handle neo_prodigy³ to call for a day of creativity featuring fans and writers of color. He created a LiveJournal community called Fen of Color United, hilariously shortened to foc_u. A lot of people were excited and jumped on board and loved the idea (because it was a good one).

Then (white) blogger Nick Mamatas pointed out that neo_prodigy had been involved in a heated debate a few years ago with Nick's then girlfriend and, in that debate, neo himself had called the girlfriend a bitch and used other gendered or otherwise prejudicial slurs against her and her friends. Then neo's female best friend, alundra001⁴, came along to call her a cunt, and neo had no problem with that at all. He encouraged alundra's going after her.⁵ Nick pointed out that this was the guy in charge of our new "safe space", as neo had advertised foc_u.

Many people were Not Pleased. When commenters and members of foc_u attempted to bring this up on the group and get clarification or explanation or even some kind of "that was wrong of me", the comments were, as I understand it, often deleted or ignored. I participated in the foc_u day of creativity and had joined the community, but after it became clear that neo was not going to address the issue in any real way (see: evasion, blaming everyone else, strawmen, you name it⁶), I left.

I got the impression that neo_prodigy felt he shouldn't have been called out on his past actions or that they did not matter in the context of the work he was doing with foc_u. They do matter, though, because the membership of the community (both that specific one and the wider SF/fan one) is made up of women as well as men. And the language he used and condoned and encouraged is not beneficial to, is offensive to, and is actively worked against by most of those women.

This is the biggest evil of Intersectionality Fail: not recognizing that your activism, useful and wonderful though it may be, does not give you a pass on other problematic behavior. No matter if that behavior is active, such as the above, or passive, as when the concerns of one group are simply ignored or not considered. People aren't going to ignore your sexism just because you work against racism. People are not going to ignore your racism because you campaigned for marriage equality. No one is going to allow you to oppress others just because you're oppressed yourself.

This issue is not limited to sex and race, it applies to all oppressions, marginalizations, prejudices, discriminations.

As activists, as people who wish to eliminate -isms, I think it's imperative to get a better grasp on intersectionality and incorporate it into the work we do and the words we speak. I feel that marginalized groups have a better than average chance of making this work because we already know what it means to be casually dismissed or slurred against or even to have to suffer cluelessness. We just have to be willing to admit it when we don't get it right and learn from that. I hope it then makes it easier to deal with when someone says "You're engaging in these activities/this speech and it's offensive/hurtful/wrong." Even if they say it in anger or with the wrong "tone".

Intersectionality doesn't have to be about reactions to mistakes or fail, though. It's also about taking in on yourself to learn, to form better bonds, to understand, to change yourself the way you've asked others to change. I'm working on it, and it's hard. But I won't stop, it's too important.

Footnotes

1. that would be from Wikipedia, yes. [[↔](#)]
2. Recent example of this very discussion right here. [[↔](#)]
3. neo_prodigy publishes under the name Dennis R. Upkins, which I assume is his real name. [[↔](#)]
4. It's been postulated that alundra is actually just neo's sockpuppet. This seems likely since she seems to exist solely to ego boost, back up, and attack people for neo. Specifically to say things he can't/shouldn't say — like calling a woman a cunt; because it's completely acceptable for another woman to do so. Tip: it is not. [[↔](#)]
5. You can no longer see the original posts where this went down because they are locked/private, but