



Re-radicalising intersectionality in organisation studies

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abstract

Although intersectionality emerged in the 1970s through the activism of Black feminists, its application to organisation studies in recent years has too often been deradicalised as a tool to collate and commodify differences. In this article, I propose that we need to re-radicalise intersectional theorising. I offer biography and history as two methodological tools with which we may fulfil intersectionality's social justice aims. Biography compels researchers to align ourselves with the struggles of marginalised subjects. History asks us to locate our subjects in their specific histories of social injustice. It is my hope that through critical, reflexive theorising, we may protect the radical roots of intersectionality and guard against its co-optation into prevailing systems of white imperial power.

Introduction

Despite its long tradition in the social sciences, intersectionality has only in more recent years begun to inform theoretical and methodological advances in organisation studies. Its application to organisational research spans across analyses of professional identities (Essers et al., 2010; Johansson and Śliwa, 2014; Kelan, 2014), career progression (Kamenou et al., 2013; Sang et al., 2013), leadership (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Richardson and Loubier, 2008), entrepreneurship (Knight, 2016; special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Romero and Valdez, 2016), diversity management (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Zanoni et al., 2010) and organisational inequality regimes (Acker, 2012; Healy et al., 2011; Holvino, 2010).

However, emerging critiques have illuminated some potential limitations and problems with which intersectionality is adopted in recent research. Organisation studies in particular have had a tendency to engage superficially with intersectionality; focusing on identities and categories of difference, but overlooking processes of differentiation and systems of domination (Dhamoon, 2011). Perhaps even more problematic is a rising tendency to use intersectionality to showcase multiple identities like gender, race and class without any commitment to the social justice aims of intersectionality's Black feminist roots.

I suggest in this article that future organisational research need to re-radicalise intersectionality to protect against its misappropriation. Demonstrating through examples from my own study of Chinese Australian leaders in government and business, I show how two methodological considerations – biography and history – can respectively help align researchers' standpoints with the politics of their marginalised subjects and contextualise subjects' struggles towards equality and justice. In doing so, I hope to generate a dialogue of how intersectionality may help organisation scholars to interrogate power relations in work and organisations as well as help their subjects transform them (Dhamoon, 2011).

The de-radicalisation of intersectionality

Intersectionality is an evolving concept and tool that broadly refers to a recognition of the 'complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation – economic, political cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 76). As an analytical sensibility, intersectionality emerged in social activism from the 1960s (Chun et al., 2013; Collins, 2000; 2012). In the academy, the work of black feminists poignantly articulated that additive single-axis approaches were inadequate to understand and account for the experiences of African American women, where for example, their experiences are seen as the combination of static experiences of blackness and femaleness (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; The Combahee River Collective, 1977). Concerned centrally with African American women's emancipation, this early work shows that oppression cannot be reduced to one axis of gender or race, but is produced through multiple, intersecting axes (Collins, 2000; 2012).

The term 'intersectionality' itself was offered by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) to demonstrate and challenge the limitations of the law in accounting for the intersection of racial and gender discrimination, and thus address the marginalisation of women of colour. Crenshaw's conceptualisation of intersectionality has been immensely influential, traversing disciplines from

sociology to political science, and adapting to the methodological practices of their field to diverse effects (Cho et al., 2013; Pathak and Rajan, 1992).

In recent years, intersectionality has offered a more nuanced lens to explore the effects of power relations in work and organisations more specifically (Acker, 2012; Essers et al., 2010; Healy et al., 2011; Holvino, 2010; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Johansson and Śliwa, 2014; Kamenou et al., 2013; Kelan, 2014; Knight, 2016; Richardson and Loubier, 2008; Zanoni et al., 2010). Intersectional organisational research has been attuned to how systemic power relations interweave with the ongoing construction of identities along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion and age (Holvino, 2010; Zanoni et al., 2010). In particular, this body of literature has vividly detailed the barriers to the labour force participation and career progression of non-white women, where ethnic and religious minority women are expected to suppress their deviance from the organisational 'norm' (Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006). Further, identity axes can serve to render other inequalities unspeakable as Kelan (2014) found in a study of young professionals, where many associated gender inequality with the older generations and saw sexism as an individual, rather than systemic, issue.

While the application of intersectionality to organisation studies has produced valuable insights, its focus on identity has at times only enabled a cursory engagement with intersectionality. Dhamoon (2011) characterises intersectional research through four points of focus: identities of individuals or social groups (e.g., black women); categories of difference (e.g., gender and race); processes of differentiation (e.g., gendering and racialisation) and systems of domination (e.g., patriarchy and white supremacy). Although comprehensive analyses across multiple foci undoubtedly exist (e.g., Knight, 2016), for the most part, intersectional examinations in organisation studies focus on individual identities and categories of difference.

Intersectionality is often cited to explain a focus on multiple axes of identity like gender and race, or gender, race and class. It is not uncommon for organisational research to frame their contribution to intersectionality along the lines of 'gender and race have been well-explored, but this study looks at race and religion/gender and age/etc.'. This rationale inadvertently reduces intersectionality to a tool for collating and commodifying 'difference'. In reflecting on the interpretation and influence of her work over time, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2013: 980) calls into question the ways in which her intersectional, transnational feminist theorising has been cited as a 'totemic symbol'; appropriated without fundamentally interrogating the ways in which the authors nonetheless reproduce white, imperialist power. In line with this, unreflexive organisational research may risk

further domesticating and deradicalising intersectionality (Cho et al., 2013; Mohanty, 2013; Nash, 2008).

Indeed, in a recent study of a university's initiatives to change a racist campus culture, Rodriguez and Freeman (2016) show how discourses of 'intersectionality' were employed to undermine efforts to challenge racism. By arguing for the need to consider race alongside other subjectivities like sexuality, gender and class, white members of this anti-racist initiative ironically re-centred whiteness and restored white privilege. These discursive tactics appropriated intersectionality as a tool with which white students and staff could use to delegitimise discussions of race and racism as narrow, exclusive, or even harmful to the university's efforts to foster inclusivity.

Rodriguez and Freeman's (2016) findings demonstrate the ease with which intersectionality is abstracted from its Black feminist roots and deradicalised in practice. This effect supports arguments from Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2004) and bell hooks (2003) who credit intersectionality's popularity to its politically neutral and less threatening character. For these scholars, intersectionality obscures more explicit challenges to the interlocking systems of imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy in our cultures (Collins, 2004; hooks, 2003). Thus ongoing theorisations of intersectionality may need to be cautious with how the concept can be used to derail the very social justice aims with which it was developed to advance.

I suggest through this article that future organisational research could protect the radical roots of intersectionality and guard against its co-optation into prevailing systems of power via two dimensions of its methodological application: biography and history. Biography allows intersectional inquiry to reflect on the standpoint of the researcher relative to the standpoints of their subjects, and thus enable their interpretations and representations to reflect the voices of marginalised subjects (Denzin, 1997; 2009). History refers to the importance of contextualising intersectional identities within histories of oppression and struggle (Collins, 1986, 1999, 2000, 2004) and rejecting the tendency to abstract intersectionality in ways that ultimately maintains sexism, racism and other modes of domination.

I will outline how these two considerations may be integrated into organisational research; illustrating with examples from my recent study of Chinese Australian leaders. A brief background to the study will be presented before demonstrating how biography and history informed my use of intersectionality as a methodological framework.

Background to a study of Chinese Australian leaders

In 2014, I received seed funding from my faculty to conduct a research project examining how race and ethnicity informed the identities and experiences of Chinese Australian leaders. The project coincided with growing public interest and debate around the relatively low representation of people of Asian descent in positions of leadership in Australia. Due to this under-representation, I broadened my sample to include Chinese Australians working in both government and business, as well as middle managers who saw themselves engaging with or aspiring to leadership. I conducted interviews with 21 participants (14 men and seven women) between April and December 2014. Driven by my own experiences, intersectionality's political commitment to share voice with a marginalised group was central to my research design (Nash, 2008). I was explicit of a radical agenda from the outset, stating on the research information statement sent to all prospective interviewees that the study was 'grounded in my observation that we [...] remain stereotyped and overlooked within organisations and Australian society' and that 'I aspire to challenge this tendency by offering stories of Chinese Australian leaders that are self-defined, humanising and beautiful'.

Four participants were initially found through my own professional networks, with additional participants engaged through snowball sampling based on their attribution by the earlier participants as a leader and their self-identification as Chinese and Australian. This dual identification was claimed by those who saw themselves as descending from Chinese heritage (primarily or partly), and either born in or permanently migrated to Australia. It thus excluded temporary migrants (e.g., expatriates) of Chinese descent in Australia. Their response to my call also reflected a shared political commitment to racial equality, with many participants seeing my study as a platform in which they could express their concerns with dominant Australian perceptions and constructions of what it means to be 'Chinese'.

Interviews were conducted in local cafés and restaurants selected by the participants, with the exception of eight that were conducted in the participants' private offices. The interviews began with a life history approach – 'tell me about your background, your childhood, where you went to school and your memories growing up' – and then proceeded in an informal, unstructured way, allowing the informant to choose which aspects of their life and career they wished the interview to concentrate. Each interview lasted between an hour and three hours with a total of 29 hours and 45 minutes of formal recorded interviewing time.

Through the negotiated dialogue of our interviews, I elicited diverse narratives of identity and power. Although I chose participants' racial identities to stand centre

stage in the framing of my study, the multiple axes of an intersectional lived reality for my participants suffused their narratives. For example, a senior marketing manager at a financial services firm recognised how Asian people were differently gendered when she remarked how, regardless of the challenges she has faced as an Asian woman manager in her organisation, she believed Asian men experience greater difficulties in securing visibility and legitimacy as leaders. Her interpretation hints at the tensions produced by intersecting discourses of gender, race and sexuality that ‘feminise’ Asian masculinities as subordinate and deviant (Chan, 2001; Louie, 2002; Zhong, 2000).

I also adopted intersectionality as an analytical tool to interpret the interviews. This allowed me to draw links between Dhamoon’s (2011) conceptualisation of the multiple levels of intersectionality theorising, where analysis can attend to the processes of differentiation by recognising that individual identity is produced and reproduced through discourse (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). These processes of identity formation are necessarily grounded in power (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Specifically, what it means to be a ‘leader’ and what it means to be ‘Chinese’ are influenced by wider sociopolitical meanings constructed through systems of domination, including imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy.

The findings were analysed across the dynamic interrelations between identities, categories of difference, processes of differentiation and systems of domination (Dhamoon, 2011). The published analyses include how masculine sexualities were racialised among the participants who identified as men (Liu, 2017b). Specifically, the paper traces how Asian masculinities have been constructed as weak, effeminate and inferior in Western imaginations, and explores how the male participants practised sensuality in pursuit of decolonisation, agency and pleasure. Another paper explores how imperialism as a system of domination constrain Chinese Australian identities within Orientalist fantasies of the ancient and mysterious exotic, and the ways the participants both co-opted and resisted this image (Liu, 2017a).

When the analyses for manuscripts were written up, excerpts relating to each participant were sent to them for review, inviting their input and feedback on my interpretations. All participants responded to this request, and in three cases, their review of their original interview prompted them to initiate second and third interviews to elaborate on their perspectives and discuss how their experiences had changed over the course of the year. Their willingness to engage with the entire research process perhaps reflected the non-hierarchical nature of our relationship. Our ongoing discussions and debates eventually developed into collaborative narratives in the write-up of the findings.

The radical commitment of the study was realised through two methodological tools: biography and history. Biography refers to the alignment of the researcher's standpoint with that of the research subjects. History involves contextualising the analysis of subject experiences within their specific backgrounds of socio-political struggle. Both these tools inform the analysis of qualitative data, although biography will also help shape the research design, for example, the choice of research subjects and sampling methods. The next section will examine how each of these tools can be applied to intersectional research, illustrating with examples from my study of Chinese Australian leaders.

Re-radicalising intersectionality with biography and history

Biography

Anti-colonial critical scholarship has long established the importance for researchers to align their research ethics with the politics of their marginalised subjects (Bishop, 1998; Christians, 2011; Denzin, 2009; Fine, 1994). Theorising from this ethical stance seeks to subvert neocolonial modes of knowledge production in which the researcher is styled as an objective authoritative figure who has the right to categorise and contain exotic 'Others' (Chakrabarty, 1992; Jack and Westwood, 2009; Prasad, 2003; Westwood, 2001). They reject these epistemic norms by adopting collaborative and participatory forms of inquiry that makes the researcher first and foremost responsible to those being studied (Denzin, 2009). Their research thus challenges gender, racial, class, age or sexual stereotypes, while promoting critical consciousness and social transformation (*ibid.*).

One way in which researchers may align themselves with the struggles of marginalised subjects in intersectional theorising is by explicitly drawing on their personal experiences. Denzin (1997: 47) highlights the value of biographical approaches to interpretation that allow the researcher to 'work outwards from [their] biography, entangling his or her tales of the self with the stories told by others'. This can enable the researcher to find stories of shared struggle with his or her subjects, even if they might not share the same identity categorisations.

My research was closely tied to my biography. I grew up in Sydney, Australia as a '1.5 generation' Chinese immigrant. Although my family's residency was made possible due to Australia's state-sanctioned policy of multiculturalism that outwardly celebrates a commitment to ethno-cultural diversity (Ang, 2014; Banerjee and Linstead, 2001; Hage, 1998), I quickly learnt that survival in Australian society required a certain assimilationist performance.

Within critical race theory, whiteness is recognised as more than a biological marker: it constitutes a performative identity located within specific sociohistorical contexts (Foster, 2003; Gillborn, 2005; Giroux, 1997). I performed whiteness in my context through adopting an anglicised first name, speaking with an Australian accent, and eventually undertaking a university degree in the white-dominated discipline of organisation studies that seemed furthest from the ‘nerdy’ Asian stereotypes of Accounting and Finance that I felt I was expected to pursue. This performance was rewarded with visibility and acceptance from my white professors and peers. Conversely, I witnessed how my classmates and colleagues at university marked as ‘foreign’ by virtue of their appearance, accents and other aspects of their embodiment, became invisible in the institution; and how easily I too fell into those cracks unless I vigorously exerted my white Australian performance to each new audience.

In my research, my experiences with Otherness prompted me to critically probe and question the ways participants’ themselves reproduced stereotypical definitions of what it meant to be ‘Chinese’. For example, some leaders internalised notions of their Asian passivity and avowed to overcome their lack of directness and assertiveness, even while demonstrating their directness and assertiveness in their interviews. Rather than accepting their stereotypical reports as given or somehow ‘proof’ that Asian people really are passive, my shared identification and experiences allowed me to understand how their identity work was shaped by wider processes of racialisation and white supremacist ideologies.

Where it seemed appropriate, I further offered these personal experiences to my participants during the extended informal discussions around our interviews. This interchange strengthened our sense of mutual trust and solidarity as it underscored for my participants how my study was driven by a personal commitment to racial equality (Clough, 1994; Denzin, 2009). Through ongoing dialogue and follow-up interviews, this biographical approach to intersectional research offered insights into how Chinese Australians grappled with conflicting senses of self and their attempts towards overcoming internalised racism (DuBois, 2005).

Research that fails to align with the politics of its subjects can exert epistemic violence against subdominant groups (Spivak, 2012). This violence is engrained in white people’s historical authority to assert racialised knowledge about the ‘Other’ (*ibid.*). By working outwards from my biography, I sought to subvert traditional, distanced approaches to social research that can reproduce existing gender, racial and sexual stereotypes of one’s subjects (Fine, 1994; Smith, 2005). Intersectional research interpreted by ‘outsiders’ can similarly be tempted to rest on stereotypes or take for granted dominant categorisations like ‘black minority ethnics (BMEs)’

that homogenise diverse peoples. My standpoint as an ‘insider’ in the study, however, made it a personal imperative to challenge the stereotypes that abound of Chinese people in Australia, utilising research as a vehicle to humanise social meanings around what it means to be ‘Chinese’.

History

The deradicalisation and detachment of intersectionality from its social justice roots as observed in organisation studies have been similarly observed across Black feminist theories. Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1999, 2000, 2004), who advanced landmark theories such as interlocking oppressions and the matrix of domination that influenced intersectionality, has reflected on how her theories have been appropriated by mainstream sociological research over the last two decades. Her ideas were developed during the 1980s and 1990s with the explicit aim of challenging white supremacy in sociology by sharing voice with Black women and affirming their valuable standpoints on self, family and society. However, her theories have frequently been abstracted from their political purpose and used by academics to claim marginal positions for any individual (Collins, 1999).

Collins (1999) claims that theories cannot be divorced from the socio-political contexts of their production. Moreover, theorising needs to attune to the specific histories of social injustice among its subjects. While the histories of Chinese migrants in Australia differ from the centuries of slavery, colonialism and subjugation experienced by the Black women who inspired and contributed to intersectional theorising, interpretations of Chinese Australian experiences need to be grounded in their specific social histories.

Historicising intersectional analyses is one way to address Dhamoon’s (2011) argument that intersectionality needs to consider the interrelations between identity, categories of difference, processes of differentiation and systems of domination. A historical approach goes beyond cursory treatments of identity that are primarily fixed on ‘this is what Chinese Australians think’, towards understanding how racialisation and white supremacist ideologies have operated in organisational and societal arenas to constrain their identities over time. History here therefore does not comprise the collection of archival data per se, but the understanding of ongoing, shifting socio-political dynamics that shape how we see our research subjects as well as how they see themselves.

The earliest Chinese migrants arrived to Australia in the mid-nineteenth century, primarily from the southern Pearl Delta region of China, during the gold rushes in New South Wales and Victoria (Choi, 1975). By the time of Australia’s Federation in 1901, there were close to 30,000 people of Chinese descent in

Australia. However, that same year saw the passing of the Immigration Restriction Act (commonly known as the White Australia policy), which limited the arrival and endorsed the deportation of non-European immigrants (Curthoys, 2003). The White Australia policy was finally abolished in 1965, since which the ideas of a multicultural national identity have become increasingly widespread in a landscape of post-war immigration and globalisation (Jayasuriya et al., 2003).

In contrast to the *laissez-faire* approach of the U.S., Australia is distinct in its deliberate management of ethno-cultural diversity, evidenced by an amalgam of policies designed to facilitate and supervise diversity's benefit on the nation (Walsh, 2012). However, critics suggest that the outwardly celebratory commitment to ethno-cultural diversity is predicated on an established hierarchy between white Australians and ethnic Others (Banerjee and Linstead, 2001). Under state-sponsored multiculturalism, Australians are encouraged to 'express and share their individual cultural heritage', however, they are cautioned that they can only do so 'within carefully defined limits' while maintaining 'an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia' (Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1989: paras. 4-5). Whiteness thus remains at the apex of Australia's racial hierarchy, while the present neoliberal context increasingly encourages ethnic minorities to be seen in terms of their economic value.

By contextualising intersectional analysis within the history of participants' struggles, the study was able to make sense of how discourses of race and racialisation have changed over time in Australia. In particular, I developed an appreciation of how Australian society has historically maintained stereotypes of Asian passivity in part to neutralise their earlier constructions during the height of the White Australian era as a threat and menace to white Australian workers (Ang, 2003). Some leaders have integrated the model minority myth (Cho, 1997; Yeh, 2014) into their identity work, positioning themselves as 'sidekicks' to their white Australian peers in attempts to neutralise their sense of power and authority in their organisations and therefore mitigate their followers' resistance.

Paying attention to history also requires researchers to be sensitive to how different social movements can in turn trade one form of equality for other forms of oppression. This compromise can be observed in the commodification of multiculturalism that resurfaced at the start of this decade within an 'Asian Century' discourse (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). The Asian Century discourse emphasises the economic rise of Asia and is concerned with how Australia can 'seize the economic opportunities that will flow' through trade partnerships (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012: ii). Through a stated desire to become 'Asia ready', businesses have begun touting the need for ethno-culturally diverse leadership in Australia (O'Leary and Tilly, 2014). However, the focus of

much of this discussion has been on primarily elite class, first generation Asian Australians in senior executive ranks. Mapping these recent calls for leadership diversity onto the history of Chinese migration in Australia suggests that we have moved away from collective struggles for labour and citizenship rights towards individual struggles for senior leadership positions. This movement thus individualises the historical and systemic professional barriers for people of Asian descent in Australia, while continuing to commodify 'Asianness' in the so-called Asian Century. By remaining attuned to social histories, intersectional research has the potential to critique contemporary trends and identify how the pursuit for racial equality in some cases can obscure equally oppressive imperialist, capitalist and neoliberal systems of domination.

Challenges to intersectional practice

Applications of radical intersectional theory to practice will not be without its challenges. Specifically, my work with Chinese Australian leaders suggested some dominant tendencies to assume both a staunchly single-axis perspective and an essentialist view of identity (Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). These assumptions fix organisational members to identity categories, treating them as homogenous and limiting their capacity to derive whole identities (Chun et al., 2013; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007).

Despite the participants' experiences of how multiple identity axes intersected in their day-to-day interactions, their articulation of intersectionality was impeded by institutionalised single-axis discourses that permeate Australian society and many organisations. In recent years, inequalities have been collapsed under the umbrella term of 'diversity', with mainstream academic and practitioner texts chiefly reducing diversity to a managerial activity focussed on increasing the 'body count' of so-called 'minority' employees (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005; Sinclair, 2006; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010; Zanoni et al., 2010). Within this paradigm, diversity initiatives overwhelmingly focus on pre-established categories of difference like gender and culture (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012), while other forms of inequality are seen as competing frames.

Some of the participants in the study seemed compelled to choose one inequality to attribute their experience. Melinda, for example, deliberated over which discrimination has affected her the most: 'race hasn't affected me that much; gender sometimes, though I haven't had major issues around sexism [...] for me, it's more my age'. These assessments reflected the issues that were permitted and those rendered unspeakable within the diversity discourses of their organisations. This tendency suggested that the language for recognising and conveying

interlocking oppressions is not yet readily available for organisational members, while prevailing pressures to choose from 'competing' discriminations are grounded in wider systems of power.

The single-axis discourses of organisations further prompted organisational members to individualise discrimination, rather than see discrimination as embedded in systems of domination and reinforced through processes of differentiation. When I interviewed Chinese women leaders, a common experience they shared was being repeatedly told throughout their careers that they lacked confidence. Lynn, a senior manager in a financial services firm, held a magnetic and charismatic presence from our first meeting. Despite her genial manner, she was frequently confronted by her managers and peers with the attribution that she lacked confidence. Some of her responses suggested that she accepted this assessment and saw confidence building as her personal project of leadership development. The stereotypically 'hyper-feminine' attributes of Asian women as quiet, submissive and long-suffering (Tajima, 1989) were first imposed on my female participants, then framed by their organisations as individual deficiencies that they needed to correct, thereby eliding considerations of wider structural inequalities as well as patriarchal, white supremacist and colonial ideologies.

Closely related to the dominant single-axis frame was the prevalent assumption that identities are primordial essences. Grounded in historical images of Chinese people in Australia as homogenous Others of the 'yellow hordes' (Mayer, 2013), stereotypical attributes like introversion and submissiveness were treated as innate attributes for all people of East Asian descent. The essentialist view was internalised by many of my participants, who often ended up perpetuating virulent stereotypes by describing negative aspects of themselves as 'typically' Chinese.

Intersectionality nevertheless has the potential to account for the plurality of identities that comprise any group, which allow single-axis frames and essentialist identity categories to be questioned or even rejected altogether (Chun et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 2013; McCall, 2013). I attempted to capture the intracategorical complexity (McCall, 2013) of Chinese Australians methodologically through my selection of participants. This meant keeping definitions around what it meant to be 'Chinese Australian' deliberately loose in the recruitment process to accommodate for participants' self-definitions. While categories of race and ethnicity are inexorably informed by wider societal discourses, I inclined towards an emic approach as much as possible to avoid imposing universalistic notions of those categories (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012).

For example, I met An-Rong through my study, who was born in Australia to Vietnamese-born parents, but identified as Chinese through his ancestry. Through An-Rong and other participants who chose to embrace a Chinese identity amidst ethnic and national ambiguity, I attempted to show that groupist ethnic/national demarcations are not so clear-cut as dominant discourses suggest (Ang, 2014). By taking participants' self-identifications as the starting point, the study aimed to make amends for the difficulties of identification, belonging and agency experienced by non-white people within multicultural Australia (Ang, 2014; Banerjee and Linstead, 2001; Hage, 1998). Further, accommodating for a more processual and flexible approach to identity facilitates the formation of strategic group positions that have the potential to forge collective political struggles (Chun et al., 2013).

Sharing and connecting our biographies through the interviews offered avenues through which to articulate and honour participants' intersectional lived experiences. As intersectional approaches have vividly illustrated, the complexity of individuals' quotidian interactions and life experiences of marginalisation cannot be understood without taking into consideration the individual's gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, class and age that varyingly intersect at different points in time to simultaneously produce oppression and privilege (Simien, 2007). Weaving intersectional considerations into our discussions through observations and questions (e.g., 'that sounds like to me he assumed you were the shy Asian woman stereotype', 'do you think that would've been different if you were straight?') opened up ways for the leaders to understand their experiences through the more nuanced discourses of intersectionality.

A recurring theme in the interviews was my interpreting of the ways in which the participants' leadership work subverted systems of domination via the overlapping interpersonal, structural and hegemonic domains of power. For example, I discussed with Jay, a risk manager of a financial services firm, the ways in which his emphasis on sensuality and empathy with his employees subverted masculinist norms of leadership as command and conquest (Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993). Andrea's decision to put the first Aboriginal model on the cover of an Australian magazine as Editor-in-Chief against the advice of her Board that 'black models don't sell' could be understood as challenging white aesthetic standards as well as the power-blind pursuit of profit. Sales Executive Jeff and I also talked through the ways in which his efforts to establish an interdepartmental diversity council and secure the advocacy of his company's most senior managers sought to manoeuvre power within and beyond existing hierarchical structures while attempting to challenge the invisible hegemony of whiteness of diversity management (Grimes, 2002).

Concluding remarks on epistemic violence

Intersectionality offers a valuable theoretical and methodological framework to advise critical organisational scholarship. By peering between the cracks of multiple marginalities (and privileges), intersectional research bears the potential to gain insights from people who may remain overlooked in existing organisational theory and practice. Despite its promising potential, intersectionality has been found in recent years to be at risk of being co-opted through both research and practice to reproduce white supremacist patriarchy (Carastathis, 2008; Cho et al., 2013; Mohanty, 2013; Nash, 2008; Rodriguez and Freeman, 2016). Indeed, when detached from its social justice roots, intersectional studies of organisations can at times appear to collect and commodify ‘minority’ subjects without a broader attention to how prevailing systems of domination may be reinforced.

Grounded in traditions of anti-colonialism and Black feminism, I have discussed the ways I drew on intersectionality in my research design and analysis of Chinese Australian leadership with a view to changing social meanings around what it means to be ‘Chinese’. Specifically, I drew on my biography and aligned my research with the politics of subjects who shared my identification and struggles. I further located my subjects’ struggles in the sociohistorical context of Chinese migration in Australia to better contextualise how colonial and racial ideologies over time work to delegitimise people of Chinese descent from the work of leadership. Future intersectional research may guard against the deradicalisation of this important framework. By considering the dimensions of biography and history in future analyses of marginalised subjects, intersectional theorising may continue to challenge and transform systems of domination.

The dual tools of biography and history force researchers to confront prevailing inequities by raising questions about who can look at whose intersectionality. I would caution against a universal criterion mandating that researchers share the identifications of their research subjects. However, it is also not possible to sustain systemic ignorance, enjoying the moral comfort of denial of the ways our theorising is complicit with imperialism, white supremacy, capitalism or patriarchy (Moreton-Robinson, 2011).

Critical, reflexive research lays bare the entangled dynamics of power inherent in knowledge production. When researchers are ‘outsiders’ to the social group being studied, they reflect on how and why they have come to investigate the group members. They call into question the hegemonic relations of power that may have afforded them the authority to ‘know’ the social group. In the case of organisational research, for example, white researchers who have been awarded grants to study diversity management may speak out against their own racial privilege that

bestows upon them the right to control and benefit from ‘difference’ (hooks, 1992; Leong, 2012; Liu, 2017c). Non-white researchers studying different non-white groups can examine biographical resonances that allow them to align their research with their racialised subjects, while interrogating their own relative powers and privileges, if any.

Still, history begs us to consider the specific locations from which we theorise intersectional structures and identities. My suggestions above for radical intersectional research reflect my views of the fraught yet relatively privileged positions of middle-class East Asian migrants in Australia. The harm may be too profound in other cases, such as in the colonial relations between Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and white Anglo Australians. In such cases, it may be appropriate to reject the reproduction of white patriarchal knowledge altogether and leave intersectional theory and activism to its rightful custodians.

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