

Political intersectionality and disability activism: Approaching and understanding difference and unity

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Abstract

Social movement scholars have increasingly examined how political intersectionality helps reveal and explain whose issues and interests are marginalised or privileged within particular activist spaces and discourses. Hitherto, much of the intersectional analysis into social movements has interrogated questions of sameness, difference and power in relation to feminist, anti-racist and queer organising; this article builds upon our knowledge of social movements and intersectionality by exploring the perceptions and experiences of disability activists in the UK. The research draws upon 24 semi-structured interviews undertaken with disability rights activists, finding that a traditional emphasis on unity means that those who are multiply marginalised still experience a silencing of issues and interests of importance to them; moreover, while there is a recognition of difference, this is principally understood in relation to impairment or social class. Simultaneously, the research finds evidence of an increasing tendency amongst disability activists in the UK to engage with intersectionality, both in how they understand disability but also in terms of how they organise.

Keywords

difference, disability, intersectionality, marginalisation, social movements

Introduction

Intersectionality reveals and interrogates the ways in which multiple and overlapping forms of structural oppression create and recreate patterns of marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991). As a conceptual lens for thinking about power it has had a profound impact on how we think about, and actualise, movement organising (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Specifically, there has been a rising awareness of the need to centralise intersectionality

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within social movements and within the study of social movements in order to identify and contest dynamics of power (Chun et al., 2013; Evans, 2020; Montoya, 2021). In the UK, intersectionality is most closely associated with, and analysed in relation to, racial justice, feminist and ethnic minority women's organising (Bassel & Emejulu, 2014; Charles & Wadia, 2018; Ishkanian & Peña Saavedra, 2019). This article helps build our understanding of intersectional organising in the UK by providing an analysis of disability activism – a relatively little-studied social movement. Concomitantly, the research also contributes to the growing global literature concerning the relationship between disability and intersectionality (Erevelles, 2011; Schalk & Kim, 2020).

This article analyses the perceptions and experiences of those active within the disability movement. It focuses in particular on the extent to which they feel that difference is recognised, and whether time and space are dedicated to discussing the ways in which disability intersects with other systems of privilege and discrimination. The study is based upon 24 semi-structured interviews undertaken with a range of activists involved with disability rights activism. The research finds that a traditional emphasis on unity means that there is still some resistance to understanding disability in intersectional terms, and more specifically resistance to thinking about differences beyond those related to impairment or social class. At the same time, the research also finds evidence of an increasing tendency amongst activists to think about intersectionality in relation to how they understand disability, but also in terms of how they organise. The article proceeds as follows: the first section reviews the literature on intersectionality and social movements, before mapping out the history, organisation and focus of the disability rights movement in the UK; the methods are then discussed before presenting and analysing the findings.

Intersectionality and social movements

With its roots in Black feminism, intersectionality takes us beyond identity politics and a focus on single-axis activism, toward a more complex understanding of how power is shaped by multiple axes of oppression (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Crenshaw, 1991). Recognising and interrogating overlapping and multiple axes of oppression can help unpack internal social movement dynamics, tactical repertoires and approaches to social justice (Roth, 2021). An intersectional analysis of social movements helps us reveal and understand the tensions between sameness, difference and power (Cho et al., 2013; Luna, 2016). Moreover, intersectionality can be especially useful for analysing movements that emerge from marginalised communities who are themselves conscious of difference, for example Benita Roth's work (2017) on ACT UP/LA. Intersectionality reveals the complex and manifold social locations that underscore organisations of power, and, fittingly, the concept itself is also multifaceted (Lewis, 2009). Crenshaw (1991) delineated three types of intersectionality: *structural*, how people are marginalised within systems that fail to recognise the position they occupy at the intersections of different layers of oppression; *representational*, how marginalised groups are depicted visually and discursively; and *political*, how the issues and interests of particular groups are marginalised within political agendas and social movements. This article draws upon the idea of political intersectionality, an important frame for how we think about

social movement organising, specifically whose voices, bodies and accounts are marginalised or privileged within particular spaces and discourses (Luna, 2016; Tormos, 2017).

Thanks to work undertaken by women of colour, some social movements, especially racial justice and feminist movements, have begun to engage with intersectionality and the idea of difference (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017; Townsend-Bell, 2011). Indeed, successful social movements have increasingly recognised the importance of appealing beyond the/one dominant social group, which risks further excluding those located at the interstices of multiply-marginalised groups (Ferree & Roth, 1998; Strolovitch, 2007; Tungohan, 2016). Normalising inclusivity, paying attention to intersectional issues, and acknowledging how power shapes relations between activists, are all strategies that can help facilitate successful coalitional organising (Cole & Luna, 2010; Laperrière & Lépinard, 2016; Weldon, 2006). Of course, perceptions of intersectionality, and importantly whether or not it is actually achieved in terms of social movement thinking and organising, vary amongst and between activists (Luna, 2020), while the type of organisation, available resources, funding and discursive strategies can all affect how, and how successfully, intersectionality shapes political organising (Lépinard, 2014; Staggenborg, 2015; Tormos, 2017).

Studies have found that those located at the margins, and who have experienced obstacles to inclusion within wider movements, have emphasised the need for self-organisation as a collective action strategy that foregrounds an intersectional identity (Crenshaw, 1991; Roth, 2004). However, even within those spaces, there can be tensions. Zakiya Luna (2016) has identified how activists negotiate sameness and difference in their organising; for example she argues that while the term ‘women of color’ offers an important ‘rhetorical space of inclusion’ it is also necessary to continue to interrogate the power dynamics at work within that group. This reflection on sameness and difference forms the theoretical approach adopted in this research. Specifically, how disability activists, especially disabled women and ethnic minority disabled women, think about their positionality within the disability rights movement, and the extent to which difference, and different locations, are recognised.

This article draws upon the work of critical race theorist and disability studies scholar Nirmala Erevelles (2011), who conceptualises disability as an ‘ideological condition’ produced, and indeed required, by the material realities of capitalism. If an individual is unable to fulfil the expectations of neoliberal regimes, *and* is to be found at the interstices of gender, race, caste, class and disability then they are effectively rendered unintelligible and cast outside of the system. There is a parallel to be drawn here between the whiteness and the maleness of the disability rights movement and disability studies, the latter of which has historically been too concerned with what Dan Goodley (2014) refers to as the ‘master signifier’ of disability. The dominance of one particular signifier chimes with the findings of Strolovitch (2007), who found that advocacy organisations in the US often prioritise issues affecting the *majority* of their constituents, rather than those located at the margins. Political intersectionality can help us understand how and why disabled women, and ethnic minority disabled women and men, occupy marginalised positions (Erevelles, 2011; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Frederick & Shifrer, 2019; Nishida, 2016). This research heeds the call to think intersectionally about the disability rights movement (Schalk & Kim, 2020), while also embedding intersectionality within the study of disability activism. This study helps develop our understanding of the ways

in which activists negotiate difference, power and marginality within a social movement of which we know relatively little. Although unity is important for all social movements, reviewing the history of the disability activism in the UK can help us contextualise its importance and why it is difficult for (some) differences to be addressed.

Disability activism in the UK

According to official statistics, around 20% of the UK population is disabled (Department for Work and Pensions, 2020).¹ That figure is likely to be higher given the various issues that pertain to collecting accurate data, not least the stigma associated with identifying as disabled (Schur et al., 2013). Definitions of disability also vary. Following UK activists, this article defines disability according to the social model, which interprets disability as a phenomenon produced by society. Disability is here understood as a system in which people with impairments (whether physical, mental, cognitive, developmental or intellectual) experience discrimination and stigma (Oliver, 1983, 2013). This model has been criticised for drawing too neat a binary between disability and impairment, leaving little room for the acknowledgement of the realities of living with pain, and for casting the disabled subject as one produced in the Global North (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). However, scholars have developed it to better reflect the ways in which disability is produced in relation to its intersections with other structural forms of oppression such as gender, race and class (Erevelles, 2011; Goodley, 2014). It is this more expansive and intersectional social model of disability that this research adopts.

Official data reveal that disabled people experience higher levels of poverty and unemployment, achieve lower levels of education, and express lower levels of well-being (Office for National Statistics, 2020). COVID-19 has also had a disproportionately negative impact on disabled people (Shakespeare et al., 2021), with studies highlighting the negligible approach of the UK government towards disabled people (Abrams & Abbott, 2020). Due to the pervasive nature of structural inequalities facing disabled people, and because disabled people in the UK are less likely to be found in positions of power (Evans & Reher, 2020), disability rights activism is vital. The disability rights movement is here understood as a constellation of collaborations (both formal and informal) between a diverse range of individuals, groups and organisations who are engaged in political contestations underpinned by shared collective identities (Diani, 1992). The disability rights movement comprises grassroots collectives, more formalised disabled people's organisations (DPOs), national high-profile charities and civil society organisations – although tensions do exist between them (Oliver & Barnes, 2006).

There is a long history of sporadic protest and fragmented disability activism in the UK, dating from the nineteenth century onwards (Judy Hunt cited in Campbell & Oliver, 1996, p. 18). One reason for the fragmented nature of the activism has been the dominance of the medical model of disability, which defines disability as an individual 'possession' rather than an oppressive social structure. The dominance of the medical approach has meant that for a long time disabled people did not necessarily view themselves as constituting a distinct social group with a shared set of interests. This inhibited the emergence of a recognisable disability movement (Davis, 2013). Campbell and Oliver (1996) date the transformation of the disability rights movement from an

emergent to a mature social movement in the 1980s. During this time a number of DPOs emerged, which continued to campaign for civil rights, as well as pushing back against the dominant perception of disability as a tragedy.

In recent years, all sections of the disability rights movement have been principally concerned with the fallout from the 2008 financial crash. The UK government, along with many other post-industrial economies, implemented a series of welfare cuts, pushing ahead with private sector outsourcing in order to reduce government spending (Dukelow & Kennett, 2018). These reforms have had a devastating impact on disabled people, who were pushed further into poverty through the introduction of punitive benefit sanctions (Clifford, 2020). As a result, many disabled people experience extreme poverty, alongside a noted rise of in-work poverty amongst disabled workers (Richards & Sang, 2019). At the same time, disabled people have been characterised as ‘scroungers’ by widespread sections of the UK’s media (Ryan, 2019). In response there has been a renewal of grassroots disability rights activism, with new groups emerging, notably the high-profile Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC) (Clifford, 2020).

The disability rights movement has worked hard to assert the idea of disability as a meaningful category and identity. The heterogeneity of disabled people and the vast range of impairments and conditions mean that it has been difficult at times to establish a set of shared political issues and interests (Reher, 2022). Although other social movements experience fragmentation, the specific history of the disability community means that it is a particular issue for the disability movement. For instance, many of the largest disability civil society organisations and charities in the UK focus on particular impairments rather than disability per se, for example the Royal National Institute for Blind People, MS Society, or Mencap, the charity for people with learning disabilities. At the grassroots level newer DPOs have tended to be cross-impairment, focusing on disability as a structural inequality, e.g. DPAC. This heterogeneity suggests that the movement is well-versed in thinking about difference (cf. Roth, 2017). However, the desire to assert the idea of a disability identity has meant those located at the interstices of disability, race, gender and class have often found themselves marginalised (Goodley, 2014). Indeed, the silencing and marginalisation of Black disabled women is something that activist Katouche Goll (2020) has written about:

. . . efforts to keep Black disabled people out of the conversation on liberation is an enduring practice in our communities, upheld by superstition, respectability politics and ignorance. Disability (like mental health) is often posited as a ‘white’ thing, internally disassociated from the Black experience.

In the longer piece, Goll highlights the various ways in which disability activism has minimised, ignored or refused to engage with the intersections between race and disability. The marginalisation of Black disabled people within the movement was a view shared by some of the ethnic minority interviewees for this project, although there was some sense that the hesitancy to discuss race had shifted recently because of the effects of Black Lives Matter (a theme to which we return).

Unlike in the US or Canada, there is little discussion concerning Disability Justice, a framework which explicitly ties ending ableism to other systems of oppression (Jampel,

2018). As such, and similar to the findings from the wider social movement literature discussed above, this has resulted in the rise of self-organising amongst multiply-marginalised disabled people – especially those related to gender and race. Disabled women’s collective Sisters of Frida was founded in 2014 by a group of activists keen to establish new communities and ways of organising in order to ‘explore intersectional possibilities’ (Sisters of Frida, n.d.). Meanwhile, Kym Oliver and Jumoke Abdullahi, disappointed by the failure to address the lack of representation and discrimination faced by disabled women, femmes and non-binary people of colour, established Triple Cripples in 2018 to challenge the marginalisation of disabled women and disabled women of colour in particular (Triple Cripples, n.d.). While the launch of Disabled Black Lives Matter was intended to address the multiple inequalities faced by Black Disabled People (ALLFIE, n.d.).

Recognising the rise of self-organising, alongside the documented rise of intersectional thinking amongst social movement actors, this research explores how disability activists perceive the tension between the need for unity and the demands for recognition of difference in the movement. This article contributes to debates within social movement studies concerning the extent to which activists from a diverse range of movements engage with difference and intersectionality (Frederick & Shifrer, 2014; Luna, 2016; Roberts & Jesudason, 2013). At the same time, the research also deepens our knowledge of disability activism as it relates to political intersectionality.

Methods

This research analyses the experiences and perspectives of 24 disability activists in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with those involved in large national disability charities and organisations as well as those involved with DPOs. Interviewing activists and paid employees from across the movement was important because it allowed for greater reflection upon the extent to which the type of organisation or group impacted upon their approach to intersectionality. Interviewees were recruited via email sent to either named people or a generic information email address asking if they would be willing to be interviewed for this research. Further interviewees were recruited via snowballing sampling, whereby participants recommend other potential participants. Interviewees came from a wide variety of backgrounds and every effort was made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, race and ethnicity; this is where snowballing was of particular use in helping identify individuals from underrepresented groups (Noy, 2008). Interviews were conducted using video conferencing software and were (audio) recorded; participants were sent an information and consent form ahead of the interviews, reassuring them that any quotations used in publication would be fully anonymised. All interviews took place between May 2021 and August 2021. Of the interviewees all apart from one were disabled, with a wide range of physical, cognitive and sensory related impairments (many had multiple impairments), interviewees were not asked to detail or describe their impairments: 13 identified as women (54%), and five were racialised minority activists (21%). No other sociodemographic data were collected ahead of or during the interviews. In hindsight this omission is a limitation on the findings of the study, particularly relating to age and class. Indeed, class came up frequently during the interviews, as the findings section below reveals, but unfortunately no systematic analysis of this can be provided.

Semi-structured interviewing is central to the study of social movements, enabling the researcher to better understand the motives and activities of those who participate (Blee & Taylor, 2002). However, also undertaking ethical social research is critical. Part of realising an ethical approach is meeting the standards as set out by universities (e.g. this research secured approval from the university's ethics committee), which safeguards the participation of all those involved in this research, including securing informed consent, anonymisation and data storage. At the broader level, undertaking ethical social research also requires a degree of reflection on the power dynamics at play between the researcher and the researched, although these are by no means always static or unidirectional, as they are shaped by the various social locations at play (Harding, 2004). While participants knew and had agreed to being interviewed as part of academic research, the researcher also flagged up the desire for it to be a two-way process, by, for example, offering to share or present the findings as well as sharing academic material (typically inaccessible for participants without access to a university library).

Interviewees were asked about organising and in particular for their views on intersectionality: Did they know what the term meant? What did they understand by the term? And, how did they think it shaped their own experience of the wider movement? Participants were not asked directly to reflect upon their history of disability activism, although most made reference to campaigns or groups they had previously been involved with. Instead, interviewees were asked to think about their experiences and how they perceived intersectionality to have shaped their own and the wider movement's activism. All of the interviewees had heard of the term intersectionality, although some wanted to check or clarify their understanding with the interviewer. The interview material was analysed by an initial close reading of the transcriptions, before pulling out broader themes that emerged in relation to the main questions concerning their experiences and perceptions of intersectionality and disability activism. The analysis was guided by the principal concerns of political intersectionality (i.e. the marginalisation of issues and interests of concern to those of particular groups). Finally, the data were coded by identifying categories and ideas. In other words, the analysis presented in the article was generated inductively rather than deductively.

Unity, marginalisation and silencing

The desire for unity within social movement organising is not unique to disability activism. Certainly plenty of social movements have sought to downplay difference in favour of a single-axis focus (Davis, 1981; Roth, 2004): a strategy which Crenshaw (1991) reminds us will always limit the potential, and ultimately the outcomes, of social activism. A single-axis focus ultimately silences those who seek to 'ask the other question' (Lorde, 1984). Indeed, the silencing that accompanies experiences of marginalisation is a theme that emerged from the interviews conducted for this research. However, the specific history of the disability rights movement means that the approach to unity differs to accounts of other social movements. Rather than focusing on sameness (cf. Luna, 2016), which would be difficult given the vast range of impairments which differentially shape individual disabled people's experiences of ableism, the emphasis is on *unity* achieved through a disabled identity.

During the interviews some people, especially women, and particularly ethnic minority men and women, felt that the disability rights movement had failed to provide space and time for thinking about how disability had to be understood relationally – especially its intersections with gender and race. This failure was identified particularly in relation to large disability charities or civil society organisations. This finding resonates with studies of other social movements that have identified the inability of large organisations to represent the issues and interests of concern to the multiply marginalised (Strolovitch, 2007). One ethnic minority man recounted a conversation he had had with a prominent white male disability rights activist who had ‘shut down’ his attempts to discuss race or gender. The interviewee said that he had responded with a simple ‘but I exist’, to demonstrate that it was not possible for him to separate disability out from race, and that this had been met with a shrug and an insistence that the focus had to be on disability as there was ‘no room left’ to ‘broaden the scope’. Although this conversation had taken place some years previously, it had stayed with the interviewee, who felt that it continued to be a ‘real issue’ for the movement across all different organisation types. This discussion was similar to the experiences of some other interviewees, who felt as though their attempts to bring an intersectional lens to the discussion had been dismissed or ignored, as the below quotation illustrates:

A while ago, I was at this meeting and I remember asking about how we were planning to think about disabled women and what we were doing to increase the number of disabled women who might be interested in becoming more involved. And there was like this type of embarrassed silence, like I’d said something wrong and people started saying that we really need to think about solidarity amongst all disabled people and not separate out into smaller groups. So, yeah. Not great. (white woman)

The woman quoted above reported feeling frustrated and angry about the response and the suggestion that she was trying to splinter or fracture the group by focusing on disabled women. As a result, this participant had chosen to devote her time to self-organising groups. She noted that she was left feeling unwelcome in that space and as if she had broken some sort of unspoken rule. It is instructive that her call for thinking about how issues of importance to disabled women was met with an insistence on solidarity and unity ‘amongst all groups’, recalling experiences of women of colour in the feminist movement (Armstrong, 2002).

Other interviewees spoke about the silences and resistances that sometimes met their attempts to bring gender or race into the conversation. One ethnic minority woman described the response to her desire to focus on how Black disabled women are treated by healthcare professionals as eliciting, ‘awkward responses, like people were listening to me but not really engaging with me or the subject if you know what I mean?’ This interviewee felt that her emphasis on a particular group often marginalised within multiple spaces was considered by others, in this instance in a grassroots activist meeting, to be a fringe topic, one that was unlikely to have much cut through, either with other campaigners or with those they were trying to pressure to address the issue. Indeed, this perception chimes with findings from other research which has found that the issues and interests of concern to disabled women are marginalised within feminist spaces (Evans, 2020; Inckle, 2015).

Interviewees discussed how the default disabled subject that exists within the wider public imagination, a white man in a wheelchair, i.e. visibly disabled in a very obvious and acceptable way, had filtered through to some of the larger disability organisations. One white woman observed the ‘limited’ representations of disabled people:

I guess it basically comes down to who they think is disabled? I mean if you’re a white man and you’re in a wheelchair then it’s like, ‘oh, you’re properly disabled’. It’s like people have a very limited understanding of what disability is and that you can’t always see it. For everyone else it’s like it’s special pleading or excuses rather than actually no, I’m disabled. (white woman)

In the above quotation the interviewee identifies the ‘limited’ understanding of disability as a problem encountered not only within society but also *within* sections of the disability movement (cf. Goodley, 2014). Hegemonic interpretations of what a disabled person looks like mean that those who do not fit the accepted image occupy a liminal space. A space in which their identity is considered unestablished or inauthentic, and an identity that needs to be continually asserted and fought for. The perceived lack of representation within parts of the disability movement crossed accounts of both large organisations and grassroots groups, both of which were considered by one ethnic minority man to be infused with an ‘uninterrogated whiteness’. His view was supported by an ethnic minority woman who argued that the movement ‘must do better’ if it wants to truly achieve liberation for all disabled people.

The interviews with white men also revealed an awareness of the problems the movement has faced. However, these reflections tended to historicise the problem, placing greater emphasis on how the movement is changing. One white man noted, ‘I know we haven’t always been great on thinking about how this or that relates to race or gender but I think things are changing’. Meanwhile another white man observed, ‘the movement’s changing, definitely and I think intersectionality is becoming more important to our conversations’. That it was white men expressing these views resonates with research which has identified how white activists often feel or experience intersectionality differently to those who are multiply marginalised (Luna, 2020). For the white women and ethnic minority women and men, there remained a perception that mainstream large disability organisations often paid lip service to intersectionality. One ethnic minority woman observed that the interest in intersectionality was a cynical attempt to make it appear as if they were interested in the multiply marginalised, ‘because that’s what they feel they *should* do, not what they want to do – if you see what I mean?’

The serious impact of welfare reform, and of course more recently COVID, has meant that the movement has tended to focus on ‘big’ issues. As such, some felt that the context meant there was sometimes little space to have the intersectional conversations or to plan campaigns and activism that reflected a commitment to thinking and organising intersectionality, as one interviewee described:

It always seems to be not now, you know? There’s always something more important to talk about or to plan and of course we’re dealing with life and death stuff here – I’m not minimising that but it also feels like there’s never time to talk about how we think we might speak more to gender and race or to trans-inclusion. (white woman)

The above quotation reflects a ‘not now’ type of silencing and marginalisation. The movement as a whole has had to address and campaign against deadly benefit cuts and to draw attention to the ways in which disabled people have been left at the margins fighting for their very existence. However, discussions concerning those at the interstices of gender, race, class and disability, who were particularly badly affected, were deemed lacking. Despite the emphasis on unity, especially amongst white men, there *was* also a recognition that difference matters. Indeed, the desire to recognise difference and to address the concerns of those multiply marginalised was present, even while those concerns often took second place to the interests of those occupying more privileged or advantaged positions (cf. Strolovitch, 2007).

Different approaches to difference

Beyond questions concerning those who are multiply marginalised, the broader issue of difference has long been a matter of contention within the disability rights movement. Studies have highlighted that disabled people do not always feel much attachment to the idea of a common disabled identity (Watson, 2002). Others have emphasised the importance of disability culture and a related identity (Campbell & Oliver, 1996). Nonetheless, a ‘hierarchy of impairment’, in which some people are considered more or less disabled, and therefore more or less deserving of scarce resources, carries weight with both disabled and non-disabled people (Deal, 2003; Titchkosky, 2003). In common with other social movements, the question of how to recognise and deal with difference, while simultaneously establishing a collective identity, is an ongoing process. One that requires conscious negotiation (Taylor & Whittier, 1992), even within self-organisational spaces (Roth, 2004). Luna (2016) describes the ‘difference in sameness’ strategy, whereby groups have to continually question dynamics of power as offering one method for thinking about how to create shared and reflexive activist spaces – especially important for multiply-marginalised groups. This research also finds that recognition of difference was part of activist discourse but that this was limited to particular types of difference in sameness. Namely those related to impairment type as well as social class.

Interviews revealed that difference was a recognised and common part of activist and organisational discourse. Specific groups, especially grassroots organisations, did in fact tacitly, and sometimes explicitly, think about difference, but difference was approached principally in relation to impairment or condition type. However, the research also found that disability was understood in relation to social class, and in particular the links to and with poverty and economic precarity. Interviewees discussed how the connections to these types of differences were often foregrounded in discussions regarding differential experiences of disability, ableism and disablism, as one interviewee explained:

I mean yes difference is important and we recognise that everyone’s experiences of disability are different – you know if you have a cognitive impairment or an energy limiting condition. It shapes your experience of the world so yeah, it’s important to note that difference. (white man)

As this quotation demonstrates there was a recognition that difference did matter, but this was understood in relation to impairment type rather than in relation to other structural

forms of oppression such as gender or race. This view was also expressed by another white man who emphasised the difference ‘between those with visible and those with hidden disabilities’. A white woman also discussed difference of impairment by linking it to a critique of universalisation:

I hate it when they talk about disabled people and disabled people’s interests like we’re one huge group of people who are all the same. No, we have different needs and different things we want addressed and that’s important. (white woman)

This particular attention to difference can be contrasted with the experiences of those described in the previous section. Specifically, the fact that the issues and interests of those who are multiply marginalised are often silenced; as Crenshaw (1991) illustrated in her original conceptualisation of political intersectionality.

Specificity and the idea of difference was also discussed in relation to the importance of lived experience which came up in a number of interviews, especially in relation to decision-making and organising. Participants – both men and women, and ethnic minority and white – emphasised the importance of those with different lived experiences being part of the conversation, in order to better shape and progress the wider goals of the movement. As one white woman observed, ‘lived experience is so critical, if you don’t have all the voices of disabled people with different experiences then we can never really hope to achieve liberation’. Concomitantly, there was also some unease expressed about focusing too much on different impairments or conditions. Such a focus would ultimately fracture the focus on disability per se, as the below quotation illustrates:

I think difference is really difficult for us to talk about as a movement – historically we’ve been read through our different impairments and they obviously matter and matter at the individual level but it’s also about how we recognise those differences while focusing on what unites us. (white man)

As the interviewee quoted above illustrates, there can sometimes be a difficult tension in managing the recognition and acknowledgement of difference within activist spaces, especially when the movement is one geared towards a particular social group – recalling the problems Luna (2016) identified for activists in adopting a ‘difference in sameness’ strategy. One white woman raised the problem of focusing too much on difference of impairment because that might reify certain impairments over others or in her words ‘creating divides where some people are considered more disabled than others if we focus too much on our individual impairments’. Thus recognising difference might in some instances reinforce particular power dynamics within movement spaces.

The interview data also revealed a focus on how disability related to social class and the very different experiences that disabled people faced based on their economic conditions. In many respects this focus is not especially surprising, the link between disability and poverty being well established in the UK (Ryan, 2019). For example, DPAC’s policy statement recognises difference while concentrating on the ways in which systemic discrimination and societal attitudes oppress disabled people:

Disabled people are not ‘the disabled’ – we are a diverse social group of people with a variety of impairments who continue to face unequal and differential treatment resulting from systems, structures and cultures which fail to take disabled people into account. (DPAC, n.d.)

The anti-austerity nature of the group clearly lends itself to analysis of disability as being intimately tied to material conditions – in particular the links between capitalism, exploitation, value and disability. Such an approach fits with Erevelles’ (2011) account of disability as a structure produced and required by capitalism, one in which your value as an individual is mediated by your ability to participate in the labour market as well as your ability to consume. Some interviewees, especially those active in grassroots groups, when discussing difference brought up the intersections with class and poverty as core to their activism; as one white man explained: ‘You really can’t talk about disability without talking about class. I mean look at the stats for poverty and this government has only made it worse.’ This link was also made by a white woman who detailed the difficult choices disabled people were faced with on a daily basis:

Being a disabled person in modern day Britain means making choices about whether to feed yourself or heat your home. That’s just the realities of life for disabled people in this country. (white woman)

Several other interviewees discussed how the economic system and in particular the attempts to force disabled people into work by judging them ‘fit’ to work had in many instances exacerbated existing conditions while also creating new ones, particularly related to mental health. One white man observed that ‘austerity politics has really politicised a lot of disabled people’, while an ethnic minority woman described how the changes to benefits had affected her:

. . . you know all of a sudden you’re told oh right you’re fit to work and that’s that. Well, the stress of it all has left me feeling anxious all the time and I’ve struggled with my mental health, so you know their processes and decisions have badly affected me and I know I’m not alone in that. (ethnic minority woman)

The widely accepted links between social class and disability demonstrate an interesting and important example of the ways in which disability is understood by activists. Furthermore, it is an example of the relational dimensions of intersectionality as a means for understanding inequality (Collins & Bilge, 2016). The economic conditions that many disabled people in the UK face were perceived to be intimately tied to the ways in which disability is produced. Interestingly, this wasn’t necessarily framed as intersectionality by interviewees who tended to associate the concept with gender and race. While this approach to difference was a key theme in the interviews, there was also evidence of an increasing awareness of intersectionality, and in particular to thinking more explicitly about race.

Towards intersectional disability activism

Some social movements, especially racial justice, feminist and queer movements, are grappling with intersectionality (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017). Many interviewees

were optimistic that the disability rights movement was heading in the right direction when it came to thinking about intersectionality, while acknowledging that there was still a long way to go. There was, for instance, more of an emphasis on thinking about coalitional organising – a strategy which has proven critical for social movements (Weldon, 2006). There was a sense of optimism from some of the interviewees that intersectionality was becoming a term that more people were aware of and that they would understand its importance for disability activism; as one ethnic minority man discussed, ‘I think in the past things haven’t been so great in terms of how we relate disability to gender but you know I do get the feeling that things are changing and that people get it.’ Similarly, a white woman noted that they perceived a change in tone and emphasis: ‘I think we’re starting to have those conversations . . . I think people are starting to think about who is included in what spaces and so on.’ The attention to intersectionality was also given a boost by recent books published by disabled women writers and activists Frances Ryan (2019) and Ellen Clifford (2020), each of whom paid attention to the ways in which disability intersected with other forms of structural oppression.

In the last few years, and in particular with the increased presence of Black Lives Matter (BLM) in UK politics (Phoenix et al., 2020), disability organisations have talked more explicitly about the intersections between disability, race and racism. For example, a recent report from the Race Equality Foundation showed that people from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic group with a learning disability had a significantly lower life expectancy than those from a white background. Responding to this finding, Mencap observed that they ‘must do better’ in terms of who they engage, support and advocate for:

Mencap has not always done enough to engage with and support the thousands of people with a learning disability from B.A.M.E communities who experience intersectional discrimination – and as part of our commitment to equity and inclusion we know we must do better. (Mencap, 2021)

The above sentiment was similar in tone to those expressed by other disability charities, especially in the wake of BLM protests around the UK; for example, a number of disability organisations released statements in support of BLM, including Disability Rights UK, the largest disability civil society organisation (DRUK, 2020). Some interviewees, especially those from larger charities, noted that they were engaging with race much more now; as one ethnic minority woman observed, ‘I think we’re getting much better on this now, we have a long way to go but yeah I think we’re thinking much more clearly about how we engage more with black disabled people and make the links between disability and race more explicit.’ Meanwhile, one white man discussed a new course on intersectionality that their organisation had started running for the DPOs which they work with. Other interviewees also noted a slight change of tone: for example an ethnic minority woman was ‘encouraged’ by the growing ‘awareness of the need to understand disability from an intersectional perspective’. One white man reflected upon the role that age or generation may have on the extent to which activists are willing to discuss intersectionality:

I think it might also be a generational thing, you know? I mean all the young disabled activists I know get it [intersectionality] they understand that you know it doesn't make sense to just focus on disability because you need to think about how it all connects up with race and gender and sexuality. (white man)

Although intersectionality is not a new idea (Collins & Bilge, 2016), its role within the UK and in particular amongst student activists has become much more established in recent years. This shift perhaps reflects a perception of different outlook when it comes to intersectional thinking and organising, a point echoed by one white woman who simply noted that she thought 'young people get intersectionality in a way that perhaps older generations of activists don't'.

For disability rights activists in particular, online activism has proven to be particularly important especially for those with energy limiting conditions or impairments, which mean they are unable to leave the house to attend protests, demonstrations or meetings. Johanna Hedva's (2016) essay 'Sick Woman Theory' examined this very issue, reflecting on which tactical repertoires and means of protest are accessible for those who may not be able to leave their beds. Although social media activism is by no means available to all and offline hierarchies can also be found online (Murthy, 2018), it has been important for disability rights organising (Pearson & Trevison, 2015). As such it is not surprising that it was picked up on by some interviewees, who noted its critical role in promoting intersectional discourse within disability activism. As one ethnic minority woman explained:

I think social media sites like Twitter are really helpful in raising the visibility of these conversations – you know some of the hashtags like #DisabilitySoWhite are really useful. (ethnic minority woman)

Interviewees reflected on the global nature of social media and how that helped intersectional conversations, 'especially from the US' according to one white woman, travel to the UK where it could help shape the debate. As another white woman observed, 'so much activism happens online these days so intersectional visibility is in some ways easier to achieve'. There was awareness that social media organising was critical to enable those who are traditionally marginalised to participate in activism, but also to ensure that the voices of disabled women and ethnic minority disabled people were part of a public and visible set of debates.

Some participants when discussing intersectionality also approached it in terms of coalitional activism, drawing attention to groups such as Disabled Black Lives Matter, as one ethnic minority man expressed: 'You know I think it's vital we think intersectionally about our activism but that also means linking up with other groups by working together you know?' Coalitional organising was seen as a meaningful way in which to mobilise intersectionally and to think about what would amplify the issues and gain greater attention for their campaigns. This finding chimes with other social movement studies (Cole & Luna, 2010; Laperrière & Lépinard, 2016; Weldon, 2006). At the same time there was also a recognition that engaging with non-disabled activists sometimes required them to explain disability, and in particular the social model of disability. This requirement was something one white woman described as 'exhausting' because 'people sometimes just want to challenge you or they think they know what disability is and just don't want to listen'.

Conclusion

This article has analysed political intersectionality in relation to the disability rights movement in the UK. Building upon extant studies exploring how social movements deal with sameness, difference, marginalisation and power (Luna, 2016; Roth, 2017), the research has highlighted the specific tensions which exist within disability activism when it comes to negotiating difference. The research has discussed the dominant ways in which difference is understood – in relation to impairment type and social class – and the implications of that for those who find themselves located at the interstices of gender, race and disability. The research has contributed toward our understanding of the ways in which intersectionality is taken up and/or resisted by social movements beyond racial justice and feminist movements, heeding the call to centralise intersectionality in the study of disability (Schalk & Kim, 2020). Of course, this article only tells one side of the story and it is also important that disability is fully incorporated into political intersectional analysis of other social movements. The themes which emerged from the interview data reveal the variety of perspectives on the past, present and future possibilities for intersectionality in the movement. There was clear evidence of the silencing of intersectional analysis, and this had a harmful effect on people's sense of belonging to the movement. Meanwhile, although difference was a part of the discourse, it was understood in specific ways. Finally, there were some grounds for optimism, with many interviewees identifying a shifting tone and growing awareness of intersectionality.

Thinking about intersectional social movement organising requires an acknowledgement of the various prisms through which intersectionality can help further the causes of social justice work: specifically, interrogating power dynamics, amplifying the voices of those most marginalised and resisting tactical repertoires, campaigns and discourses which implicitly or explicitly exclude particular social groups. Within disability scholarship, the pervasive and interconnected nature of ableism and disablism within exploitative political economies has been a critical theme, one which is increasingly also recognising the gendered and racialised nature of those economies (Erevelles, 2011; Goodley, 2014). Disability adds a profoundly radical element to our thinking about intersectionality, unsettling sometime liberal demands for representation in favour of a wholesale rethink about what counts as a useful and rational human being. Disability, in and of itself, disrupts and contests our very understanding of what equality looks like or how it can possibly be achieved within societies enmeshed in neoliberal logics.

The interview data have revealed that while there is some opposition and resistance to thinking intersectionally within disability rights organising, there does appear to be a shift in terms of how people think about disability especially in relation to race, largely thanks to the high-profile nature of Black Lives Matter activism. Self-organising groups, set up to provide spaces within which disabled women or disabled women of colour can organise, have undoubtedly played a part in revealing and amplifying the perspectives of those who have traditionally been marginalised within the movement, underlining the importance of these spaces (Crenshaw, 1991; Roth, 2004). The fact that attention to difference exists is important as it provides a meaningful way in which to approach and introduce frames for thinking about difference in relation to other forms of structural oppression. For the disability rights movement, which at least in the UK is less high-profile than anti-racist, feminist or LGBTQ+ movements, organising and mobilising

intersectionally is not only a normative good in and of itself but will also help strengthen coalition ties with other activist groups interested in resisting and disrupting power inequalities. Given the profound, and deadly, social and economic inequalities that face disabled people in the UK, ensuring that the movement is inclusive of, and responsive to, the issues and interests of those found at the interstices of gender, race, class and disability is an urgent task for the movement. Likewise, understanding disability in relation to other forms of social inequalities is also a necessary task for disability studies scholars, especially those concerned with the study of the disability rights movement.

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Note

1. Language around disability varies according to context; in the UK it is the very strong stated preference of disability activists and disability studies scholars to use disability-first language to emphasise the role that disability has on people. As this research focuses on the UK disability rights movement, this article uses disability-first language (Dunn & Andrews, 2015).

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