

EXPLORING JUSTICE: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN BRITISH CRIMINOLOGY



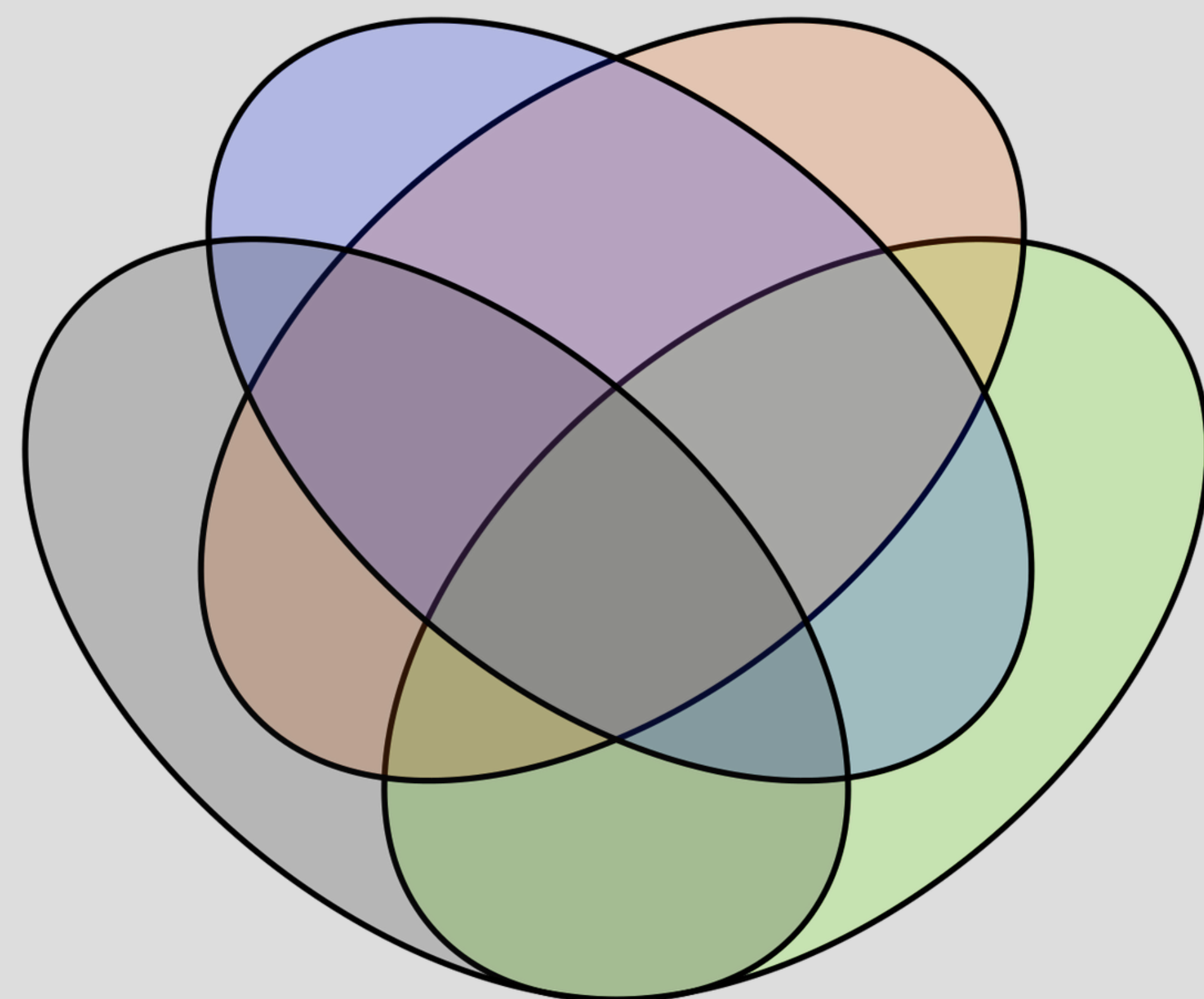
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In recent years, people have become far more attuned to the idea of the complexity of their own identity - people are more often considering the interplay of multiple identities that make up their own character. This idea has become far more influential in modern-day British society, supported by the rise of intersectional feminism, and has started to change the way many institutions approach identity. This is particularly significant in the area of crime and criminal justice, and recent criminological research has started to take intersectional approaches into account. This project explores the significance of intersectionality, looking at how it works in relation to the British criminology of the past, present and future. By focusing on the intersection of race and gender, through a number of semi-structured interviews and reflection upon existing theoretical research, it becomes clear that intersectional criminology is a somewhat underdeveloped idea in current criminology, but it is growing in a way that suggests it may be particularly impactful in the future.



An intersectional analysis considers a collection of factors that affect a social individual in combination, rather than considering each factor in isolation, seen here in a venn diagram.
(Diagram by Rupert Millard)

WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that examines how multiple social identities intersect to create unique circumstances of privilege and oppression. Intersectionality recognises that people aren't defined by only one single social category, but rather by the interplay of multiple identities.

The term "intersectionality" was created and defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw as a way for her to describe her personal experiences with oppression, concerning the fact that she is both Black and a woman. Recently, this understanding has been extended to consider many more social categories that contribute to discrimination, including identities relating to sexual orientation, class, religion and many more.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between crime, race and gender has always been one that has fascinated criminologists, with a lot of research being dedicated to how these factors affect experiences through the justice system. As there has been a growing awareness of the overlap between personal identities, there has been a similar criminological movement towards addressing these overlaps through criminological theory. This has led to the development of intersectional criminology, which advocates for a more holistic view, allowing for identities to be viewed concurrently, rather than as distinct entities.

Intersectional criminology is an idea rooted in Americanism, with even the term being rooted in American imagery. As the foundations of British criminology are different, this project considers whether this idea can easily be understood, implemented and embraced in British criminology.

METHODOLOGY

This study used semi-structured interviews, conducted online over the course of the summer of 2024. The interviews allowed for discussions about research into race and gender in criminology, as well as discussions about intersectionality in current criminology, and reflections on the extent to which there is overlap. Discussions were led by the participants, following prompts to stay on topic, but allowing for elaboration on areas which were particularly interesting, or complex.

In the end, there were five interlocutors who were recruited using both purposive sampling techniques and snowball sampling techniques. All of my interlocutors are part of a highly selective academic institution, being members of the University of Cambridge. This is, in no way, reflective of a societal sample, and so findings should not be extrapolated, but interpreted as a reflection of a small sample.

DISCUSSION

As criminology is so deeply intertwined with society, drawing heavily on societal factors, trends and issues to understand and address criminal behaviour, it was important to start the discussion by considering the significance of intersectionality in current society. As a newly emerging idea, intersectionality has been met with some distrust in the UK, being a traditionally American idea, based in critical race theory that we do not recognise in the same way. The lack of a foundation for intersectional criminology to feed off has had an impact on its ability to make a significant difference in the present day, but as it is being discussed more, and the concept is becoming more familiar, its impact on criminology is becoming increasingly apparent.

The discussion also moved to consider the role that intersectional criminology can play when it comes to application in criminal justice. When looking at the justice system - focusing predominantly on prisons, as many of the interlocutors highlighted this as a particular area of concern - it became apparent that there are many struggles of many individuals which are missed due to the lack of an intersectional lens. It is clear that there have been attempts to consider how gender affects offending, and experiences in prison, and the same has been done for race, but we have not seen much research into how the two can intersect, meaning that minority ethnic women can often fall through the gaps in terms of targeted research and application. There does seem to be a shift towards engaging with intersectionality when researching crime, and if this can be applied, it is likely that the rehabilitative processes will be more effective for all.

CAN INTERSECTIONAL CRIMINOLOGY BE APPLIED?

The application of intersectional criminology has been questioned many times - many people see it as a purely theoretical exploration. However, I believe that there is strong evidence to suggest its application would be beneficial; similar initiatives have been introduced to help certain groups who offend in certain ways, like the community centres which were set up as a prison alternative to support women, and to more effectively deal with the reasons why they are more likely to offend. Restructuring this through an intersectional lens would likely be more complex, but it is in no way impossible, and may be something done in the future.

CONCLUSION

Conceptually, it is clear that intersectionality is very messy and very layered - it considers concepts in a way that is unlike traditional British criminology, embracing concepts that are hard to define, or even measure, rather than focusing on finding definitive answers. However, it is clear that current criminologists have a desire to consider intersectionality, in a way that is more natural to British criminology, and there is a strong sense of hope for the future that this concept will be able to grow and influence in a way similar to that of the US, where it originates. Intersectionality is of a growing significance, and should be embraced so we can engage with an increasingly critical understanding of criminology.