Applying Intersectionality in Policy and Practice: Unseating the Dominance of Gender in Responding to Social Inequalities

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Abstract

Researchers, policymakers and practitioners have long struggled with how to apply the Black feminist theory of intersectionality. *While the term intersectionality is commonly appropriated by white feminism, the first, and most difficult, step to operationalising intersectionality is to unseat the dominance of a unitary gender lens – or any other hierarchy – for understanding social inequalities. In an intersectional approach, relevant entry points and target groups are context-specific and based on the empirical evidence of where the greatest intersecting inequalities lie. This article will consider how to understand intersectionality, and how it can be applied in policy and practice. I argue that (1) addressing the needs and interests of those who are most marginalised, within the context of (2) cross-cutting issues affecting differently marginalised groups, is the most effective way to mitigate inequalities.*

Keywords: intersectionality; COVID-19; white feminism; gender; economic inequalities

Introduction

(White) researchers, policymakers and practitioners have long struggled with how to apply the Black feminist theory of intersectionality. In other words, "there is some agreement that [policy makers] have been much more successful at authoring and implementing variations on additively organized diversity policies than creating robustly intersectional ones" (Townsend-Bell 2019: 735). Intersectionality is widely perceived among them as being difficult to apply because intersectionally marginalised people (e.g., Black women and women of colour) have been largely excluded from these research and policy spaces. The resulting hegemonic approach to inequalities has been to address them separately – in both legislative and policy intervention

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terms. In Europe, campaigns for legislation offering protection against identity-based discrimination have tended to be led by the more powerful among marginalised groups (e.g., white women), and the results have reflected their experiences and interests. The dominance of the gender lens on inequalities is also reflected in the international arena (Hankivsky/Kapilashrami 2020a). While the term intersectionality is commonly appropriated by white feminism (see Christoffersen 2022a; Christoffersen/Emejulu 2022), the first, and most difficult, step to operationalising intersectionality is to unseat the dominance of a unitary gender lens – or any other hierarchy – for understanding social inequalities (see Hankivsky/Kapilashrami 2020a).

In an intersectional approach, relevant entry points and target groups are context-specific and based on the empirical evidence of where the greatest intersecting inequalities lie (see Hankivsky 2012; Hankivsky/Jordan-Zachery 2019). This article will consider how to understand intersectionality and the barriers to its operationalisation, and how it can be applied in policy and practice. I argue that (1) addressing the needs and interests of those who are most marginalised, within the context of (2) cross-cutting issues (e.g., poverty) affecting differently marginalised groups, is the most effective way to mitigate inequalities. This is because, if efforts benefit the most marginalised, those who are singularly disadvantaged will also be reached along the way. As Kimberlé Crenshaw, who named intersectionality, wrote:

> *[i]f […] efforts […] began with addressing the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged and with restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit […] [P]lacing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action. (Crenshaw 1989: 167)*

Policy makers and practitioners have their own competing understandings of how to operationalise intersectionality, which often contradict this core message; for example ones that reduce differences by targeting 'everyone' and ones that continue to prioritise those who are singularly disadvantaged (Christoffersen 2021a). In existing research on intersectionality's operationalisation, there is little evidence of intersectionality actually being applied by policymakers as yet. I will build towards an example of how intersectionality could be applied to COVID-19 recovery in the UK.

Understanding Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a Black feminist theory (see Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Collins 1990) that names Black women's theorising of the social world's foundational organising logics of white supremacy[2], capitalism, gendered racism and racialised sexism. This theory was not developed only in the US, but rather also has a strong tradition in the UK (see e.g., Amos et al. 1984; Anthias 1993; Mirza 1997) and Europe (e.g., Emejulu/Sobande 2019). Intersectionality is the understanding that social inequalities are interdependent and indivisible from one another: 'race, class, gender,

[2]By white supremacy I mean, drawing on the work of Charles Mills, a global social, political, economic and cultural system that privileges whiteness (see Mills 2017).

sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena' (Collins 2015:2).

Kimberlé Crenshaw employed the term to describe the ways that Black women's experiences and identities are marginalised by tendencies to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories in antidiscrimination law, feminism, and antiracist movements, with all focusing on the most powerful/privileged members of discriminated-against groups (white women) and taking them as representatives of the group as a whole (see Crenshaw 1989). Although she was writing about the US, this is equally true of Europe. In other words, as Patricia Hill Collins articulated around the same time as Crenshaw, systems of oppression are interlocking and interdependent within a "matrix of domination" (Collins 1990).

Yet, intersectionality is understood in competing and contradicting ways among scholars and practitioners alike. Drawing on the theory cited above, I suggest that there are certain points which are integral to it which I elaborate below. These points reflect how I have employed intersectionality theory in my prior research in order to assess the implications of different applications of intersectionality for intersectionally marginalised groups and intersectional justice (see Christoffersen 2021a).

First, intersectionality involves both individual *and* structural levels of analysis. Yet in public discourse about intersectionality as well as in policy and practice, there is an overfocus on identity and experience. In fact, identities and experiences (marginalised *and* privileged ones) are created by the *synthesis of inequality structures* (white supremacy, sexism, ableism, cisgenderism, heterosexism, etc.). I suggest that while this synthesis is always in process, it can be useful to consider that in relation to existing people, this synthesis already happened: that synthesis created the conditions for the identities and experiences which people occupy and create. Therefore, identities and experience are inseparable from the synthesis of inequality structures and in considering applications of intersectionality, we must do the work to understand structures and not only experiences. This is not necessarily simple, because particularly from practitioners' perspectives it can appear abstract.

Second, intersectionality is both relational *and* focused on those who are (most) oppressed. The inequality structures whose synthesis as mentioned above is what intersectionality is, can be thought of as axes of privilege and oppression which produce our social positions and experiences. The idea that intersectionality is relational means that along each of these axes, "someone's disadvantage is [usually] someone else's privilege" (Center for Intersectional Justice 2018). To take the example of white privilege: not everyone can have white privilege, i.e., privilege accorded to one particular racial group wherein, among other benefits, white people perceive themselves as the centre/at the centre of social life; are positively represented in all media; have role models; and often the official holidays reflect white cultures and religions. Not all of these particular benefits which white people derive from racial injustice can be redistributed (see Mills 2017): not everyone can be the centre since there is only one centre; privileging of whiteness is created by taking something away from other racial groups. Similar observations can be made about other forms of privilege, and in practice these are always intersecting.

Given our different positions along these different axes of inequality, for each of us, experience is characterised simultaneously by both oppression and privilege in context-dependent ways. Oppression and privilege are not an either/or, but a "both/and" (May 2015). No one is

wholly oppressed or wholly privileged along all axes and in all contexts. One key implication of this is that we all have agency, the capacity to act for ourselves. We have both privileged and marginal aspects to our complex identities and our positioning as privileged/oppressed shifts depending on whom or what we are interacting with. But at the same time, some people are certainly more oppressed or more privileged than others: this can be learned through investigation, through empirical research, and those who are (most) oppressed are the priority of intersectionality. This means that, in a social world which is characterised by white supremacy, the priority of intersectionality is not to study or address differences among white women. This also means that in relation to a given issue and in a particular context, sexism is not always the most relevant axis; gender cannot be presumed as a constant focal point, and when it is, it might be men and/or non-binary people, who are disadvantaged.

Third and finally, intersectionality theory views inequalities as mutually constitutive, and not additive. This means that because of the synthesis of inequality structures, inequalities are *always* (not just sometimes) indivisible from one another, although they are not the same as one another (see Yuval-Davis 2006). As such, thinking in terms of *multiple identities* is not helpful because this suggests an additive view of inequalities. It is not that we all have multiple identities which can be added and subtracted from one another, but rather we have complex identities in which different aspects shape one another and are therefore indivisible from one another. Hence, there is no analytical value in discussing, for example, 'women' or 'men' generically and homogeneously: gender is shaped by other inequalities, resulting in specific experiences of gender which are different from one another. The seemingly generic category of 'woman/women' is in fact, in a social world always shaped by white supremacy, always-already socially constructed as white (see Lewis 2017) – it is given the meaning of white and associated with whiteness whether this is intentional on the part of the speaker or not; we can make similar observations about other singular categories.

There are many reasons why intersectionality is important. A key reason is that *little progress has been made with the separate single-issue approach in terms of achieving equality for the most marginalised*, as is evidenced for example by research on the impact of austerity in the UK (see Bassel/ Emejulu 2017; Women's Budget Group et al. 2017). Recognition that single-issue approaches do not benefit the most marginalised is apparent in contemporary racial justice and migrants' rights movements across Europe. A single-issue approach has actually increased inequalities both *within* and *across* social groups. In the case of women, the single-issue approach has created "policy privileges to affluent, educated, white women" (Hankivsky/Cormier 2011: 218). For example, in the UK nearly 50 years on from legislation on equal pay and sex discrimination in employment largely benefiting professional women, considerable inequalities remain primarily for women experiencing intersecting inequalities (see Khan 2022).

Yet, in Europe and internationally, equality policy and practice remain hugely siloed[3], predominantly focused around single issues/identities, and serving relatively homogenous and intersectionally privileged groups.

[3] By *siloing* I mean the ways that equality issues are addressed by isolated movements, organisations, laws, policies, institutions, and funding programs, functioning each apart from the others with limited communication and collaboration.

Barriers to operationalising intersectionality

Equality silos, which represent the antithesis to intersectionality, present a key barrier to operationalising intersectionality in policy and practice. The predominant, hegemonic approach to inequalities has been to address these separately in both legislative and policy intervention terms. For example, in Europe inequalities concerning gender and race have been addressed discretely by the Equal Treatment Directive and Race Equality Directive respectively, thereby neglecting the experiences and interests of women marginalised by the synthesis of both race and gender inequalities. Contrary to popular perception, intersectionality is not a *new* theory that has the potential to innovate *old* siloed ways of understanding and responding to inequalities; ideas of intersectionality have been articulated by Black women and women of colour in Europe for some time (see e.g., Emejulu/Sobande 2019). These ideas have been marginalised in policymaking because intersectionally marginalised women have been excluded from policymaking spaces and because siloed approaches reflect the experiences of, and serve the interests of, singularly disadvantaged groups (i.e., white women). This corresponds with what I found in my research on the development of gender equality policy in the UK, which in turn was heavily influenced by developments at European level (Christoffersen 2021b). In other words, ideas of intersectionality have long been actively resisted by those who have had influence on equality policy and practice, namely intersectionally privileged white women many of whom have favoured siloed approaches to gender (see Christoffersen 2022a). Silos are reflected not only in legislation but also in social movements and organisations (e.g., discrete racial justice and women's/feminist sectors), institutions, and funding programs.

Beyond equality silos, a second key barrier to operationalising intersectionality in Europe is the dominance of a unitary concept of gender based on a universalised white, middle class, cisgender, non-disabled, heterosexual experience, which has been and largely remains the privileged identity-based focal point from which to consider social inequalities. This privileging of gender to the exclusion of other inequalities is reflected for instance in the quantity of EU directives pertaining to gender inequalities as compared with other inequalities and in the policy of gender mainstreaming, an objective that has not been officially applied to other inequalities (of e.g., race or disability) to any comparable extent. In contrast to relatively wide recognition of gender inequality in both policy and popular spaces, "in the continental European context, the dynamics of race and racism are oftentimes silenced and denied and there is not an agreed public lexicon on identifying, describing and combating racism – unlike sexism and homophobia" (Emejulu/Bassel 2021: 4).

In spite of the persistence of equality silos and the dominance of gender, the concept of intersectionality is increasingly difficult for those with influence on equality policy to ignore or actively resist: "without an intersectional approach […] the women's movement will lack credibility" (European Commission Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men 2020). Today the term *intersectionality* is increasingly mobilised in European equality policy debates, so the challenge now is to carefully interrogate the meanings applied to it (see Christoffersen 2021a) and whose interests these serve: those of people experiencing intersectional disadvantage, or, implicitly, political actors and intersectionally privileged groups? "While the

challenge of intersectionality is urgent, in European gender policy debates, increasing mobilisation of the term masks what remains the main concern: the reassertion of the primary importance of gender – a use of intersectionality that is necessarily additive" (Christoffersen 2022a).

As such, the way in which white feminism has appropriated and co-opted the term intersectionality, i.e., misused it, is a third key contemporary challenge to operationalising it. In European policy making, intersectionality has been appropriated in and by gender equality policy machinery. White feminists in Europe often give a particular meaning to intersectionality, which is emptied of attention to race (see Lewis 2013), and where gender is still considered as the most important marker of inequality, such that other inequalities are only considered additively. Therefore, while not all white feminists practice white feminism and not all uses of intersectionality by white feminists represent an appropriation, I suggest that uses which view gender as being always more important than other inequalities *do*, since these forgo intersectionality's tenets of relationality and mutual constitution. Such uses, which are dominant ones in policy spaces of power at European level (see Christoffersen 2022a) and in the UK (see Christoffersen/Emejulu 2022), contrast to the understanding of intersectionality I outline above, which involves seeing inequalities as relational and mutually constitutive – meaning their relative importance depends on context. Therefore, the first, and potentially most difficult given organised resistance, step to operationalising intersectionality is to unseat the dominance of the unitary gender lens (see Yam et al. 2021) – or any other hierarchy – for understanding social inequalities. While gender is often important, in an intersectional approach, relevant entry points and target groups are context-specific and based on the empirical evidence of where the greatest intersecting inequalities lie: "when analysing social problems [in an intersectional approach], the importance of any category or structure (e.g. socioeconomic status, race, or gender) cannot be predetermined; the categories and their importance must be discovered in the process of investigation" (Hankivsky/Jordan-Zachery 2019a: 7). This understanding of how intersectionality can be applied competes with dominant appropriations of it within gender policy and white feminism, which treat it as gender *plus* in an additive way.

Applying Intersectionality

My research conducted in the UK, the first study of how both policymakers and equality non-governmental organisation (NGO)[4] practitioners themselves understand how to operationalise intersectionality, identified five broad concepts of intersectionality in use in policy and practice (see Christoffersen 2021a)[5]. Three of these can be considered to be *mis*uses of intersectionality. I undertook this research as a former practitioner in the equality NGO sector in a London-based, Black-led LGBTQ organisation which strived to work in an intersectional way.[6]

[4] These were organisations that have emerged because of inequality related to markers of identity and which aim to increase equality, namely LGBTI rights, racial justice, feminist, disability rights, migrants rights organisations, and intersectional combinations.

[5] These findings are based upon 41 interviews, one focus group, analysis of 66 documents and ethnographic observation of 9 meetings or events (see Christoffersen 2021a).

[6] I explore my positionality further in Christoffersen 2018.

First, generic applications of intersectionality – in which the target group of generalised interventions is *everyone* – may appear attractively cost-effective to policymakers, but actually they serve to uphold and increase inequalities. Given that people have varying starting points depending on the intersectional privilege and/or disadvantage that they experience, treating everyone the same reproduces and extends the status quo (see Christoffersen 2022b).

Second, addressing different inequalities separately but *at the same time*, in parallel – which I have called *multi-strand intersectionality* –, is a common misunderstanding of how to do intersectionality in policymaking. The aim is not to do all inequalities at once, but rather to address the ways in which they *intersect*. Addressing singularly understood inequalities all at the same time serves to make those at the intersections invisible, just as single-issue approaches do. The fact that the outcomes of such policymaking for the most marginalised, even pre-COVID, were often worse than they were years earlier should be evidence enough that this trickle-down approach to mitigating inequalities does not work, as research on the impact of austerity on women of colour in the UK (see Women's Budget Group et al. 2017) has found.

Third, interventions that pre-suppose that one inequality is more important than others – as in the earlier example of gender, an understanding of intersectionality that I have called *diversity within* – are not only unresponsive to changing contexts and evidence; my research has shown that they ultimately centre the interests and experiences of more powerful members of subgroups. When they do address intersectional marginalisation, interventions are limited to possibly well-intentioned but ultimately paternalistic and stigmatising efforts to include the so-called hard to reach in services that were never designed for them, for instance efforts to include disabled women in violence against women and girls services (see Christoffersen/Emejulu, 2022).

In contrast to these three approaches, two productive applied concepts of intersectionality were identified; these are distinctive yet complementary. While intersectionality is often perceived by policymakers to be prohibitively expensive, when these two applications are employed together, this need not be the case. In fact, research suggests that (1) *addressing the needs and interests of those who are most marginalised* (*intersections-of-strands intersectionality*) within the context of (2) *cross-cutting issues affecting differently marginalised groups* (*pan-equality intersectionality*) is the most effective way to mitigate inequalities. This is because, if efforts benefit the most marginalised, those who are singularly disadvantaged will also be reached along the way (see Crenshaw 1989).

I expand on the issues associated with identifying the most marginalised, as well as their needs and interests, in the next section. As I argue above, the category of *most marginalised* is a contingent one, dependent on time and place as well as the policy issue in question, and can be determined based on available evidence. This category is therefore a fluid one, and as evidence overwhelmingly suggests, will be represented by a group experiencing intersecting inequalities. Thus, work to meet the needs and interests of the most marginalised will necessarily address multiple structures of inequality, therefore also benefitting those who are singularly disadvantaged in relation to the included inequalities, *as well as* their intersection. Fundamentally, as I explain further below, identifying the most marginalised involves conceptualising social groups as always-intersecting and overlapping, such that one group is related to all others.

Much existing equality policy and practice predetermines which issues affect which social groups, representing the siloing I discuss earlier. For example, a common predetermination is that domestic abuse is a social problem affecting women in heterosexual relationships. This predetermination serves to conceptually elide domestic abuse experienced by LGBTQ people from family members, as well as forms of domestic abuse predominantly affecting Black, Asian and minority ethnic women, such as honour-based violence perpetrated by family members not partners (see McCabe forthcoming). These thus represent groups that are poorly served by most existing domestic abuse policy and services. In this example, domestic abuse could be reconceptualised as a *cross-cutting issue affecting differentially marginalised groups*, rather than predetermining the affected groups. Other cross-cutting issues that participants in my previous research have worked on as part of their intersectional practice include hate crime and mental health (see Christoffersen 2021a). While some issues in contrast do affect particular groups more than others (e.g., migration and refugee policy), we must bear in mind that these particular groups are never exclusive to others: migrants and refugees include women, disabled and LGBTQI+ people, for example; and so policy targeted at these groups will be of equal relevance to migrants and refugees. While I offer *addressing the needs and interests of those who are most marginalised* within the context of *cross-cutting issues affecting differently marginalised groups* as a way to operationalise intersectionality, work on issues that affect only or predominantly particular groups also remains necessary.

In the remainder of this article, I will bring the preceding discussion of understanding intersectionality, barriers to operationalising it, and applications together in considering how it might be applied to COVID-19 recovery in the UK.

Operationalising Intersectionality in COVID-19 Recovery

The COVID-19 crisis has both deepened pre-existing inequalities and, alongside social movements, raised awareness of how they are *intersecting*. This is fundamentally different to additively understanding them as *multiple* (see Hancock 2007): it is the fusion of structures of inequality – including but not limited to structural racism, sexism and ableism – which has created the documented disproportionate health and social outcomes of COVID-19. Given this raised awareness and the crisis context representing a break from political business-as-usual, we are witness to new opportunities to operationalise intersectionality (see Hankivsky/ Kapilashrami 2020b).

However, the dominance of the gender lens on inequalities (insofar as inequalities are being thought about) discussed above has also been reflected in the international arena in discussions of COVID-19-related inequalities (see Hankivsky/Kapilashrami 2020a). As I discuss above, an intersectional approach in contrast involves using empirical evidence to determine which inequalities should be given priority (see Hankivsky 2012), rather than predetermining these. However, it is not quite as simple as stating that priorities and decisions should be based on evidence, since intersecting inequalities are reflected in research evidence: who is funded to do research, and who that research is about. There is a paucity of evidence concerning particular groups – for example, LGBTQI+ people – due to a lack of official data collection, and a dearth of research and evidence concerning *intersectionally* marginalised groups (see Christoffersen

2017). Applying intersectionality therefore involves identifying and rectifying these key gaps in knowledge, drawing on qualitative research and methods as equally important as quantitative data, and taking seriously the research and evidence produced by organisations led by and for marginalised groups who are most often best positioned to gather data from their constituents. For example, the largest disabled peoples' membership organisation in Europe, the Glasgow Disability Alliance, conducted important research with their members on the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people (see e.g., Glasgow Disability Alliance 2022). As a disabled peoples' led membership organisation, research conducted by the organisation with their members is likely to garner more trust and participation than research conducted by academics or policymakers.

With these caveats in mind, I will end with an example drawn from evidence collected by the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) to suggest ways to take advantage of these new opportunities to apply intersectionality in COVID-19 recovery. The IPPO is a collaborative policy research programme that aims to mobilise and assess evidence from different geographical and institutional contexts to inform policymakers throughout the United Kingdom about the best ways to mitigate social harms associated with COVID-19.[7] In its preliminary inequalities matrix (IPPO 2021), developed from taking stock of existing evidence, the IPPO identified *living standards* (encompassing income, earnings, wealth/savings, employment and housing) as a priority area of increased inequality for differently marginalised groups – namely, the (overlapping) groups of deprived communities, those who are disabled and/or have pre-existing conditions, young adults, and what they termed *smaller marginalised groups,* which includes migrants and LGBTQI+ people.

After selecting an issue that affects differently marginalised groups based on the empirical evidence, applying intersectionality would involve developing interventions to improve living standards, *and within these interventions* centring the needs and interests of the most marginalised. On the basis of evidence – and bearing in mind that a lack of evidence is also used as an excuse for inaction –, we could imagine this to be a Black, trans, disabled, young, migrant woman who will almost inevitably also be socioeconomically deprived. With this particular experience at the centre of policymaking, what would be required is a holistic approach taking account of labour market segregation and discrimination therein, participation adjustments, support for labour market entry, and increased employment rights to ensure improved working conditions and an adequate income from this employment – all regardless of migration status. Existing evidence on labour market discrimination and poor mental health for this group would also support consideration of guaranteed income measures. Intervention design should involve this group's meaningful participation and that of organisations of and by them – but not necessarily more consultation into what interventions are needed since community-led organisations have been gathering and submitting this evidence of need (often without seeing any concrete change as a result) for some time. If generalised policy interventions ensured that this social group had adequate income, then that would mean that people who do not experience this extent of intersectional disadvantage would also have it. Applying intersectionality requires

[7] see https://covidandsociety.com/

this meaningful participation of marginalised groups in the policy process, and ultimately, imagination.

Conclusions

This article has covered understanding intersectionality; key barriers to operationalising it; and how, in spite of these barriers, it might be applied, drawing on an example relating to COVID-19 recovery. Intersectionality is a multi-faceted theory. When considering its applications in policy and practice, I have suggested some key tenets, by which we might evaluate these: the employment of both individual, and structural levels of analysis; thinking *both* relationally *and* about those who are (most) oppressed; and, considering inequalities as mutually constitutive, and not additive.

In Europe, barriers to operationalising intersectionality include the persistence of equality silos, the dominance of gender, and white feminist appropriations of it which distort its meanings. All of these barriers encourage an overfocus on the individual level, prevent relational thinking and identification of priority groups that are context-specific, and encourage additive understandings of intersectionality which are ultimately antithetical to the theory.

I have argued that in the current context, unseating the dominance of the unitary gender lens for understanding social inequalities is essential to operationalising intersectionality.

As I found in my research, intersectionality is applied in multiple, contradicting ways. Some concepts further entrench inequalities while others further intersectional justice. Addressing the needs and interests of those who are most marginalised (*intersections of strands*) within the context of cross-cutting issues affecting differently marginalised groups (*pan-equality intersectionality*) is, I suggest, the most effective way to mitigate inequalities. Thus far, there is little evidence of this approach being applied by policymakers which might be evaluated. However, in Scotland, to take one example, there is currently work underway to develop and improve the intersectional equality evidence base, which may enable identification of priority, intersectionally marginalised, groups for policy interventions across a range of issues[8]. Applications of intersectionality, at least in name, are increasing internationally, and it therefore remains more important than ever to critically examine these from a range of perspectives.

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[8] See https://www.gov.scot/groups/equality-data-improvement-programme-edip-group/

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