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Marginalized to double marginalized: My mutational intersectionality between the East and the West

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Abstract

Intersectionality allows better understanding of the differences between individuals' experiences. In this article, I use intersectionality to explore how my lived experience of marginalization is different from one context to another. I reflect on how the nature of intersectionality and the intensity of oppression are altered by context. Grounded in a brief reflection of my fragmented experience in two different contexts, I explore how my identities and their intersection "mutate" from the Egyptian context to the UK context. Then, I reflect on how the intensity of oppression changed with this alteration in my intersectionality. In contextualizing my intersectional experience, first I problematize viewing intersectionality as a fixed acontextual ontology. Second, as a student immigrant and racialized minority in the United Kingdom, I seek to extend intersectionality and move beyond the traditional categories of race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality to include precarity as a pivotal social category that amplifies the intensity of oppression and marginalization, especially when intersected with race and gender. Finally, in sharing my reflection as a Middle Eastern woman, I contribute my unique experiences into the conversation, and a voice that has been muted, invisibilized, marginalized, and excluded from the literature.

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KEYWORDS

intersectionality, mutating identities, precariousness, racial minorities

1 | INTRODUCTION

Intersectionality allows better understanding of the differences between women's experiences intertwined with oppression and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991; Meléndez & Özkazanç-Pan, 2020; Ressia, Strachan, & Bailey, 2017). From an intersectional feminism lens, I reflected elsewhere (Abdellatif & Gatto 2020) on my pandemic experience and how the intersection of my identities as a woman, single parent, and a PhD student has positioned me in a disadvantaged situation under the UK lockdown. As a means of recognizing the influence of social and national context as key for intersectional analysis (Opara, Sealy, & Ryan, 2020), in this essay I reflect on how the nature of intersectionality and the intensity of oppression changes or “mutates” from one context to another. I explore how some identities become more salient than others in a given context and consequently alter the intensity of oppression and marginalization. In so doing, I echo Meléndez and Özkazanç-Pan (2020) in expanding intersectional analysis beyond a micro-focused approach to emphasize the meso organizational practices and macro structural arrangements as sites where oppression and marginalization occur.

To acknowledge the importance of the broader social context, I reflect on my translocational positionality (Anthias, 2009, 2013). As a woman who has crossed, and lived in, different sociocultural contexts, I reflect on my fragmented experiences in Egypt and the United Kingdom. While the intersection of my gender and religion is more salient with interlocking oppression and marginalization in Egypt, the nature of my intersectionality is altered in the UK context. Other forms of identities such as my race, being a student immigrant, and precariat manifest intersecting with oppression and marginalization. This change of intersectionality with context emphasizes its temporality and acknowledges the inseparability of both the structural and identity levels within intersectional analysis. Viewing intersectionality as temporal shifts the attention away from fixities of social position and enables a more transnational as well as more local-based intersectional lens (Anthias, 2013). Therefore, grounded in my experience, I echo Opara et al. (2020) and problematize viewing intersectionality as fixed acontextual reality. Rather, contextualizing intersectionality helps in understanding how identities are continuously constructed and reconstructed with the embedded locally and socially defined categories of gender, race, and class (Crenshaw, 1991).

Management and organization scholars recently focused on examining various intersecting identities such as gender, race, and power (Meléndez & Özkazanç-Pan, 2020); ethnicity, gender, and nationality (Opara et al., 2020); gender and foreignness (Strauß & Boncori, 2020); and gender and precarity (Steinþórsdóttir, Smídt, Pétursdóttir, Einarsdóttir, & Le Feuvre, 2019). In sharing my fragmented experience, I mirror Rodriguez, Holvino, Fletcher, and Nkomo (2016) in moving beyond the favored triumvirate of gender, race, and class. I explore the intersection of my racial, gendered, precarious identities as well as my identity as a student immigrant in the United Kingdom. In so doing, I seek to extend intersectional analysis to include precarity as a social category that amplifies the intensity of oppression, especially when intersected with gender and race. Finally, in sharing my reflection, I hope I bring a different voice to the conversation, a voice that has been excluded from literature (Nkomo, 2011). In acknowledging that women's experiences cannot be rendered coherent or homogenous (Smith & Nkomo, 2003), this reflection merely represents my lived experience. However, I am inviting the readers to enter the conversation, reconceptualize, and share their own stories.

In the next section, I use intersectional analysis to reflect on my salient intersected identities in two different contexts, Egypt and the United Kingdom. I first reflect on my intersectional identities intertwined with marginalization in the Egyptian context, before considering how my identities mutate and intersect differently to further my marginalization in the UK context. Then, I explain how this alteration in context influences the intensity of marginalization and oppression.

2 | THE EAST: GENDER AND RELIGION

I was born mid-1980s, grew up and worked in Egypt. Since my childhood, I was “taught” more about my gender than I was taught about other school subjects. The construction of my gender identity and my consciousness of it has never left the scene. It was present everywhere, in the street, in the classroom, at home, at the beach, or at work. Each of these social institutions continuously constructed and consistently reinforced my gender. They shaped what I can do as a girl/woman, where my gender “boundaries” are and what consequences I will face should I “choose” to cross my gender “boundaries.”

I grew up in a masculine dominant culture. Growing up as a woman in a culture where hegemonic patterns of masculinity are explicitly legitimated and naturalized (Connell, 1987) meant that I had very limited agency or control, if any at all, over fundamental aspects of my life such as my career. In this context, to be a woman is to be socially, financially, and legally dependent on the man of the household (Dasgupta & Nabli, 2003). This man is the father and/or the brother before marriage or the husband after marriage. This means that trying to be socially, financially, or legally independent contradicts the very aspect of my “normalized” gender construction. Therefore, in this highly masculine culture, being an independent woman is perceived as being a man, masculine rather than feminine.

Being a man, however, is socially constructed around dominance, breadwinning, and the authority figure of the household who can never be questioned (Sidani & Thornberry, 2010). Men have authority and control over many aspects of women's lives. For instance, since men are the legal guardians of women, they have the “legal” authority to control many aspects of their lives such as women's mobility or career choices (Banihani & Syed, 2017; Metcalfe, 2008). For instance, some men use their “legitimized” authority to deny their women's access to certain careers such as those requiring long/late working hours. Even something as simple as traveling abroad alone as a woman, whether on holiday or for work, requires a written agreement from the husband (Banihani & Syed, 2017) acknowledging that he is “aware” of and “allows” this traveling.

My gender is constructed around inferiority to men (Witz, 1992). It is socially defined around conformance to this patriarchal structure and the deeply rooted traditional gender roles. My role is to nurture and create a home that provides comfort and stability to the man. As a woman, I should limit my ambition to creating a home that supports the man's career, rather than building myself one. Since I am already “assumed” to be dependent on the man, my work is not perceived as important as the man's work. My work is perceived as supplementary or complementary, even if I earn more. Should I “choose” to build a career, or view my career as a priority, I would be threatening and risking this home. So, it is either to accept and conform, or resist and face the consequences of being non-conformant. Divorce and stigma are simple examples of non-conformance consequences.

Yet, this gender order does not float free or in a vacuum. Religion and religious identities are very prominent in reinforcing this gender regime and patriarchy (Connell, 1987; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Parboteeah, Hoegl, & Cullen, 2009). Religion is of a paramount importance across all social institutions, where Islamic law, Sharia law, is the main source of legislation (Charrad, 2011). It regulates and organizes formal social institutions such as the state through the application of Sharia law in the constitution (Ahmed, 1998). This application of Sharia law sustains gender order even in spaces such as courts, where a woman's testimony is worth half of a man's testimony. Sharia law also regulates other informal social institutions such as family (Metcalfe, 2008). For example, marriage and divorce are also governed by Sharia law, where men can divorce their wives unilaterally

while women must attain their husband's consent to divorce. Although Islam promotes equality, its patriarchal interpretation by patriarchal societies is used to constrain women's agency and sustains their inferiority to men (Koburtay, Syed, & Haloub, 2020). As a conservative religious society, modesty principles also regulate women's lives. Modesty codes regulate women's dress and behavior. As a woman, I must conform to modesty principles to guard and protect my honor and my family honor to avoid stigma (Banihani & Syed, 2017; Kandiyoti, 1991). Non-conformant women who do not abide by modesty codes are stigmatized, when such codes are not applicable for men.

The power of religion in this context, which reinforces patriarchy, exacerbates the salience of my gender identity with interlocking oppression and marginalization. As a woman, I must be conscious of my actions and behaviors, especially when interacting with men, whether at home or at the workplace. In addition to this, and to fit the code of modesty, I must be aware of what to wear, where to go, and when to go to avoid the stigma of breaking the modesty code and its implication on honor. As a woman in a highly religious culture and masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001), not only do I lack agency over my life choices such as traveling, my career, or getting a divorce, but also, I cannot make simple decisions such as how to dress. Therefore, my gender identity is most salient when intersecting with the broader strong religious environment in Egypt, which is compounded with interlocking oppressions, silencing my voice, and restraining my ability to exercise agency, whether socially or at work.

3 | THE WEST: GENDER, RACE, AND PRECARIOUSNESS

Several years ago, I moved to the United Kingdom as a student immigrant. Before this point, I was never conscious of my racial identity until the moment I arrived in the United Kingdom. Although Egypt has racial minority groups, race is not often a source of oppression as much as religion, at least from my lens as a national of Egypt. My awareness of my racial identity in the United Kingdom started at a shallow level of phenotypical difference before the deeper meaning started to unveil. The shallow level of this racial difference started with some comments on my "exotic" look or my "accent." Yet, I realized that there is a much deeper constructed meaning attached to these phenotypical differences. As Smith and Nkomo (2003) state, race is politically and socially defined to produce, reproduce, and reinforce the already powerful group and weaken the less powerful one.

My non-Western race is politically and socially constructed around its inferiority to the Western white supremacy (Gillborn, 2005). For instance, my race is constructed around a monolith "third world" discourse (Mohanty, 1988, 2003a, 2003b) of poverty, high levels of illiteracy, poor education, people who are "riding camels," and less civilized. Such construction is left historically unchallenged but generationally transmitted through formal texts, global politics, and informal communications and interactions (Mohanty, 2003a, 2003b). This concerns me when I think how these unchallenged constructions around my race could influence my career here in the United Kingdom, particularly in academia. Or more specifically, how these constructions could justify and reinforce the (in) validity of my knowledge, (il)legitimacy of my representation, and (in)visibility of my voice.

This social and political construction around my race directly influences my experience in the United Kingdom. I experience symbolic violence in the form of implicit unspoken interaction as part of my everyday life (Bourdieu, 2001). This symbolic violence manifests in interruptions while speaking, challenging my arguments, discounting my intelligence, as well as devaluing my views and explicitly acknowledging my voice as absent. At the level of decision making, I am not represented. This is politically extending and reinforcing the illegitimacy and invisibility of my voice and further normalizes symbolic hostility. Thus, such construction reinforces inferiority and justifies marginalization in society and in the workplace.

In the context of work, the intersection of my race with my status as student immigrant has exacerbated my marginalization. More specifically, the precariousness associated with being a student immigrant is of a fundamental influence in the context of my experience. My temporal or precariat ontology is inevitably

associated with a lack of sense of security or stability. Should I wish to tackle this temporality and precariousness, I should first “fit” the neoliberal model (Strauß & Boncori, 2020) or the Western typology of work and “ideal” worker (Acker, 2006). I should “lean in” harder (Sandberg, 2013) to get an opportunity that seeks in the future to provide more sense of stability and security. Second, in taking this “opportunity,” as a precariat, I am informally accepting the terms and conditions of the unwritten contract of unequal treatment or exploitation (O’Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2019). This means that I am indirectly and inevitably engaging in the “naturalization” of my own symbolic violence. I should expect and accept to be treated unfairly, otherwise I would be risking an “opportunity” or a “chance” that could potentially provide a sense of security in the future and tackle precarity.

This precariousness exacerbates during the COVID-19 pandemic. When situated in the broader disruptive uncertain environment of the global pandemic, my sense of security and stability is even worse. My precariousness, as well as my racialized and gendered identities, has exacerbated my ontological insecurity under the current global pandemic (Wright, Haastrup, & Guerrina, 2020). For instance, while home PhD students can pause their studies under these circumstances, for international students it is “business as usual.” I must provide “evidence” of my progress on a monthly basis as a legal requirement of being an international student immigrant. That means regardless of the pandemic and my individual circumstances as a single parent with childcare/homeschooling responsibilities, as an international student immigrant, I must produce “evidence” of my progress under these circumstances as failing to do so affects my legal residency in the United Kingdom. Even my future employability is vague. With many permanent contracts of resident/home academics being furloughed or made redundant in academia, as a precariat student immigrant, my future employability is uncertain and at risk under the current disruptive circumstances. This immense pressure and uncertainty I face as a student immigrant and precariat amplify my anxiety and my ontological insecurity. More precisely, being a precariat in an uncertain environment strips any sense of stability or security and intensifies my experience of inequality.

In a labor market that is gendered and racialized, I do not represent the dominant gender nor extend the superior legacy of the Western white. Compounded with my precarity, the intersection of my gender, race, and precariousness situates me at the bottom of the hierarchy of power restraining my ability to exercise agency or have a voice. These restraints on my agency are similar in intensity to the gendered oppression I experienced in Egypt but intensified in the United Kingdom when intersected with race and precarity to further silence my voice, especially under the current global pandemic. This change in the nature of intersectionality with space and time, and its subsequent influence on the intensity of oppression and marginalization, influences my experience.

In this Western context, rather than mere sexism and gendered oppression, my race represents an additional intersectional burden which shapes my experience of both gendered and racialized oppression and marginalization. For instance, because I am *highly visible*, as they explained, I was excluded from a social event aimed at “empowering” women by a group of (all white) women. This was justified on grounds that my presence might impede their communication and elevate their consciousness. This experience has left me questioning that even with time, if one day I managed to tackle my precarity and gained a sense of stability or a permanent job in this space, would I still lack a sense of belonging?

However, my marginalization was not merely stemming from those who were from the dominant West or from a privileged race. Marginalization was also originated from some minoritized but powerful individuals who had established their position in the hierarchy of power long before I arrived. This might suggest that over time, some minorities can find and establish power in this Western space as a means of overcoming their racial oppression. If so, does this indicate that over time, if I got to find and establish power in this Western space, that my race as less privileged identity would become less salient as a source of oppression and marginalization? Or would my gender as an intersectional factor impede such a privilege and dilute this power?

In summary, from an intersectional lens, I explored different shades of inequalities. In sharing my fragmented experience in two different contexts, I reflected on how intersectionality as a lens is used to capture and compare my two different experiences of marginalization. While my gender identity was the most salient within the broader religious environment intertwined with gendered oppression in Egypt, the intersection of my gender, race, and precariat identities is more salient in the UK context contributing to gendered and racialized oppression. The change in the nature of intersectionality from Egypt to the United Kingdom meant that instead of merely marginalized, I am doubly marginalized. In effect, my contextually bound, yet interwoven intersectionalities place me in a prison of seemingly perpetual, inescapable alienation.

4 | A HOPE IN SOLIDARITY

To build solidarity in our struggles to end domination and oppression it seemed vital to call attention to shared humanity, and one location of that unity was present in our emotional universe. For across all differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, religion was a shared realm of emotional feeling. Thinking about shared passions and longing I thought about all of us who were and are committed to remaining critically aware. I thought of our passionate collective longing for peace and justice. Thinking that our yearning might serve as a uniting force, I wanted to make the longing of our hearts tied to the quest for freedom. (hooks, 1992, p. II)

Despite this prison of intersectionalities, I have hope in solidarity. The year 2020, as a year of multiple crises, has surfaced the harsh realities of deeply rooted social injustices and structural inequalities. Yet, there is an opportunity in times of crisis to break the constraints of time and space that have bound my intersectional experience of gender and race. The Black Lives Matter mass movement is evidence that there is a hope in solidarity. We watched people marching together moving beyond their borders, their differences of race, gender, class, religion, sexuality, and disability to fight against injustice. It takes a collective voice to eradicate and dismantle inequality and social injustices.

For this collective voice to exist, everyone's voice needs to be included. I end my reflection by issuing a plea to those who hold privilege in your time and space. At the individual level, reach out to others who are less privileged, this can make them feel included rather than isolated. If you are less privileged, fight your marginalization by speaking out and sharing your story. At the organizational and governmental levels, invite everyone to the table of decision making, prioritize invisible and visible minorities, especially those who have been disproportionately affected during the pandemic. Revisit policies to ensure they allow people to share their identity, and embrace their uniqueness rather than reinforcing their differences, prioritize policies that seek to improve wellbeing, and promote togetherness rather than otherness.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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