

Intersectionality at work: concepts and cases

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Intersectionality is an open and contested concept, which analyses the intersections of social categories creating social differences. The intersectionality approach thus addresses the complexities, interferences and interweavings of social differences, which often create inequalities and hierarchies, as they are involved in power relations.

Intersectionality is a travelling concept, which has become influential in Nordic gender research (see *Kvinder Køn & Forskning* 2006). Kimberly Crenshaw's conceptualization of intersectionality articulated intersections between the systems of capitalism, racism and patriarchy (Crenshaw 1991). She, thus, inspired intersectionality research that was mainly structuralist in tendency. Since then the perspective has been taken up and reworked in poststructuralist approaches emphasising intersections in discourses and social positions. The intersectionality debate is still developing in dialogues between different feminist ap-

proaches, methodologies and epistemologies (see *European Journal of Women's Studies* 2006) and by methodological reflexivity in European research projects (see Lombardo, Meyer and Verloo 2009).

This double issue presents new theoretical perspectives and discusses research questions, concepts and cases that put intersectionality at work. It aims both at elaborating the questions raised in the previous special issue on intersectionality of *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* (2006) and at contributing to theoretical and methodological reflexivity in European gender research. It proposes ways to overcome divisions in feminist theory, for example those between systemic approaches (Collins 1998) and constructivist approaches (Phoenix 2006). It identifies difficulties, blind spots and gaps, for example between theory and research. The inspiration for doing so is debates at Danish, Nordic and European workshops and conferences,¹ as well as within Danish/Nordic and European research projects.²

The articles point out some of the challenges involved in addressing intersectionality in research, for example to understand the dynamic between identities, structures and institutions and to clarify the ways in which spaces, places, policies, and institutions influence our perceptions of intersecting categories such as gender, class, race and ethnicity. The articles have been selected to present a range of perspectives, but the publication maintains its general focus on the possibilities offered by the two key concepts of *intersectionality* and *power relations*, through which the articles analyse how social differences are experienced, contested, and reproduced in historically changing forms.

Social categories are contextual, and their meanings and interrelations change with time and place (Knapp 2005). The articles link intersectionality to perceptions of power which can be relational, locational or embodied. As mentioned above, we see

power relations working with differentiating processes in ways that creates issues like (in)equality, subjection and diversity. Differences produced through social systems and in political institutions often create hierarchies in social relations. The articles in this special issue explore the meaning of power as both structural *and* productive, for example how institutions, public policies, and national belongings influence how inequalities related to gender, ethnicity and class intersect in Nordic contexts. Thus, minority/majority distributions in relation to, for instance, class, gender, and ethnicity are produced in public and private social interactions, in debates, public policies, and in political institutions on a wide range of sites.

The issue thus analyses intersecting power relations in a rather broad sense, exploring the relations between structures, institutions, discourses, and actors in different contexts, while keeping a comparative dimension that transcends the particular relation or site.

Many of the contributions to this volume are edited papers presented in debates about intersectionality and power to members and international guests of FREIA: the Feminist and Gender Research Centre in Aalborg.³ The articles in the first part present critical perspectives on theoretical frameworks and concepts with the aid of empirical illustrations. The second part presents empirical research, which elaborates on intersectionality in the Nordic and transnational European contexts. The invited essay explores the concern with multiple inequalities across Europe from the perspective of intersectionality.

In the first article, Ann-Dorte Christensen and Birte Siim claim that intersectionality is double-edged. The intersectional approach can be fruitful in analysing the intersections between different categories, but intersectional arguments can also be part of an exclusionary framing, which constructs social distinctions between 'them

and us', for example in the debate over the headscarf. They propose a multilevel model to analyse the changing meanings and intersections of the categories at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels.

Anette Borchorst and Mari Teigen explore the concept of *political intersectionality* and suggest that the intersectionality paradigm can contribute new perspectives to the study of public policies. They question whether the intersectionality approach can stand alone when analysing structural aspects of inequality, or whether it is important to address different dimensions of inequality separately. Scandinavian policies provide an interesting case in relation to this issue.

Sune Qvotrup Jensen and Camilla Elg suggest exploring intersectionality as embodiment, arguing that this will broaden the possibilities of intersectional analysis. By approaching intersectionality as embodied experience, new perspectives on the classical debate about structure versus agency can be developed while important knowledge about the embodied character of power relations is considered.

Christina Fiig focuses on the media as a specific site for representations and self-representations of women politicians from an intersectional perspective. She looks critically at previous research on the media representation of women politicians in written press coverage, which mainly applies a gender perspective. The case study of the media representation of an ethnic minority woman politician from a perspective of intersectionality raises new questions for media research.

Mari Holen and Sine Lehn-Christiansen analyse cases from the Danish public health system. Here the principle of equality of access engender institutional attempts to neutralize social differences such as gender, ethnicity, and class. However, the article claims that gender, ethnicity, and class cannot be neutralized in the public health system, and that these categories play a con-

stitutive role in subjectifying patients in the cases presented.

Helene Pristed Nielsen and Cecilia Thun explore how 'majority' women's organisations in Denmark and Norway respond to ethnic 'minority' women in these two countries. Should feminists make special efforts to collaborate with ethnic minority women to promote women's interests across ethnic differences? Who is to define who are 'Norwegian', 'Danish', 'feminist' or 'ethnic minority women', what 'ethnic differences' are spoken about, and who has which 'interests'?

Lise Rolandsen Agustín analyses how various organisations mobilise at the transnational, European level around gender and ethnicity issues. She finds that the intersectional nature of their demands for diversity makes it necessary to combine particularistic claims regarding identity and European belonging with universal claims to human rights, citizenship and inclusion.

Judith Squires reflects upon approaches to intersectionality from a European perspective. She suggests that one way to move beyond multiple inequalities is to adopt a transversal approach to intersectionality, which combines diversity mainstreaming with participatory democracy.

Finally, this issue offers a number of book reviews and a debate section. The latter is a contribution about the theatre play *Villa Saló*, which was shown in Copenhagen this winter and is based on works by Marquis de Sade and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

The images in this issue are from the photographic series *Strude* by the internationally acclaimed Danish artist Trine Søndergaard (b. 1972). The 'strude' is a mask-like garment that was worn by women on the Danish island of Fanø to cover their faces from the wind, sun, and sand. This style of dress, considered a traditional costume, is now worn only for an annual fête. While the work is not a direct study of either the place or the women's clothing, the series expresses the artist's fascination with

the culture of the island and with folk costume as the bearer of meaning and specific codes.

The women in Søndergaard's photographs are contemporary, classically posed, seated in a room where chronological signifiers have been eliminated, reflecting the artist's interest in the viewer's perception of images. It becomes evident that these straightforward images are in fact loaded. The current polemic of veiling, the incongruity between the clothing and the time period, and the inward gaze of the sitter, provoke the viewer to pause, to contemplate these photographs and their meaning. Søndergaard's approach to this series is not that of an ethnographic or typographical study, but rather reveals an attention to almost imperceptible moods and elements – how much is visible, what is said and what is unsaid, what is exposed and what is unexposed.

NOTES

1. For example, at the kick off conference for the Nordic network: "Multidimensional Equality and Democratic Diversity", Løgstør, January 2009 and at ECPR conferences in Belfast, January 2009, and Lisbon, April 2009.
2. For example, in the European VEIL, the Eurosphere and the FEMcit projects.
3. FREIA was selected as a strategic research programme by the Social Science Faculty at Aalborg University (2005-2009). Intersectionality and Power were the two main concepts in FREIA's strategic research programme, *Gendered Power Relations in Transition: Equality and Diversity in Modern Welfare Societies*. See also: <http://freia.ihis.aau.dk/Forskningsprogram>

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