
Interrogating intersectionality:

Productive ways of theorising multiple positioning

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Within feminist literature many accept that social categories are mutually constitutive and that gender is not clearly separable from other social categories. Still there are disagreements about how to analyse intersectionality. Which are the most productive approaches?

In recent years, the concept of intersectionality has generated much interest in feminist circles. Its popularity has partly resulted because Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) put a name to ways of theorising that black feminists had long advocated and that working class and lesbian feminists had promoted. As Crenshaw (1994) recognises, intersectional analyses had been conducted long before the term was coined. Black women, in particular, had argued that it is important to deconstruct the category 'women' and to recognise that social class and 'race' produce both commonalities and differences between women. The Combahee River Collective of black lesbians was groundbreaking, for example, in arguing for strategic alliances across various categories of difference:

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women

who are separatists demand. Our situation as black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with black men against racism, while we also struggle with black men about sexism. (reprinted in Nicholson 1997, 65)

The concept of intersectionality provided a conceptual language for recognising that everybody is simultaneously positioned within social categories, such as gender, social class, sexuality and 'race'. So even when focusing particularly on one social category (such as 'race', gender or social class), intersectionality reminds us that we cannot understand that category in isolation. A full understanding of any social category requires the analysis of differences, as well as commonalities, within groups. For example, feminist researchers have shown how women's experiences and life chances differ according to their 'race', ethnicity, sexuality and social class – i.e. gender and sexuality are class-based and racialised social relations. (e.g. Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983, Brah 1996, Lewis 2000, Lykke 2003). Intersectionality also helps make clear that all categories are associated with power relations and so cannot be neutral (Brah and Phoenix 2004, Collins 1998, Thornton and Nettles 2001). Hence it allows the interrogation of 'unmarked' positions such as 'whiteness' and 'masculinity' as well as of 'marked' positions such as 'blackness' and 'femininity'.

There is widespread agreement within feminist circles that it is important to theorize and analyse intersectionality.¹ Thus, many feminists accept as a starting point that social categories mutually constitute each other and that gender is not clearly separable from other social categories. There is, however, disagreement about how to conceptualize and analyse intersectionality and whether it constitutes a deconstruc-

tive politics. This paper uses feminist literature to examine some current debates about intersectionality. The paper is informed by the ontological understanding that social categories and social relations intersect in complex ways and that intersectionality is central to the understandings of social relations. It is, therefore, concerned with attempts to clarify the concept of intersectionality rather than to challenge it on epistemological grounds.

Any theory that gains popularity is interpreted and applied by many theorists and researchers. As a result, disagreements over differences of interpretation become common. Thus, some feminists who do intersectional work focus on materialist analyses while others conduct postmodern analyses that eschew materialist explanations. There are also different points of entry into feminist intersectional analyses with, for example, some starting from critical 'race' theory and a concern with racisms; some starting from analyses of social class and others starting from a focus on sexuality. In addition, there are sometimes contradictions between analyses of intersections from different academic disciplines.

All of these debates are important to the understanding of intersectionality. It would, however, be impossible to address all the possible disagreements in one journal article. Instead this paper addresses three common sets of disagreements that are central to understanding the conceptual, political and analytic contributions that intersectionality can make to moving forward understandings of social categories and social relations. These are: structural divisions; decisions about which intersections to focus on and methodologies for analysing intersectionality.

CONCEPTUALIZING STRUCTURE AND POLITICS

Feminism has long been concerned with the ways in which society is structured into

social divisions relating, for example, to 'race', social class and gender. Indeed, in coining the term 'intersectionality', Crenshaw (1989) was concerned with structural (as well as political) intersectionality. Post-modernism has decentred differences associated with social divisions and led many feminists to conceptualise them as fluid, rather than fixed and to focus on agency, rather than structure. Intersectionality foregrounds the notion that no social category operates in isolation from other social categories. It can thus further destabilize the notion of speaking as black, working class or a woman and of claiming fixed identities based on these categories. At the same time it conceptualizes individual agency. This eschews the notion of identity politics, which involves groups using particular identities associated with less powerful social categories in order collectively to resist oppression. Intersectionality fits better with a notion of strategic alliances, where people make temporary alliances for particular purposes. Yet, while intersectionality makes clear that claims to identities (e.g. as black or as a woman) are always open to challenge and change, some versions of it can allow multiple identities (e.g. as black, working class lesbians) to be treated as if they are fixed and so reproduce identity politics and ignore agency.

Prins (2006) makes a division between what she calls systemic intersectionality (mostly US-based) and constructionist intersectionality (mostly UK-based) that speaks to the debate between intersectional approaches that foreground structure and those that foreground agency. Prins contends that the systemic approach foregrounds structure in ways that treat power as unilateral and absolute, rather than relational and assumes that the human subject is "primarily constituted by systems of domination and marginalization" (Prins 2006, 280). In doing so, the 'systemic' approach disqualifies some of the ways in which people choose to identify because it

treats identity as predominantly a matter of categorization and naming. It does not, therefore, treat people as having agency or consider the everyday practices that produce structure. Prins favours what she calls the 'constructionist' approach, which allows for the analysis of more nuanced complexity, contradiction and agency, but can keep structure in view.

According to Prins then, some versions of intersectionality can decentre differences and focus on agency while paying attention to structure. The following example, taken from a study of black women's identities, demonstrates why treating identity as a matter of categorization and naming is problematic and why an intersectional approach that attends to agency and complexity is potentially more productive.

- D People feel like if you have a Black identity it's got to be like you know rice and peas and chicken on a Sunday
 S Oh tell me I know every Sunday as well you can't have a break
 D And Nutriment
 S And peas soup on Saturday and all that
 D Yeah yeah and you know if you don't do that you know?
 S Yeah I know
 D And it's like awareness *of* identity to them is based on how dark you are so like me I have to prove myself all the time
 S Mhm I know. What's wrong with them?
 Tate (2005, 1)

The women whose conversation is reported above strongly resist having the ways in which they identify as black disqualified by those who consider themselves gatekeepers to blackness as a social category. In doing so, they demonstrate that power is not unilateral and absolute, coming only from more powerful oppressors (in this case white people). Instead, intragroup relations between black people, as well as intergroup power relations with white people need to be examined. Tate challenges discourses of

black authenticity which equate blackness with being judged to have a sufficiently dark skin and behaving in ways considered appropriately Caribbean and/or African, such as eating rice and peas each Sunday. She is concerned with an 'everyday' hybridity which challenges these essentialising discourses. This fits with an intersectional approach because it foregrounds complex commonalities and differences as well as the agency of the women in defining their own identities. A simple focus on structure would not, therefore, provide a sufficient explanation of these women's identities or how the category of blackness is differentiated by its intersection with shade of skin colour and (although this is less visible in the quote) with gender since the women are expected to maintain an essentialised black culture through cooking. The women's conversation demonstrates how the expression of 'race' is not natural, but is constructed (i.e. there is a process of racialisation) in intersection with other social categories.

An explanation for why Prins' (2006) 'constructionist' approach to intersectionality can more successfully theorise structure is that social structures incorporate cultural resources and so are simultaneously cultural and material (Beisel and Kay 2005). Racialised structures are, therefore, partly expressed through everyday cultural practices, as shown in the example above. In a short excerpt from their conversation, the women show that they are agents who can resist and transform expectations of what it is to belong to a particular social category through their everyday practices.² Structures and everyday cultural practices are, however, often theorised in isolation from each other. Beisel and Kay (2005, 499) argue that theorizations of intersectionality generally say "little about the nature of racial and gender structures that intersect". Their formulation cuts across Prins' 'systemic'/'constructionist' divide in that they simultaneously foreground structure and

view it as open to change and modulated by culture. This alerts us to how complex it is to analyze the intersection of different social structures.

A further difficulty in theorizing the intersections of different social structures is that they have different organizing logics (Skeggs 2006). In Verloo's (2006) terms "different inequalities are dissimilar because they are differently framed" (p.221).

The problem of inequality of sexual orientation is primarily located in the organization of intimacy and citizenship. In contrast, gender inequality...while primarily linked to the division of labor in many policy texts, is also connected strongly to the organization of citizenship and the organization of intimacy. While social, sexual, and parenting relations are racialised or ethnicised, race/ethnicity, like class, but contrary to gender and sexual orientation, is not seen as located predominantly or even partly in the sphere of personal relationships and intimacy; they are not seen to be 'a private problem' in that sense, their public character is widely acknowledged. Compared to gender and sexual orientation class and race/ethnicity are represented more as firmly located in the public sphere, in the spheres of citizenship and employment. Class is seen to originate in how labor is organized, while race/ethnicity inequality is seen to derive from the way we organize citizenship (who belongs to 'us'? who is the outsider?). (Verloo 2006)

Intersectionality is sometimes criticised for ignoring the different organizing logics of social divisions and treating them as if they are interchangeable. Verloo argues that it is important to "ground policy strategies not only in the similarity, but also in the distinctiveness of inequalities" (p. 222). Recognizing the distinctiveness of social divisions does not, however, require the eschewing of intersectionality since inequalities are not independent of each other (see, for example, Brah 1996, and Yuval-Davis

2006a). Beisel and Kay (2005) suggest that structures intersect where they are socially constructed in similar ways or share resources. ‘Race’, class and gender, for example, are social categories that incorporate relations of power and involve inequitable distribution of resources among groups that are socially constructed as different. It is possible, therefore, to analyse relations of power and distribution of resources in intersection. This is the case whether people are positioned in the same ways in relation to each of their intersecting social divisions or are more or less powerful in relation to some, than to others (e.g. as is the case for black, middle class, heterosexual women who are relatively more powerful in relation to class and sexuality than in relation to ‘race’).

Some feminists also express concern about whether intersectionality dilutes focus on any one category to such an extent that it becomes impossible to engage in politics based on, for example, being a woman or being a black woman (Francis 2002). This can make it difficult to focus on any specific identity and sometimes means that analysts foreground some categories and ignore others. Kathy Davis (2004), for example, asks whether intersectional analyses have resulted in gender (and hence women) often being overlooked in favour of analyses of ‘race’. Anna Bredström (2006) gives examples that support Davis’ argument that intersectional analyses can be conducted in ways that overlook some categories. Bredström argues that prominent (feminist) scholarship on sexual health continues to treat race, ethnicity, culture and religion as merely additional to gender. She suggests that the lack of attention to some differences in favour of others (even by those who recognize the importance of an intersectional approach) produces analyses that are less policy-relevant and analytically sound than they should be. She maintains that we need a contextualized intersectional approach in which systems of oppression

are seen as mutually constructing one another rather than simply co-existing.

In summary, then, intersectionality is able to address the issue of structure, even though it does so in various ways. While different social divisions operate in different ways, it is possible to conceptualise their intersection in relation to the power relations, distribution of resources and agency they allow as well as how they are socially constructed. Approaches that deal simultaneously with structure and culture (e.g. Biesel and Kay 2004, Yuval-Davis 2006b) and the decentred fluidity and flexibility of identities and social categories (e.g. Prins 2006, Søndergaard 2005, Staunaes 2003) are particularly fruitful.

TOO MANY INTERSECTIONS TO ANALYSE?

While, as discussed above, intersectionality can be used to analyse both structure and agency, many feminists are perplexed about which intersections they should analyse at any one time. In discussing intersectionality, Helma Lutz (2002) identified 14 ‘lines of difference’ with associated identities that require attention and explained that others need to be added to the list. Not surprisingly then, it is common in feminist writing to find an ‘etc.’ at the end of lists of social divisions – something that Judith Butler (1990) sceptically referred to as a sign of exhaustion. So is there, as Butler (1990, 143) suggested, an “illimitable process of signification... excess that necessarily accompanies any effort to posit identity once and for all”? Nira Yuval-Davis (2006a) argues against Butler and in concert with Axeli Knapp (1999) that such a critique would only be valid within identity politics where there is a reductionist correspondence between positionings and social groupings.

Yuval-Davis suggests that it is important to recognize that social divisions are not interchangeable but are historically contin-

gent and specific to particular contexts and people. Therefore, “in specific historical situations and in relation to specific people there are some social divisions that are more important than others in constructing specific positionings” (p.203) while some social divisions are relevant to most people in most locations. This provides one way out of the impasse of “illimitable signification”. The implication is that those analysing intersections have to take strategic and creative decisions about which are the most relevant intersections for specific groups or individuals at particular times and on particular issues. In practice, this will mean that sometimes the researcher will have to focus on bottom-up local issues of how people do gender, ‘race’, class and sexuality in talk, only analyzing categories that people themselves make relevant. At other times (and sometimes in addition) researchers in intersectional studies will themselves decide which categories are the most relevant to analyse. Sometimes this will involve conducting studies with the top-down intention of analyzing pre-identified categories. This can (but need not) mean that the analyst focuses on absences, as Crenshaw (1989) did when she demonstrated how black women are omitted from work in law when the focus is women and when it on black people.

Intersectionality can alert us to systematic omissions as, for example, in the following quote from David Lamy, a young black British male Member of Parliament in the UK, talking on a British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio 4 programme on *The Black Middle Classes* on Tuesday 10 Jan 2006.

...Hope has always been a quintessential narrative in the black experience...It matters because we still must fight stereotypes. I look forward to a day when in the House of Commons there are black men who can talk about treasury matters; there are black men who can lead on gun violence; there are black men who *don't* feel they want to talk about race at all...

Lamy argues for racialised equality, but confines his vision to hopes for black men. While Crenshaw named ‘intersectionality’ in the 1980s, Lamy’s example makes it clear that black women are still sometimes rendered invisible, even by those who are arguing for equality. In this case the speaker does not orient to an intersection – ‘race’ and class with gender – that is important to what he has to say about the ‘black experience’. Intersectionality is clearly not the only methodology that can enable analysis of Lamy’s exclusion of black women from his account, but it makes it unlikely that this omission would be missed in the analysis.

Crenshaw (1994) points out that the social world is more complicated than theories sometimes allow. The concepts we devise therefore always have to deal with complex and shifting realities (Knapp 2006). People live simultaneous positioning in their everyday practices. Therefore, regardless of whether or not that multiplicity is represented in theoretical work the mundane is multiplex. Intersectionality can be employed to deal with mundane complexity. However, it cannot offer a magic formula. In order not to be overwhelmed by the number of intersections it would be possible to analyse, researchers and other social analysts necessarily have to make creative judgements about which intersections to analyse when.

METHODOLOGY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

A recurrent criticism of intersectionality is that, while it purports to be a methodology as well as a theory, it does not have any methods associated with it. This criticism is, however, somewhat outdated in that methodological insights and practices are beginning to be produced to address intersectionality. Rather than being associated with only one type of epistemology or methodology, intersectionality can be asso-

ciated with broad ranging approaches because its major focus is on ontology with different epistemologies being associated with it (Prins 2006).

Lesley McCall (2005) provides an overview of the methodologies that have been used to study intersectionality. She identifies three methodological approaches, which draw on different epistemological frameworks and which are commonly used in the study of the complexity of intersectionality. These she labels 'anti-categorical complexity'; 'intra-categorical complexity' and 'inter-categorical complexity'. McCall's 'anti-categorical' approach is a postmodern critique of categorization. This approach builds on the deconstruction of categories as fixed and pre-given and so highlights the social constructedness of social categories and their intersections. Buitelaar (2006) provides an example of this in her analytic attention to the ways in which a Dutch politician of Moroccan background orchestrates "voices within the self that speak from different I-positions" (p. 259). This analysis demonstrates that the politician's identities are dialogical, constructed and emergent, rather than pre-given.

The 'intra-categorical' complexity approach is the one McCall identifies as having inaugurated the study of intersectionality. She views it as a conceptual 'third way' between the rejection of categories that characterises the

anti-categorical complexity approach and the use of categories in the inter-categorical approach. It critically interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining processes that construct categories, but recognises that social categories represent 'stable and even durable relationships' (p. 174)

at any point in time. The intra-categorical approach focuses on a limited number of intersections in selected social positions in order to analyse the complexity of lived experiences within social groups at points of

intersection that have often been neglected (as, for example, Crenshaw demonstrated that black women were). Lutz (2006a) uses this approach to research migrant women domestic workers in German households. She argues that

the doing of gender is not the only *doing* relevant in this case. The analysis becomes lopsided and inadequate if I would refuse to look at the same time at the doing of class and ethnicity in these households.

McCall spends more time discussing inter-categorical approaches than the other two because, she argues, it is less known, not widely used and is the area within which she works. This approach studies relationships *between* categories and is associated with quantitative research. McCall suggests that it uses predefined and preselected categories empirically in a strategic fashion. The following quote from the USA illustrates quantitative intersectionality research.

Men and women see different levels of progress for women. As they look back over the past 20 years, men see far more progress than women see. Younger and older women report more progress than baby boomer women... "There is an enormous division between white and black perspectives on the impact of race on education. Whites and blacks disagree about the extent of discrimination in education and the urgency of the problem..." (Bostrom 2000)

It is, of course, difficult to characterize typologies in ways that make them mutually exclusive and McCall recognizes that her typology is not entirely discrete. In particular, 'anti-categorical' and 'intra-categorical' types can overlap although they may seem to be epistemologically divergent. She explains that hers is not a comprehensive characterization. Her paper usefully documents, however, the burgeoning range of methodology that is now used in the study

of intersectionality. Such work comes from a range of disciplines, focuses on both microanalytic readings of everyday practices and macroanalytic political processes and takes different approaches. Those who would prefer a unitary methodological approach to intersectionality are, therefore, necessarily going to be disappointed since there is a proliferation of intersectional methods and the methodology is continually being developed (see, for example, also the 2006 special issue of the *European Journal of Women's Studies on Intersectionality*; Brewer et al. 2002 and Knapp 2005).

INTERSECTIONALITY IN PROCESS

It is now widely accepted that an intersectional approach is important to the understanding of social relationships. Intersectionality provides an ontological framework that establishes that social existence is never singular, but rather that everybody belongs simultaneously to multiple categories that are historically and geographically located and that shift over time. There are, however, a variety of ways in which feminists using intersectional analyses theorise and research intersections. This paper has argued that the most productive approaches are those that allow the recognition of complex and dynamic positioning as well as historically located power relations and social relations. Such approaches fit with political approaches that take as their starting point that alliances will be contingent on shared interests and forged across constructed boundaries.

The paper has discussed contradictory criticisms of intersectionality made on the grounds that it focuses on agency to the detriment of structural positioning or that it treats structure as fixed. Contradictory criticisms that it both ignores agency and ignores structure arise from the fact that intersectionality has been taken up in epistemologically divergent ways. Prins (2006)

characterises these differences as 'systemic' and 'constructionist' intersectionality. The challenge for intersectionality is to take the 'both/and' approach advocated by Hill Collins (1986) in addressing both structure and agency. Prins argues that this is more adequately done in what she terms 'constructionist' intersectionality.

Intersectionality is also sometimes criticised for treating all differences as equivalent and, hence, interchangeable. Instead, various theorists argue that it is important to recognise that they operate at different levels (Yuval-Davis 2006) because they have different logics (Skeggs 2006). The discussion above indicates that the analysis of intersections requires researchers to take strategic and creative decisions about which are the most relevant intersections for specific groups or individuals at particular times and on particular issues. The paper drew on McCall's meta-analytic overview of intersectional methodologies to highlight the varied methodologies used by feminist researchers. It argues that intersectionality will necessarily continue to be characterised by multiple methods.

The plurality of intersectional theory partly results from the fact that it was already being employed before Crenshaw (1989) coined the term. Since all theories become diverse as they are interpreted by different people and applied in research, policy and practice, it is not surprising that its success has contributed to its differentiation. While, therefore, there is widespread agreement that more work is needed to refine intersectional theory and methodology (Knapp 2006, McCall 2005) its burgeoning plurality indicates that it is developing, rather than being fixed in earlier debates.

NOTES

1. It should be noted, however, that this 'travelling theory' is more in evidence in the UK, Scandinavia and the USA than in Germany (Lutz 2006). This is at least partly because there is resistance to the

concept of 'race' as a consequence of its deployment by the Nazis.

2. While resistance to essentialist thinking about social practices does not necessarily change structures in themselves, people can and do create, reproduce and transform social structures (e.g. Bourdieu 1984).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An early version of this paper was presented at a PhD course on Intersectionalities in Aalborg University. Thanks to Annick Prieur; Ann-Dorte Christensen; Bev Skeggs; May-Len Skilbrej; Yvonne Mørck and the many participants who commented on the talk and to the anonymous referees who made numerous incisive and helpful comments.

SUMMARY

Intersectionality is an increasingly popular feminist approach to theorising and analysing the fact that everybody is simultaneously positioned in multiple social categories. It is, however, a much debated concept. This paper considers recent literature on intersectionality to discuss current debates on the concept. In particular, it considers whether, on the one hand, intersectionality fails to address structural inequalities because it focuses on agency and, on the other, if it produces fixed conceptualisations of structure. The paper argues that the most productive versions of intersectionality are those that draw on postmodern ideas. In these versions social categories and their associated positions and identities are treated as fluid and multiple while recognising that structure and culture are mutually constitutive. The paper also considers whether intersectional theory produces so many intersections that it becomes impossible to know which should be analysed at any particular time. In addition it discusses the methodologies employed by intersectional researchers. It suggests that those analysing intersections have to take strategic and creative decisions about which are the most relevant intersections for specific groups or individuals at particular times and on particular issues. Intersectional methodologies are in the process of development. However, the paper highlights a variety of methodologies used by feminist researchers and argues that the study of intersectionality will continue to be characterised by multiple methods.

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