Intersections of Diversity:

Is This the Road to Better Policy?

John Biles

John Biles is the Director of Partnerships and Knowledge Transfer for the Metropolis Project Team (www.metropolis.net). He has a wealth of experience working on diversity and public policy in Canada. He was the policy editor for the forthcoming special issue of Canadian Ethnic Studies focusing on intersections of diversity.

Erin Tolley

Erin Tolley is a project analyst with the Metropolis Project. She conceptualized and coordinated several policy roundtables on the intersections of diversity and is on the editorial board for a special issue of Canadian Ethnic Studies journal on intersections of diversity. She has written previously on political participation.

ABSTRACT

Increasingly, the development of constructive and cost-effective public policy requires encouraging and recognizing coalitions of interest among the diverse Canadian minority communities. An intersectional approach would assist policy-makers in identifying existing or desired coalitions of interests, and in deconstructing the "hierarchy of difference" that generally informs our understanding of, and treatment of issues regarding diversity. The authors insist that intersections of diversity are indivisible from a new vision for Canada in the twenty-first century.

As public servants, we hear time and again about the inherent value of diversity and, whether we intend to or not, we reinforce this theme, weaving into our work messages about diversity writ large and its contribution to Canada's creativity and innovation. Diversity has traditionally been approached quite broadly, with minimal differentiation or reconciliation among diversities and not enough thought given to their interactions and overlaps. In this article, we challenge the traditional approach to diversity – an approach that has treated diversities singularly, in isolation, and as one and the same – and evaluate whether approaching public policy through the lens of intersections makes sense. In other words, would taking intersections of diversity into account lead to better public policy?

We argue that looking at intersections of diversity does make a difference and would contribute to better policy for two reasons. First, an understanding of intersections of diversity lends itself to exploring similarities across collectivities of Canadians, which would provide an avenue for government to tackle issues in a more comprehensive manner. Second, by undermining the "hierarchy of difference," intersectionality facilitates acceptance and inclusion. We will explore these arguments in turn.

First, policy-making situated in an intersections framework would assist policy-makers in identifying existing or desired coalitions of interest. Such coalitions of interest can be critical staging grounds for the introduction and implementation of policies that affect cross-sections of society with mutual or overlapping interests. An intersections framework encourages policy-makers to look beyond singular diversity groups when designing policy, an approach that is likely to prove cost-effective by capitalizing on existing work, as well as more likely to effect desired change.

Racial profiling is one issue where an intersectional approach would facilitate the identification of coalitions of interest in an effort to develop more effective policy. Racial profiling could be – and has been – viewed primarily as a concern for Black communities, especially those in Toronto, and this has contributed to a rather skewed perception of the issue. Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 have a stake in discussions about police profiling, as do Aboriginals, not to mention gay and lesbian communities. Policy development must take into account the interests of those affected and should seek to bring these communities together to tackle the issues. Intersectional Canadians – perhaps the lesbian Aboriginal or the Black Muslim – often inhabit multiple worlds and are able to make connections between interests that others may be unable or unlikely to make. Those who study social networks might liken intersectional Canadians to "boundary spanners" who connect those in their network to other, external groups, providing a conduit for the flow of information and knowledge.

Second, we contend that by facilitating acceptance and inclusion, intersectionality undermines the "hierarchy of difference." We draw here on the work of Iris Marion Young in *Inclusion and Democracy* (2002). Young argues that a free, open and inclusive discussion is only possible when all participants have an equal voice. Given the historic complexities of Canada, some identity markers have been given a higher stature or status than others. Equally, in western societies the iron triangle of "race, class and gender" has been a diversity hegemone for at least the last two decades. Intersections unsettle this dominance and insist on a different approach to diversity – one that does not *a priori* privilege some diversities

over others. This is not to imply that in any given enquiry, all diversities will be salient or even equally salient. It does, however, demand that rationales for consideration of diversity run deeper than "we lack the data," or "that is too complex." Ducking hard questions makes for bad policy and poor research.

We have argued, then, that intersections would lead to better policy. To press the point, we consider three examples where intersections were not taken into account and where, consequently, outcomes were somewhat less than optimal. We will look at Canadian preparations for the World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance; attempts to create a representative federal public service; and, finally, the ongoing Canadian response to 9/11.

WCAR: Wrong Turn?

The World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance took place in August 2001. Prior to the conference, Jack Jedwab et al. prepared an extensive report outlining precisely the common cross-cutting issues faced by various minority communities, however so defined, in any number of policy areas. In spite of this, and in spite of the conception of the conference as a broad and far-reaching examination of diversity, the proceedings were dominated by questions of race and Black experiences in particular, to the exclusion of other forms of diversity. Issues of sexual orientation and religion were almost entirely absent, unless one, rather perversely we might add, considers the anti-semitism that emerged in the proceedings of the NGO forum as evidence of religious inclusion.

Indeed, the privileging, or replication of the "hierarchy of difference" was apparent even within the government secretariat that was established to manage the Canadian consultations. Two South Asian Muslim women employed by the secretariat were informed that they were "not visible enough" (in other words, not "dark" enough) to staff the consultations' registration table and were thus removed from that responsibility. Had an intersectional approach been embedded in the preparations leading up to the conference, organizers would have been forced to look beyond traditional diversities, to include a broader range of perspectives (and, moreover, various shades of flesh!), and hopefully push the conception of tolerance beyond racial tolerance alone. In the end, however, sceptics argued that not even the cause of racial tolerance was advanced as a result of the conference. In fact, one could argue that the conference proceedings caused considerable damage to the fragile coalitions of interest that existed around discrimination and other diversity issues.

A Representative Public Service: The Language Traffic Jam

In our second example, we consider attempts to create a representative federal public service. Although bilingualism is not required of all employees in the public service, many positions require that candidates have competence in both official languages prior to taking up their positions as public servants. Some have suggested that this requirement will adversely affect the representation of Atlantic and Western Canadians, where competency in both official languages is lower and where applicants are already disadvantaged by geographic requirements that limit the scope of government competitions to applicants residing within the National Capital Region.

An intersectional analysis would have shed light on the official language profile of those living outside of Ontario and Quebec and demonstrated the likely negative impact of official language requirements. Policy-heavy jobs in the federal public service are already dominated by residents of the National Capital Region, and obliviousness towards the regions is unfortunately acutely apparent.

An intersectional analysis would have shed light on the official language profile of those living outside of Ontario and Quebec and demonstrated the likely negative impact of official language requirements. Policy-heavy jobs in the federal public service are already dominated by residents of the National Capital Region, and obliviousness towards the regions is unfortunately acutely apparent. For example, a few years ago, we were both involved in policy discussions to create a framework for celebration, commemoration and learning in Canada. The coming commemoration of the landing of Champlain and the founding of Quebec City were both discussed in detail, but nary a word about Alberta and Saskatchewan's upcoming centenaries, save to describe the latter province as "a wasteland." Is it any wonder that we insist on hanging the flags of our respective provinces in our offices, even though few are able to correctly identify them?

Creating a more representative public service is absolutely a valid policy objective, but it could be better met by employing an intersectional approach that moves beyond increasing the representation of singular groups. An intersectional approach would avoid triggering antagonism between Canadians who feel excluded on the basis of geography and those who feel excluded on the basis of language, as well as those visible minority Canadians for whom language is a systemic barrier.

The Response to 9/11: Did Canada Just Run a Red Light?

Third, intersections have not been considered in Canada's ongoing response to 9/11, and there appears to have been little serious consideration to how various activities would impact on Canadians differently. In particular, South Asian men have become the target of much scrutiny, particularly if they are Muslim as well.

While relevant research and policy work is not yet extensive, it has until now focused on young Muslim women. As a result, there is little to guide policy on young men post-9/11. We have even less to assess the impact of existing and new policies. Indeed, even where expertise existed in government, it was often poorly utilized. A young Muslim woman working in the public service was removed from any files pertaining to 9/11 because, in the words of one colleague, "now must be a sensitive time for you." Rather than take advantage of the expertise that this intersectional public servant had as a result of her diverse identities, policy was developed by people with little, if any, understanding of the issues that the communities in question faced.

At the same time, the critical examination of the issues that emerged following 9/11 has, in many cases, reverted to an approach concerned primarily with elements of the iron triangle of race, class and gender. Researchers and organizations, including the Ontario Human Rights Commission, are looking at racial profiling, but not other types of profiling. Moreover, despite the differences, religion has been subsumed by race in many analyses. The differences between religion and race and the impact of police profiling on a broad range of individuals would be made more evident if an intersectional approach were employed.

Of course, adopting an intersections approach does not mean that all issues must be examined from all vantage points at all times. Indeed, this is the argument that critics launch to discredit intersections. They suggest that intersections would require policy-makers to focus on an unrealistic number of possible identity combinations, or that they would be forced to develop highly specific policies for, say, the young, poor, Black, lesbian, disabled, francophone women in rural Manitoba. These critiques, we contend, are intellectually dishonest and are merely looking for a means to avoid exploring the complex subject of human diversity. Taken to their extreme, their arguments suggest that we could never really know anything, except ourselves for brief moments in time and, even then, with only a partial picture. This, of course, runs against our sensibilities because while deconstruction and unpacking may be tools in our policy toolkits, these are not endpoints; rather,our job, as policy-makers, is ultimately to construct.

Implementing an intersectional approach in policy and research is by no means a small order, but it is a necessary one. Indeed, we, and others, have worked over the past few years to do so, and recognize the challenges. Few have argued that the current approach works as it should; nor have many argued that simplifying diversity into discrete "identity units" produces equitable results. The primary challenge has not been resistance to the *idea* or theory of intersectionality, but rather resistance to the task of creating a new, more fulsome way of looking at, and addressing, diversity. Developing an intersectional approach to diversity is absolutely a complex task but, as we have argued, it will improve research findings, policy outcomes, and the cost-effectiveness of delivery.

In *Making History,* Paul Martin outlines his vision and direction as Canada's 21st Prime Minister. He argues that "the time has come for a new approach by leaders to building Canada. An approach based on national purpose… An approach that builds Canada's nationhood, not through the diminishment of provinces or particular identities, nor by the rejection of the world outside, but by making the national space the place in which Canadians build better lives, a better future and a better world. An approach that will take on the big challenges that matter, and do so by changing the way things work in Ottawa." Intersections must be a part of this approach.