

Narrating the Intersectionalities of Gender Violence: Editorial

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Abstract

The telling, sharing and, most critically, the hearing of stories related to gender violence has been a critical part of the project of feminism as well as the refuge movement (Dobash and Dobash 1979, Kelly 1988). This an introduction to a set of papers that represent highlights from the conference entitled “International Congress on Gender Violence: Intersectionalities” in terms of how the intersections of gender violence have been narrated.

Key words

Gender violence; narrations; intersectionalities

Resumen

Contar, compartir, y, más críticamente, escuchar historias relacionadas con la violencia de género ha sido una parte fundamental del proyecto del feminismo, así como del movimiento de refugio (Dobash y Dobash 1979, Kelly 1988). Esta es una introducción a una serie de artículos representativos del Congreso Internacional sobre Violencia de Género: Intersecciones, que abordan cómo se han relatado las intersecciones de la violencia de género.

Palabras clave

Violencia de género; relatos; interseccionalidades

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The telling, sharing and, most critically, the hearing of stories related to gender violence has been a critical part of the project of feminism as well as the refuge movement (Dobash and Dobash 1979, Kelly 1988). From the 1970s onwards the narration of women's accounts of violence played a key role in raising consciousness and mobilising the support and resources needed to challenge men's violence against women both from the bottom up, in terms of grassroots activism, and from the top down, in terms of national and international policy. Since the 1990s, however, the value of addressing gender violence through a single narrative premised upon the overarching relevance of patriarchal social relations has been queried, both by those supportive of feminism and from those opposed to it. Among those critical-but-supportive voices have been those conscious of how the multiple intersections of ethnicity, citizenship status, sexuality, age and (dis)ability compound gender inequalities make some people much more vulnerable to violence and/or less able to secure protections from it than others (Crenshaw, 1993; Mama, 1996). Among those dismissive of feminism have been those who have queried whether gender is relevant at all in the aetiology of domestic violence, given the apparent 'gender symmetry' in the use of 'conflict tactics' uncovered by self-report studies administered upon heterosexual couples (Dutton 2010).

The telling, sharing and hearing of stories, however, remain important to all parties, nevertheless. This is in part because the claim to recognition of all groups rests upon illuminating similarities with others whose stories have been believed (in terms, for example, of being hurt, becoming entrapped and of being denied support), while at the same time asserting a critical degree of difference (whether in terms of having no-one to tell, facing additional obstacles to disclosing or being disbelieved, or living with the consequences). It is also because within the policy domain across so many jurisdictions there is also a very powerful political narrative that claims that the problem of violence within intimate relationships has been identified for what it is and effectively redressed through the application of policing and criminal justice sanctions. The papers in this special issue emerged from a conference that grappled with many of these issues. The conference, which was entitled "International Congress on Gender Violence: Intersectionalities" was held at the Oñati International Institute for the Sociology of Law in the summer of 2013. The conference brought together practitioners, activists, academics and policy makers from a range of global contexts, all with an interest in gender violence and the inequities that continue to fuel it.

This collection pulls together four papers that represent conference highlights in terms of how the intersections of gender violence have been narrated. The first paper by Julie Stubbs provides an incisive overview of the complexities scholars working in this field must now engage with. Stubbs revisits the longstanding debates around structures of oppression and the challenges posed in more recent ones with regard to the role of gender in the reproduction of structural inequalities. Stubbs tackles three areas that are key to the field, namely: 1) debates around intersectionality and complex inequalities; 2) the role of power in different forms of gender violence; and 3) the criminalization of gender violence. In providing a critical overview of the ways in which intersectionality has been taken up and critiqued, Stubbs reminds us that the idea of intersectionality itself, though useful as a conceptual and political tool, may have unintended consequences in terms reproducing stereotypes of victimhood and marginalization if not considered alongside a critical analysis of power and its locations. Stubbs also exposes similar unintended consequences that have followed from the differentiation of various forms of domestic violence – a development that has, at the same time, added to our understanding of the complexity of the many abuses that occur within intimate relationships. In legal settings for example, the use of the concept of 'Situational Couple Violence', said by some to be the most common form of relationship violence (Johnson 2006), may contribute to gender neutral analyses that obscure important structural inequalities that have contributed to the histories of so many

relationships. Finally, Stubbs reflects on the the co-opting of feminist activism into the political cases made for increasing social control through criminalization, how this has sometimes led to the negation of 'feminist knowledge', and, ironically, the growth of support for 'gender neutral approaches' to policy and practice.

The challenges involved in conceptualizing and responding to intersectionality are neatly illustrated in Esen Ezgi Tascioglu's paper, which examines the life narratives of trans women in Istanbul, Turkey. Tascioglu shows that it is not simply a case of recognizing the violence trans women are exposed to, but of understanding how violence has produced and shaped lives and subjectivities navigated against a backdrop of multiple prejudices and oppressions, including the exploitations endured by those employed as sex workers. Tascioglu's paper should not, however, be read merely as a victimological account however, for it exposes both the repressive and the productive effects of power. New forms of agency and subjectivity can be detected in the narratives shared between trans women – subjectivities that emerge from the precarity of their lives and conditions. The new knowledges constituted by their shared experiences can subvert dominant discourses about men, families and home, including their embeddedness in the law. These new narrated knowledges also work to produce trans women as subjects who are able, pragmatically and symbolically, to work through the intersections of oppressive inequities that shape their experiences and to counter the dehumanizing dominant and official scripts that continue to mark them as 'other'.

The contribution by Taryn van Niekerk and Floretta Boonzaier discusses the social representations of masculinities, femininities and violence that emerge from domestically violent men's narratives. They approach their analysis of South African men's personal narratives of violence through the wider cultural frame of respectability, evoking, as it does, notions of masculine heroism and feminine masochism. In particular Van Niekerk and Boonzaier divulge how individual men's narratives about their own perpetration of violence against women are linked to and framed by pervasive cultural and historical narratives about gender, relationships and community. Their argument, like Tascioglu's, is that shared conceptions of community provide powerful psychological resources to be drawn upon by marginalized individuals in the construction of their identities. The paper makes the case that men's personal narratives of violence should be located and understood within broader intersecting narratives about gender, violence and relationships. The complex effects of uncovering these intersections however are also apparent in that, on the one hand they reveal how abusive men hold women responsible for their own victimization, while on the other, they normalise violence against women as necessary in a society with a complex history of intersectional oppressions. This paper serves as stark reminder that the multiple oppressions instilled across generations during the apartheid era cannot be easily wiped away from the life histories of men and women still living in a grossly unequal society and for whom the trauma of violence has been part of the furniture of family life for many generations.

Finally, Bianca Fileborn's paper offers a critique of feminist theories that provide heteronormative framings of gender-based violence by asking how those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ) experience and understand unwanted sexual attention, drawing on research conducted in Melbourne, Australia. The findings of Fileborn's study point to diverse and context-bound understandings of unwanted sexual attention, especially within the nighttime economy. Fileborn shows how heteronormative framings of sexual violence can obscure the experience of unwanted sexual attention for LGBTIQ young people, who come to regard the more common elements of such behaviours as trivial, inevitable or nothing serious. Fileborn argues that it is important to ensure that our theoretical approaches to sexual violence are inclusive of the experiences of those who sit outside normative heterosexuality. Her paper thus forces us to recall the ways in which the telling of stories around violence and

sexuality serve to liberate and empower through the sharing of experience, while at the same time in their sharing new narrations are often put the previously silenced at risk of being co-opted into dominant victimological frames that expose them to policy solutions, the value of which has yet to be agreed upon by many of those who told their stories at earlier times (Plummer 1994).

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