

[Armine Ishkanian](#) and Anita Peña Saavedra

The politics and practices of intersectional prefiguration in social movements

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Ishkanian, Armine and Peña Saavedra, Anita (2018) The politics and practices of intersectional prefiguration in social movements. [Sociological Review](#). (In Press)

© 2018 [The Sociological Review Publication Ltd.](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/90951>

Available in LSE Research Online: December 2018

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

The Politics and Practices of Intersectional Prefiguration in Social Movements

By

Armine Ishkanian, LSE, Department of Social Policy

&

Anita Peña Saavedra, LSE, Atlantic Fellows programme for Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE) and Sisters Uncut

Accepted for publication in *Sociological Review* on 29 November 2018

Prefiguration, which emerges out of anarchism (Ince, 2012), is a politics embraced by recent anti-austerity and pro-democracy movements (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Tejerina, Perugorria, Benski, & Langman, 2013), as well as the alter-globalisation movement of the 1990s (Graeber, 2002; Pleyers, 2011). It refers to the ‘attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present, either in parallel with, or in the course of, adversarial social movement protest’ (Yates, 2014: 1). In this article, accepting that ‘progressive politics do not flow magically from aggrieved identities’ (Chun, Lipsitz, & Shin, 2013 : 937) and considering contemporary prefigurative movements as sites of struggle between attempts at inclusiveness and enduring tendencies to reproduce existing power hierarchies (Ishkanian & Glasius 2017), we examine how movement actors confront and tackle inequalities not just in society but within their organisational spaces. Drawing on an in-depth study of the intersectional feminist anti-austerity group Sisters Uncut conducted in 2016 – 2017, we focus on the micro-politics or what some call the ‘back stage’ work in movements (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017: 650). Given that intragroup dynamics ‘which are crucial to sustain any movement, are still poorly understood’ (Jasper, 2011: 295), we maintain that if we are to understand how movements, prefigurative and otherwise, contest existing power relations and social inequalities, we must not only focus on their public actions, but also examine how they acknowledge and address inequalities *within* their own spaces as these can affect both the cohesion and viability of movements as well as their

ability to achieve wider aims.

Sisters Uncut (SU), which is part of the wider anti-austerity movement in Britain, adopts prefiguration as a strategy and campaigns against cuts to domestic violence services. It was founded in 2014 by activists who had been involved in other anti-austerity groups, but who felt that a separate group was necessary to address the gendered and intersectional impacts of austerity, which they believed were ignored by the wider anti-austerity movement. What initially began as a single chapter in London, has grown into a national movement¹ and there are now SU chapters in cities across England and Scotland. Through a multi-scale² analysis, we examined both micro-level organisational dynamics and macro-level mobilisation strategies in SU, to analyse how actors acknowledge and address inequalities in organisational spaces, how they translate intersectionality into practice, and the challenges they face in enacting this form of politics, which we call **intersectional prefiguration**. We argue that intersectional prefiguration should be seen as a form of radical democratic politics (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), in that it acknowledges inequalities and relations of domination and seeks to challenge them, both in organisational spaces and society. We maintain that enacting intersectional prefiguration is predicated on actors developing a collective identity, embracing a commitment to organising intersectionally, *and* adopting specific organisational methodologies through which to put it into practice. In the practice of intersectional prefiguration, means and ends are not separate and changes at the level of policy and society are seen as indivisibly connected to the changes at the individual and organisational levels. As a radical, democratic politics intersectional prefiguration consists of actors' acknowledging and making visible existing inequalities and having the 'uncomfortable

¹ We use Jasper's definition of social movements and protest groups, in which he argues that these overlap sufficiently to use the terms interchangeably (Jasper 2011).

² We discuss the macro-political level politics elsewhere.

conversations' (Gökarrıksel & Smith, 2017: 640), so as to change their own actions, group practices, and to challenge structures of power and oppression in society. While recognising the emancipatory and transformative potential of intersectional prefiguration, we also discuss how it produces its own hierarchies and forms of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991), indicating the necessity for continuous and iterative action. Our work is located at the crossroads of and contributes to both the sociology of social movements and intersectionality. It contributes to social movement theories of action and the literature on collective identity, boundary making, agency, and emotions (Castells, 2012; Gamson, 1998; Jasper, 2010; Mizen, 2015; Pleyers, 2011; B. Roth, 2017; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Specifically, by examining how activists develop a collective identity and enact intersectionality as a social movement strategy, we aim to contribute to our understanding of how normative ideas, in this case intersectionality, are translated into practice and the ways in which emotions, norms, and cultural understandings shape social relations and political action. While intersectionality has become a core concern in feminist studies (Bygnes, 2013; Chun et al., 2013 ; Nielsen, 2012; Verloo, 2013; Waites, 2017) and an area of sociological inquiry (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Degnen & Tyler, 2017; B. Roth, 2017), it as yet remains on the margins of social movement studies (Laperrière & Lépinard, 2016).

There has been relatively little attention paid to intersectionality in the context of prefigurative movements (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2011) which have become more prevalent in recent years. While acknowledging that not all movements explicitly embrace prefiguration as a strategy, our findings, which examine the challenges of developing collective identity, resolving tensions in intra -group relations, and the role of emotions and individual agency in collective action, are relevant to all social movements, prefigurative and otherwise.

We begin with a discussion of our conceptual framework and methodology, before turning to examine how SU activists enact intersectionality.

Intersectional Prefiguration

Drawing on theories of action we examine how activists' agency, cultural understandings, and emotions shape social and political action (Castells, 2012; Jasper, 2010; Mizen, 2015; Pleyers, 2011; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Acknowledging that emotions and collective identity play a key role in movements (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Taylor & Whittier, 1992), we consider how solidarity and a moral commitment to intersectionality are the products of collective efforts and how shared norms and values are manifested and operationalised in organisational spaces. We consider identities as dynamic, acknowledging their emergent nature and examine how, in the context of collective action, they undergo a continual process of recomposition. In terms of the role of emotions, we agree with Jasper who writes: 'Emotions are present in every phase and every aspect of protest... [they] can be means, they can be ends, and sometimes they can fuse the two. They can help or hinder mobilisation efforts, ongoing strategies, and the success of social movements (Jasper, 2011: 286). Such an understanding of emotions in movements is pertinent in analysing prefigurative movements where ends and means are connected and where changes at the level of society are seen as interconnected to changes within the individual and the group.

Boggs first coined the term prefiguration, defining it as 'the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal' (1977, 100). While not using the term prefiguration, Rothschild – Whitt's study of collectivist organisations, was one of the first to theorise the organisational dynamics and structural commonalities of what she called 'contrabureaucratic' organisations, highlighting their 'alternative practices and aspirations'

(Rothschild-Whitt, 1979: 509). In recent years, as the number of self-identified prefigurative groups has grown, so too has the literature about them. Scholars have discussed how in contemporary prefigurative movements, processes of organising are central to and inextricably linked to goals as changes at the level of society are seen as interconnected to changes in the individual and movement (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Pleyers, 2011; Yates, 2014). As Maeckelbergh argues, ‘prefiguration is something people *do*’ it is not ‘a theory of social change that first analyses the current political landscape, develops an alternative model in the form of a predetermined goal, then sets out a five year plan for changing the existing landscape into that predetermined goal’ (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 3).

Many of the tensions present in prefigurative movements, also exist in non-prefigurative movements and one may argue that they are inherent to the nature of collective action. While accepting that point, our objective in this article is to examine how, in self-identified prefigurative groups, where there is an explicit emphasis on enacting a different kind of politics and practice (i.e., non-hierarchical, utopian), both within the group and beyond, structural inequalities persist and how these are acknowledged and addressed. This is important as studies of recent prefigurative movements demonstrate, despite claims of inclusivity and the adoption of horizontal procedures and structures, such movements continue to reproduce inequalities and exclusionary practices found in society, as a result of which the voices and demands of women, as well as racial and ethnic minorities, become marginalised in organisational spaces limiting their ability to shape agendas of action (Athanasίου, 2014; Campbell, 2011; Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015; Gamez Fuentes, 2015; Potuouglu-Cook, 2015). For instance, despite the claims that the Occupy movement was structured to ‘give voice’ to underrepresented people (Vallee, 2017), this was not necessarily achieved in practice. Campbell and Choi-Fitzpatrick discuss the persistence of white privilege (Campbell, 2011) and the marginalisation of African American and Latino

participants in Occupy Wall Street (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015) and elsewhere one of the authors has examined similar tensions in Occupy London (Ishkanian & Ali 2018). Exclusionary practices were not limited to Occupy; Tadros shows the constraints on women's participation in Tahrir Square, while Martinez Palacios and Gamez Fuentes illustrate how women's voices and demands in the Spanish 15M movement were marginalised and silenced, and Potuouglu-Cook examines exclusionary practices in Gezi Park (Martinez Palacios, 2015; Potuouglu-Cook, 2015; Tadros, 2015).

While feminist theorists have critiqued social movement theories' gender blindness (Zemlinskaya, 2010), arguing that 'the public realm of modern citizenship has been constructed on the very negation of women's participation' (Mouffe, 1991: 80), it is important to keep in mind that feminist movements themselves have also struggled with 'diversity' (Bygnes, 2013; S. Roth, 2008) and that alongside gender, class, race, and other "social hierarchies" find their way into every interstice of a movement' (Oliver, 2013: 253) thereby affecting intragroup dynamics. We maintain that intersectional prefiguration is more than the recognition of diversity or a bid to integrate diverse voices or interests (Bygnes, 2013; S. Roth, 2008), but is rather concerned with acknowledging, challenging, and transforming relations of inequality and oppression both within group spaces and beyond.

While the concept had existed and was previously used by scholars and activists, Crenshaw was the first to coin the term 'intersectionality' in 1989. For Crenshaw intersectionality meant moving beyond 'the single axis framework' to consider how intersecting identities of race and gender shape experiences of discrimination and subordination (Crenshaw, 1989: 137-138). Since then, scholarship on intersectionality has grown and it is generally considered to be both a theoretical and methodological paradigm as well as a normative politics which emerges out of and continues to inform activism (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Hancock, 2007). Scholars have addressed the different

manifestations of or approaches to intersectionality. While Crenshaw examined political, structural, and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), others have further elaborated to examine constructionist (Prins, 2006) and strategic (Ricardo, Martinez-Ebers, Lopez, & Ramirez, 2006) forms of intersectionality. Our aim in this article is not to adopt intersectionality as ‘a descriptive analytical tool’, but rather, to consider how SU activists adopt intersectionality as a ‘liberation/political framework’ (Jordan-Zachery, 2007: 261) to challenge the ‘matrix of domination’ (Collins, 1990). Focusing on SU activists’ adoption of intersectional prefiguration as a mobilising strategy and political framework, we use what Choo and Ferree call a process-centred approach to intersectionality. In doing so, we consider how ‘the formation of political subjects [is] a contested process of self-creation in a field of power relations’ (Choo & Ferree, 2010: 134) and examine SU activists’ (emic) understandings of intersectionality as well as their agency in translating it into practice. We agree with Chun et. al. who argue that we should view intersectionality as not only ‘a mechanism for revealing that power works in uneven and differentiated ways’ (Chun et al., 2013 : 922), but also ‘... an indispensable tool for creating new democratic institutions, identities, and practices’ (2013, 924).

While feminist scholarship has examined how intersectionality is manifested in movements (Chun et al., 2013 ; Gökarkısel & Smith, 2017; Moss & Maddrell, 2017; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017) and in advocacy organisations (Nielsen, 2012; Verloo, 2013), there has been far less focus on intersectional praxis in prefigurative groups (Laperrière & Lépinard, 2016). In prefigurative groups, such as SU, while the processes of organising are interconnected with the ends, challenging hierarchies and privileges in the group are seen as equally if not more important, than achieving wider political and policy goals. Thus it is important to note that while intersectional prefiguration is a form of intersectional praxis, not all forms of intersectional praxis adopt prefigurative politics.

Finally, recognising that social relations are manifested in different historical configurations (Nielsen, 2012; B. Roth, 2017) we note that while intersectionality has increasingly gained prominence in US academic and activist circles it has not been widely embraced by anti-austerity activists in Britain (Bassel & Emejulu, 2014). Intersectionality remains on the margins as ‘most high profile feminist groups [in Britain] and actions have failed to take intersectionality seriously’ (Evans, 2016: 68) and as Degnen and Tyler argue, it is striking that intersectionality has also attracted such little interest amongst some social scientists, notably anthropologists of Britain (Degnen & Tyler, 2017: 39). Within the wider anti-austerity movement, SU is the only group to explicitly adopt intersectionality as a goal and paradigm of practice. In the analysing of the anti-austerity movement in Britain, scholars (Bassel & Emejulu, 2014; Emejulu & Bassel, 2015; Maiguaschca, Dean, & Keith, 2016) have pointed to the persistence of misogyny, racism, and other forms of identity-based marginalisation. Such exclusionary tendencies and the persistence of inequalities within movements which oppose inequality, leads us to ask how prefigurative movements can counter inequalities in society if they allow for exclusionary practices to persist and shape their demands, organisational dynamics, and repertoires of action.

Methodology

The research for this article was a collaboration between an academic and an SU activist. Adopting some of the methods associated with the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, we worked together to design, implement, and write-up the research. PAR, which relies on dialogue and collaboration in the research and writing process, was originally adopted in ‘postcolonial, subaltern and women’s studies’ (Hemment, 2007: 303) and is concerned with ‘...involvement, activism and social critique for the purpose of liberatory [sic] change’ (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000: 89).

The authors first met when the activist author was a student at the academic

author's university, but became friends and colleagues later. From the start, we committed to working in a non-hierarchical manner. We did this by acknowledging our positionalities as an academic and an activist, our differences in age and professional status, and the inherent power dynamics in any research endeavour. We embraced a dialogical epistemology (Yuval-Davis, 2012) centred on 'emancipatory values' (Assiter, 2000: 339), which sought to bring the spheres of academia and activism into dialogue. Throughout the process, we engaged in constant discussion and reflection of our findings and analysis. Dialogue is 'critical to the success' of this epistemological approach, which acknowledges 'power inequities' but also 'decentres' dominant perspectives (Collins, 1990: 236-237). Our collaboration worked because of our mutual trust, respect, and our shared values and commitment to democratising the research endeavour.

The research, conducted from October 2016-September 2017, involved: 1) participant observation, with the explicit consent of those present; 2) in-depth, qualitative interviews with a total of twenty SU activists: including fifteen individuals from the three London branches (East, North, and South-East) and five activists from other SU chapters including Newcastle and Doncaster; and 3) analysis of SU publications and social media posts. Despite the expansion to other cities, the three London chapters continue to be the largest and most active and the activists in other cities often look to London for support and advice. Therefore, out of the total interviewees, three quarters were based in London.

At the design stage, we discussed and agreed the research questions, focus, and interview criteria and structure. The activist author, because of her ongoing involvement with SU, was much more actively involved in the participation observation of meetings, caucuses, and protests and also identified and contacted key individuals, but the majority of the interviews were conducted by both authors. While there are competing definitions of the term 'activist', much of the social movement literature defines activist as a

collective identity linked to participation in a social movement or collective action (Bobel, 2007: 148). Here we consider activists those individuals who take part in sustained activism and/or direct action and not occasional participants at protests. As an informal group, SU does not have a fixed membership and there are many individuals who are occasional participants. As our aim was to understand organisational practices and understandings; we interviewed those who were actively involved, rather than occasional participants who attend a protest but who are not involved in the regular meetings. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were transcribed, coded, and analysed around four broad categories: practices; understandings of and discourses around certain concepts (e.g., intersectionality); emotions; and relationships to other groups. Names have been anonymised to protect respondents' identities.

Throughout the process, SU activists were aware of the research objectives and our collaboration, but we bear full responsibility for the text which does not hide uncomfortable aspects or avoid critique.

Developing a Culture of Intersectional Organising

In this section we focus on the articulation and enactment of collective values within the group (Gamson, 1998; Taylor & Whittier, 1992; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013) and the ways in which activists' 'choices, desires, and points of view' in turn affect organising (Jasper, 2014). We consider activists as political subjects operating in a field of power relations (Choo & Ferree 2010) and consider their understandings of sisterhood and intersectionality, discussing how these inform group norms and expectations of individual behaviour. As we discuss, in SU, intersectionality is both a normative goal, shaping intra-group relations, as well as a 'political' goal (Collins 1990; Jordan-Zachery, 2007).

SU practises prefiguration in that it seeks 'to be the change we want to see in the world' (Sisters 2017, 12) and since its founding, it has functioned as an autonomous and

intersectional space from which to fight against austerity through disruptive direct action. In its *Feministo*, the group defines intersectionality as ‘...understand[ing] that a person’s individual experience of violence is affected by gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, trans status and immigration status’ (Sisters Uncut, 2016a). On its website, the group describes itself as ‘a respectful, compassionate and kind space where people feel able to express their views without fear of reprisal or humiliation’ (Sisters Uncut, 2018a). Many interviewees described SU simultaneously as a space for activism and self-development, support, and conviviality, arguing that this was informed by a strong commitment to organising intersectionally. This dual aspect is not unique to prefigurative movements (Perugorria & Tejerina, 2017), but is found in other types of movements and groups (Jasper, 2011; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013).

While some scholars have problematised the terms ‘sisterhood’ and ‘sister’ as essentialist (Spelman, 1988), in SU both terms were interpreted as inclusive categories, which included transwomen and persons who identify as gender non-binary. Most interviewees expressed very positive understandings of ‘sisterhood’, variously describing it as a form of ‘active solidarity’ (Berta), ‘a community’ (Angela, Janelle), a kind of ‘family’ (Gloria, Kimberly), source of ‘friendship’ (Debra, Rose), and a commitment to helping one another (Audrey, Emily, Freya, Linda). Many activists explained how SU actively worked to be different from other groups, arguing that it was a core part of Sisters’ activism to create and maintain an inclusive, supportive, caring, and explicitly intersectional space. Bell, who had previously been involved in another anti-austerity group, contrasted the way Sisters practiced activism saying, ‘There is an expectation you’ll be supportive and that influences the group dynamic. If someone posts that they’re in trouble or that they’re worried or that things aren’t going well, people will normally respond. Sometimes in public and sometimes people will privately message each other.’

Activists discussed how they sought to create an alternative organisation to the existing anti-austerity or left wing groups, which would be a safer space that provided greater opportunities for political participation to a wider group of people. Berta explained how, as a working class woman of colour, she had found it ‘difficult to find a place’ in the social justice movement which she argued tended to be ‘dominated by white middle class men who had just graduated from Cambridge or Oxford’. She contrasted her previous experiences in activism with her experience in SU saying, ‘...unlike other [anti-austerity or left wing] groups, the people front and centre in organising in Sisters are the people who are marginalised in other groups... black and brown Sisters, disabled Sisters, and trans Sisters are front and centre of organising.’ Angela, who is white and identified as working class, also explained how, despite coming from a city which had a very diverse population, the activist organisations she’d previously been involved in were mostly comprised of ‘white people with only a couple of people of colour’. She added, ‘... they’re mostly straight and middle class. Women were marginalised in meetings, organising, and decision-making... while it was useful because I learned about political organising, it wasn’t necessarily always very positive...I didn’t realise there was an alternative until later.’ By ‘alternative’, Angela was referring to other modes of organising, which if not necessarily intersectional, were less hierarchical.

These self-reflexive attempts to embody the change one seeks to achieve in society and to create ‘alternative or utopian social relations’ (Yates, 2014: 1) are characteristic of prefigurative movements (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013; Graeber, 2002; Maeckelbergh, 2011). There was a clear expectation that everyone who joined Sisters would make an effort to acknowledge their own power and privilege in relation to others and to commit to making changes to their own thinking and actions. Yet acknowledging one’s own privileged background can be difficult. Angela explained: ‘...white middle class Sisters, or any Sister

who has had any kind of privilege, might feel quite uncomfortable because they have to acknowledge how that can be hurtful to other people and how they can use that in negative ways'. Yet Evelyn, who is white and who identified as coming from a privileged background, emphasised that however difficult, it is important to 'take responsibility for your privilege.' For Evelyn that meant 'develop[ing] a critical perspective...to interrogate that [privilege] and to try to be better.' They added:

...learning about intersectional feminism is that there are so many ways that you need to be better...you need to try to make space for people who aren't as privileged as you. I would probably have agreed with that principle five or ten years ago, but I wouldn't have known how to talk about it in a meaningful way.

Thus far we have discussed how values, norms, and emotions as well as understandings of intersectionality informed practice within SU. We have considered how the process of becoming a Sister involved engaging with and embracing the group's norms and values and exercising one's agency to commit to making changes in one's thinking and actions. Writing specifically about prefigurative movements, Maeckelbergh argues, '...horizontalism is believed by many movement actors to be the best way to create equality...horizontalism means actively creating practices that continuously challenge inequalities – both structural and inter-personal' (Maeckelbergh 2011: 10). Yet as mentioned earlier, scholars studying contemporary prefigurative movements have shown that prefigurative movements are failing to tackle existing inequalities and patterns of exclusion (Athanasίου, 2014; Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015; Gamez Fuentes, 2015). Given our focus on how prefigurative movements not only acknowledge but also tackle the reproduction of inequalities in group spaces and our process-centred approach (Choo & Ferree, 2010), we now turn to examine how activists translate intersectional prefiguration into practice.

Enacting Intersectional Prefiguration

For many SU activists, the possibility of putting intersectionality into practice was first and foremost seen as based on maintaining safer spaces. But we found that what constitutes a safe or safer space was contested and negotiated. Despite the critiques of safe spaces in the context of universities, there has been little focus on how safe spaces function as a repertoire of action in movements. On its website, SU's Safer Spaces Policy is described as follows: **'We have high expectations of how we behave towards each other in meetings, actions and social spaces.** We will not wait for...harm to happen but will proactively challenge oppression & hierarchy in everything we do...We want to create a community that recognises and challenges the oppression & exploitation that some of us are harmed by and some of us benefit from' [emphasis in the original] (Sisters Uncut, 2016b).

SU is unique among anti-austerity groups in Britain in that while claiming 'not to police gender in our spaces', its Safer Spaces policy also states that meetings are 'not open to people who identify solely or primarily as men' (Sisters Uncut, 2016b). Some respondents described this boundary making (Taylor & Whittier, 1992), 'no men' policy, as absolutely crucial, (Maya, Linda, Elle), arguing that a separate or protected space was essential to bring to the fore previously marginalised voices and that keeping men out of the internal group spaces was also done out of consideration for those members who are survivors of violence.

Janelle said:

This is the only space we know of where we feel safe to talk about the violence that has been inflicted on us, where we know that we're not going to be undermined, humiliated, interrupted, and patronised which we experience in so many other spaces from men...this is ultimately a space about the liberation of women from male violence.

While the no-men policy was unanimously agreed and adopted at a group meeting very early on, some activists, whilst not challenging its adoption, raised questions about the essentialist nature of the policy (Spelman, 1988). Angela said, '...to say 'no men' as if that

would make the space safe is to ignore that many of us are queer, so the people that we are most likely to experience domestic violence from is other women or non-binary people.

There is some complexity in that that isn't quite worked out.' Concerns over whether feminist organising which excludes men leads to separatism or 'fractionalisation' has long been an issue of debate (Combahee River Collective, 1977). In relation to SU's no-men policy, Berta discussed the ways of reconciling this with the group's intersectional approach. She said:

We are not separatists, but we believe in a protected space... to grow and learn is really important... However being intersectional means we make time and space to organise with men in different ways. Like linking our struggle with the Movement for Justice by Any Means Necessary or Black Lives Matter. Because we know we can't get liberation without doing that. If there are black men being shot dead in the streets by police, as long as that's happening, then women are also not going to be able to be liberated and we understand that. So, we have to make space for organising with men, but I still advocate for having a protected space.

Other activists also acknowledged that banning men from the group meetings did not mean that tensions, harm, or conflicts were entirely removed and argued that one of the difficulties of enacting intersectionality, even within the safer spaces of SU, meant negotiating the various vectors of difference which shape people's identities and experiences and which are not always easily reconciled (Hancock, 2007; May, 2015). We found that tensions were manifested in individuals' experiences of voice, participation, and representation in the group.

Demands emerge from discussions at meetings, where those present are expected to participate and contribute to the agenda setting. While recognising the many negative impacts of austerity, SU focuses on three main demands: 1) ending cuts and restoring ring-fenced funding for domestic violence services; 2) securing additional services for survivors, including access to legal aid and housing; and 3) promoting funding of specialist domestic violence services which address the needs of different women (including women of colour,

transwomen, disabled women, migrant women, etc.). Meetings are run using the consensus based system and there is a rotation of facilitators to ensure wide participation.

While great effort was made to address all kinds of inequalities and to be maximally inclusive, several activists mentioned class, race, and disability as factors shaping participation. Of these, class was the factor most mentioned as affecting voice and representation. Scholars have pointed to the challenge of integrating multiple vectors of identity in organising and the tensions of different subjective positionalities (Chun et al., 2013 ; Moss & Maddrell, 2017; B. Roth, 2017; Verloo, 2013). Specifically, in the British context Evans has noted that despite the focus on ‘the intersections between sex, race, disability and gender’, little attention is paid to class (2015, 67) and this was certainly the case in SU. Angela argued, ‘...if anything our issue is [not including] working class people who are not educated. The working class people who are in Sisters are very well-educated, over-achievers. It’s not my sister who lives in a council house raising three kids by herself and that’s something we need to do more of.’ For Bell and Rose, the issue of class wasn’t solely in terms of who was involved in the group, but how within a space that claimed to be inclusive and intersectional, there existed hierarchies of knowledge which sometimes functioned to exclude the voices and concerns of people who were the most affected by austerity. Rose and Bell, who both identify as people of colour and working class, criticised class based elitism arguing that this functioned to silence certain voices. Bell said, ‘I feel there is a lot of Gender Studies speak and terminology. If you want to engage communities, which include working-class people...we have to be more accessible and acknowledge that the way people speak is different.’ For Bell, this meant that at times those most affected by austerity were not the ones involved in shaping the agenda. She said,

... a lot of middle class Sisters, mainly white, but also some middle class Sisters of colour, who have never had any contact with State services and they’re not directly affected by austerity speak about cuts, but don’t really understand it.

Meanwhile Rose maintained,

...if you expect everyone to come into this space and to know exactly what all these things are, like understanding colonisation and trans-misogyny and to be completely perfect already is a big ask! That will mean only the people who have already done a Gender Studies masters will be able to join. But we want women and non-binary people who come from any part of society.

But both Bell and Rose agreed that it wasn't solely a matter of class, but rather how race intersected with class, how class intersected with disability, and how the power dynamics between each vector and social relation affected voice, participation, and representation. Bell said, '...at times black Sisters have felt they've done a lot of labour on educating other Sisters on racism but then things have become really tokenistic!' Similarly, Rose said, '...our media is written by predominantly white and/or middle class Sisters and it becomes hierarchical and a class thing and then quite tokenistically they'll ask Sisters of colour or disabled Sisters to be the 'face' of that media and that's not authentic at all.'

Some activists who were involved in the communications group, argued that from a strategic perspective, if SU sought to address every issue related to austerity, it would lose focus and be less effective. The narrow focus on the aforementioned three demands, they argued, emerged out of strategic considerations and were not intended to silence certain voices. Even our more critical respondents acknowledged these arguments, but while acknowledging the difficulties of negotiating different aims and concerns, they maintained that the purpose of intersectional activism in a prefigurative group should not only be concerned with achieving external impact, albeit they recognised that such impact is certainly important. As Maya argued, '...sisterhood has to be about us and how we interact with each other and the way we care about each other. That has to be the first thing really before anything else. Because there is no point being a feminist direct action group if internally people are hurt or upset.'

An incident which occurred at SU's 2017 national congress illustrates the conflicts that can arise and the difficulties involved in negotiating differences in the context of intersectional prefiguration. During the congress, Flora, who is white, in her mid-40s, and identified as working class was speaking about the work she and fellow activists were doing in their city. When she spoke at the congress, her comments sparked an outcry from some activists, mostly young people in their 20s, from London who criticised her comments and accused Flora of being trans-exclusionary. Arguments ensued in which all parties were visibly upset and Flora subsequently left the congress. This episode created tension and raised questions of how the group could address these tensions in the future. It also illustrates the function of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991) in the group, which can shape the nature of activism, through delineating what is (un)sayable and serving to limit the issues around which activists mobilised.

Discussing this incident, some argued that the purpose of having a Safer Spaces policy was to allow for debate in a less confrontational manner. Gabriela said, 'we must look at them [those who may not think like us] as our Sisters, not as our enemies' and for Rose, it was important 'to have that conversation and to be able to learn from it and to move on and not to just focus on it and say, "That person is terrible and we hate them!"' Following the incident at the congress, the group responded by creating the 'Sisters Learn' and 'Sisters Reflect' interventions, to address tensions and conflicts and to prevent them from becoming destructive. In 2018, the group also developed the 'Accountability Toolkit' which is intended to serve as 'a guideline for how we heal and address what has happened' (Sisters Uncut, 2018b: 2).

Described as a living document, the Accountability Toolkit provides suggestions on how to deal with arising conflicts and tensions in the group. It reframes accountability away from the managerialist understanding of the term, and advances accountability work in the

group as a form transformative justice, which is defined as a ‘methodology’, which will allow members--

...to challenge and address harmful acts and structures by creating space to explore and transform harmful behaviour, systems, and relationships. This means when someone causes harm, **we look to the values, behaviours and power dynamics of the whole group for answers about how this happened and how we can transform it.** (Sisters Uncut, 2018b: 6). [Emphasis added]

The Toolkit describes this as a ‘messy’, ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘complicated’ process, but also presents it as essential to achieving change and for preserving group cohesion (Sisters Uncut, 2018b: 7). The process is one of confronting and acknowledging the harm and tensions and committing to addressing and transforming these as a group. Activists have started to use the Accountability Toolkit, and the Sisters Learn/Reflect initiatives, but it is too soon to tell how these will work in practice. Yet the adoption of these tools indicates a commitment to practising a radical democratic and utopian politics (Chun et al., 2013 ; Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Yates, 2014) – i.e., intersectional prefiguration – which includes the willingness to have the ‘uncomfortable conversations’ (Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017: 640) and to work through the difficulties collectively rather than retreating from the group (Moss & Maddrell, 2017).

In this section, we discussed the complexity of enacting an authentic, radical, democratic politics of intersectional prefiguration without it become its own form of exclusion, tokenism, and reification. The adoption of mechanisms, including the Accountability Toolkit and the Sisters Learn/Reflect initiatives, we maintain illustrates that activists acknowledge that it is not enough to adopt horizontality (Maeckelbergh, 2011) and to have shared norms (Chun et al., 2013), but rather that specific tools and continuous, iterative action are necessary to translate intersectionality into practice.

Conclusion

Our starting point in the article was that if we are to understand how social movements contest existing power relations and social inequalities, we must not only focus on their public actions, but also examine how they acknowledge and address inequalities within their own spaces and practices. We argued that despite the adoption of prefiguration, contemporary movements remain sites of struggle between attempts at inclusiveness and enduring tendencies to exclude and reproduce existing hierarchies (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015; Miguaschca et al., 2016; Martinez Palacios, 2015).

Focusing on SU, we examined the challenges of operationalising a radical democratic politics of intersectional prefiguration, which acknowledges inequalities and seeks to transform them both within organisational spaces and in society. We argued that enacting intersectional prefiguration is predicated on developing a collective identity, creating a culture of intersectional organising, *and* using tools such as the Safer Spaces policy and the Accountability Toolkit, to translate it into practice. Throughout the article we examined the development of a collective identity as well as shared norms and values, and how these shape practices and are in turn reconfigured through the interactions within the group. In focusing on the role of emotions, we examined how emotions, including compassion and kindness, help to inspire collective action and a sense of collective identity (Mizen, 2015; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Taylor & Whittier, 1992), but also how the high emotional content of interactions at times created tensions and conflicts, which can, as Jasper (2011) argues, hinder mobilisation and threaten the viability and cohesiveness of the group. To be sure, intersectional prefiguration can have both positive and negative consequences. It will be positive if self-reflective and accountable processes and experiences genuinely promote expression, inclusivity, and internal strength. Yet, there is also the danger where, given the high emotional content of these situations and interactions, intersectional prefiguration can generate its own disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991) which leads to oppressive and

exclusionary practices, including manipulative tendencies and hierarchical attitudes, indicating the necessity for continuous reflection and iterative action. The key challenge of enacting intersectional prefiguration is for actors to move beyond their comfort zones so as to have the ‘uncomfortable conversations’ (Gökarıksel & Smith, 2017: 640) and to remain engaged in working with others who share similar aims and goals rather than ‘retreating into privilege and isolation’ (Moss & Maddrell, 2017, p. 619). In other words, intersectional prefiguration does not just happen of its own accord; this type of activism requires conscious and constant effort and self-reflection.

But questions remain: can intersectional prefiguration be scaled upward and outward to other activist groups in Britain? Can it work in non-feminist groups or feminist organisations in which intersectionality is not valued? It seems unlikely that without a prior commitment to intersectionality that this can occur. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine why intersectionality has as yet little purchase in Britain, though this is an important area of inquiry (Bassel & Emejulu, 2014; Degnen & Tyler, 2017; Evans, 2016).

We do not claim that intersectional prefiguration is a perfect methodology, but argue that it offers the possibility for democratising political participation in movements through making hierarchies and inequalities visible and legible, thereby providing opportunities for tackling them. Our research focused on SU, but our findings have wider relevance to scholars of social movements and intersectionality and can help advance our understandings of the ways in which movements, prefigurative and otherwise, drive social change and transformative politics and the challenges they face in this process.

References

- Assiter, A. (2000). Feminist epistemology and value. *Feminist Theory*, 1(3), 329-345.
- Athanasίου, A. (2014). Precarious Intensities: Gendered Bodies in the Streets and Squares of Greece. *Signs*, 40(1), 1-9.

- Bassel, L., & Emejulu, A. (2014). Solidarity under Austerity: Intersectionality in France and the United Kingdom. *Politics & Gender*, 10(1), 130-136.
- Bobel, C. (2007). I'm not an activist, though I've done a lot of it': Doing Activism, Being Activist and the 'Perfect Standard' in a Contemporary Movement. *Social Movement Studies*, 6(2), 147-159.
- Bygnes, S. (2013). We are in Complete Agreement': The Diversity Issue, Disagreement and Change in the European Women's Lobby. *Social Movement Studies*, 12(2), 199-213.
- Campbell, E. R. A. (2011). A Critique of the Occupy Movement from a Black Occupier. *The Scholar*, 41(4), 42-51.
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis. *Signs*, 38(4), 785-810.
- Choi-Fitzpatrick, A. (2015). Managing Democracy in Social Movement Organizations. *Social Movement Studies*, 14(2), 123-141.
- Choo, H. Y., & Ferree, M. M. (2010). Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities. *Sociological Theory*, 28(2), 129-149.
- Chun, J. J., Lipsitz, G., & Shin, Y. (2013). Intersectionality as a Social Movement Strategy: Asian Immigrant Women Advocates. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38(4), 917-940.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Combahee River Collective. (1977). The Combahee River Collective Statement. Retrieved 7 November 2018, from <https://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8, Issue 1*(Article 8), 139-167.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241-1299.
- Degen, C., & Tyler, K. (2017). Amongst the disciplines: Anthropology, sociology, intersection and intersectionality *Sociological Review Monographs*, 65(1), 35-43.
- Emejulu, A., & Bassel, L. (2015). Minority women, austerity and activism. *Race & Class*, 57(2), 86-95.
- Evans, E. (2016). Intersectionality as feminist praxis in the UK. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 59, 67-75.
- Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). London: Penguin Books
- Gamez Fuentes, M. J. (2015). Feminisms and the 15M Movement in Spain: Between Frames of Recognition and Contexts of Action *Social Movement Studies*, 14(3), 359-365.
- Gamson, J. (1998). Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma *Social Problems*, 42(3), 390-407.
- Gatenby, B., & Humphries, M. (2000). Feminist participatory action research: Methodological and ethical issues. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23(1), 89-105.

- Glasius, M., & Pleyers, G. (2013). The Global Moment of 2011: Democracy, Social Justice and Dignity. *Development and Change*, 44(3), 547-567.
- Gökarıksel, B., & Smith, S. (2017). Intersectional feminism beyond U.S. flag hijab and pussy hats in Trump's America. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(5), 628-644.
- Graeber, D. (2002). The new anarchists. *New Left Review*, 13, 61-73.
- Hancock, A.-M. (2007). When multiplication doesn't equal quick addition. *Perspectives on Politics*, 5(1), 63-79.
- Hemment, J. (2007). Public Anthropology and the Paradoxes of Participation: Participatory Action Research and Critical Ethnography in Provincial Russia. *Human Organization*, 66(3), 301-314.
- Ince, A. (2012). In the Shell of the Old: anarchist geographies of territorialisation. *Antipode*, 44(5), 1645-1666.
- Ishkanian, A. & Ali, I.S. (2018) From Consensus to Dissensus: The Politics of Anti-austerity Activism in London and Its Relationship to Voluntary Organizations. *Journal of Civil Society*, 14(1), 1-19.
- Ishkanian, A. & Glasius, M. (2017) What does democracy mean? Activist views and practices in Athens, Cairo, London, and Moscow. *Democratization*, 24 (6), 1006-1024.
- Jasper, J. M. (2010). Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action? *Social Compass*, 4(11), 965-976.
- Jasper, J. M. (2011). Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research. *Annual review of sociology*, 37, 285-303.
- Jasper, J. M. (2014). Constructing Indignation: Anger Dynamics in Protest Movements. *Emotion Review*, 6(3), 208-213.
- Jordan-Zachery, J. S. (2007). Am I a Black Woman or a Woman Who is Black? A Few Thoughts on the Meaning of Intersectionality. *Politics & Gender*, 3(2), 254-263.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Laperrière, M., & Lépinard, E. (2016). Intersectionality as a tool for social movements: Strategies of inclusion and representation in the Québécois women's movement. *Politics*, 36(4), 374-382.
- Maeckelbergh, M. (2011). Doing is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement. *Social Movement Studies*, 10(1), 1-10.
- Mauguaschca, B., Dean, J., & Keith, D. (2016). Pulling together in a crisis? Anarchism, feminism, and the limits of left-wing convergence in austerity Britain. *Capital & Class*, 40(1), 37-57.
- Martinez Palacios, J. (2015). The Sex of Participatory Democracy. An analysis of the theoretical approaches and experiences of participatory democracy from a feminist viewpoint. *Democratization*, 23(5), 940-959.
- May, V. R. (2015). *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries*. New York: Routledge.
- Mizen, P. (2015). The madness that is the world: young activists' emotional reasoning and their participation in a local Occupy movement. *The Sociological Review*, 63(S2), 167-182.
- Moss, P., & Maddrell, A. (2017). Emergent and divergent spaces in the Women's March: the challenges of intersectionality and inclusion. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(5), 613-620.

- Mouffe, C. (1991). Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community. In Miami Theory Collective (Ed.), *Community at Loose Ends* (pp. 70-82). Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nielsen, H. P. (2012). Joint purpose? Intersectionality in the hands of anti-racist and gender equality activists in Europe. *Ethnicities*, 13(3), 276-294.
- Oliver, P. E. (2013). Ethnicity, Repression, and Fields of Action in Movement Mobilization. In J. van Stekelenburg, C. Roggeband, & B. Klanderman (Eds.), *The Future of Social Movement Research: Dynamics, Mechanisms, and Processes* (pp. 235-262). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Perugorria, I., & Tejerina, B. (2017). Politics of the encounter: Cognition, emotions, and networks in the Spanish 15M. *Current Sociology*, 61(4), 424-442.
- Pleyers, G. (2011). *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Polletta, F., & Jasper, J. M. (2001). Collective Identity and Social Movements. *Annual review of sociology*, 27, 283-305.
- Potouglu-Cook, O. (2015). Hope with qualms: a feminist analysis of the 2013 Gezi protests. *Feminist Review*, 109, 96-123.
- Prins, B. (2006). Narrative Accounts of Origins: A Blind Spot in the Intersectional Approach? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3), 277-290.
- Ricardo, L. R., Martinez-Ebers, V., Lopez, L., & Ramirez, R. (2006). Strategic Intersectionality: Gender, Ethnicity, and Political Incorporation. Institute of Government Studies: University of California Berkeley.
- Rose-Redwood, C., & Rose-Redwood, R. (2017). 'It definitely felt very white': race, gender, and the performative politics of assembly at the Women's March in Victoria, British Columbia. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(5), 645-654.
- Roth, B. (2017). *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA: Anti-AIDS Activism in Los Angeles from the 1980s to the 2000s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. .
- Roth, S. (2008). Dealing with Diversity: The Coalition of Labor Union Women. In J. Reger, D. J. Myers, & R. L. Einwohner (Eds.), *Identity Work, Sameness and Difference in Social Movements*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
- Rothschild-Whitt, J. (1979). The Collectivist Organization: An Alternative to Rational Bureaucratic Models. *American Sociological Review*, 44(509-527).
- Sisters Uncut. (2016a). Feministo. Retrieved 31 March 2017, from <http://www.sistersuncut.org/feministo/>
- Sisters Uncut. (2016b). Safer Spaces Policy. Retrieved 9 October 2017, from <http://www.sistersuncut.org/saferspaces/>
- Sisters Uncut. (2018a). FAQ. Retrieved 1 February 2018, from <http://www.sistersuncut.org/faqs/>
- Sisters Uncut. (2018b). *Sisters Uncut Accountability Toolkit*. Sisters Uncut. London.
- Spelman, E. V. (1988). *Inessential Woman*. Boston, : Beacon Press.
- Tadros, M. (2015). Contentious and Prefigurative Politics: Vigilante Groups' Struggle against Sexual Violence in Egypt (2011–2013). *Development and Change*, 46(6), 1345-1368.
- Taylor, V., & Whittier, N. (1992). Collective Identity in Social movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization. In A. D. Morris & C. M. Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (pp. 105-129). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tejerina, B., Perugorria, I., Benski, T., & Langman, L. (2013). From indignation to occupation: A new wave of global mobilization. *Current Sociology*, 61(4), 377-392.

- Vallee, M. (2017). Giving account of the voice-of-encounter: Anecdotes from the Occupy Movement *The Sociological Review*, 65(4), 714-728.
- van Stekelenburg, J., & Klandermans, B. (2013). The social psychology of protest. *Current Sociology*, 61(5-6), 886-905.
- Verloo, M. (2013). Intersectional and Cross-Movement Politics and Policies: Reflections on Current Practices and Debates. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society.*, 38(41), 893-915.
- Waites, M. (2017). LGBTI organizations navigating imperial contexts: the Kaleidoscope Trust, the Commonwealth and the need for a decolonizing, intersectional politics *Sociological Review*, 65(4), 644–662.
- Yates, L. (2014). Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements. *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest*, 14(1), 1-21.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2012). Dialogical Epistemology - An Intersectional Resistance to the 'Oppression Olympics'. *Gender & Society.*, 26(1), 46-54.
- Zemlinskaya, Y. (2010). Social Movements Through the Gender Lens. *Sociology Compass*, 4(8), 628-641.