Intersectionality
Assembling and disassembling the roads

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Intersectionality is a concept of fusion, but it has a special message and a particular history which cautions against any kind of ‘melting pot’ idea where the elements dilute and become something new. In this essay I will first give an account of intersectionality’s rapid spread from the USA to Europe and other continents; I will then distinguish between various strands and positions among those who use the concept; finally, I will outline open questions linked to the debates about intersectionality’s scientific use and status.

Intersectionality’s brilliant career

When in 2005 the American sociologist Leslie McCall wrote: ‘One could even say that intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far’ (McCall 2005: 1771), she paid tribute to a concept that was coined in 1989 by the black US law expert Kimberlé Crenshaw and spread quickly beyond the United States, first and foremost in the field of gender studies. Notwithstanding the term’s relatively short history, it does have a long past which is closely related to black women’s fight for equality, human rights and recognition. Formerly discussed as the gender, race and class nexus, intersectionality has several forerunners and founding narratives. Some authors consider as an early reflection of black women’s struggle against slavery, subordination and discrimination the speech from the year 1851 by Sojourner Truth, a former slave and anti-slavery activist:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps me any best place. And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, I have planted and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as any man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children and seen them most all sold into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me. And ain’t I a woman?

(Sojourner Truth quoted in Brah and Phoenix 2004: 77)
With these words, Truth addressed the exclusion of black women from the collective of *women* during a meeting of the burgeoning women’s rights movement in Akron, Ohio. Her plea for the consideration of ‘race’ and ‘racism’ as important markers of difference and inequality between women has proved relevant for the women’s movement up to this very day.

More than 100 years later, in 1977, the manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based black lesbian feminist organization, renewed this request. It highlighted the futility of privileging a single dimension of oppressive experience:

> We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously.

*(Combahee River Collective 1981: 213)*

This is an early manifestation of challenging hetero-normativity, simultaneously in the women’s movement and in the black movement. The demand for a ‘development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking’ (ibid.: 210) was followed, echoed and elaborated in black feminist scholars’ work, for example in the famous book by Angela Davis (1981), *Women, Race and Class*. Strongly influenced by Marxism and the Frankfurt School, Davis insisted on the importance of ‘class’ as a crucial category for the analysis of black women’s inequality, which intersects with gender and race. Davis revived a theme that had been fiercely discussed in the European women’s movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Marxist feminists such as Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai (1918) clashed with the representatives of the bourgeois feminist movement over their disregard of class differences between women. While these earlier concepts of race–class–gender in which the categories were portrayed as markers of difference and exclusion were added up to the ‘triple oppression theory’, intersectionality established a new agenda for women’s and gender studies.

Intersectionality is a conceptualization of the problem that attempts to capture both the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination. It specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create background inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes, and the like. Moreover, it addresses the way that specific acts and policies create burdens that flow along these axes constituting the dynamic or active aspects of disempowerment.

*(Crenshaw 2002)*

Crucial for Crenshaw’s framing of the concept is the interaction of the macro level (inequality structures functioning as social positioning) with the micro level (subjective experiences of discrimination and identity formation as an excluded group).

In summary, it was the analysis of the specific socioeconomic situation of black women in the USA which made it possible for the first time to speak of the simultaneity and mutual co-constitution of different categories of social differentiation, and to emphasize the specificity of the experiences shaped by these interactions. Crenshaw’s term intersectionality, suggesting an imagery of black women being positioned in the very dangerous middle of an intersection, became a dazzling success; it was adopted in gender studies in more or less all English-speaking countries from the start (Davis 2008a: 68f.), and has made its journey into mainland Europe since the early 2000s. Furthermore, it is now used by gender studies scholars from India, Africa and...
Intersectionality takes up the political project of making the social and material consequences of the categories of gender/race/class visible, but does so by employing methodologies compatible with the poststructuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmasking universalism, and exploring the dynamic and contradictory working of power.

(ibid.: 74)

Intersectionality clearly released new energy as an answer to the search for a satisfying theorization of the interactions between different social structures and identity positions.

**Strands and positions**

In her review of the intersectionality landscape, Leslie McCall (2005) distinguishes between three main approaches: the anti-categorical, the intra-categorical and the inter-categorical. The anti-categorical approach, strongly influenced by post-structuralism, focuses on the socially constructed nature of gender and other categories; its main interest lies in the deconstruction of categories which are unpacked as legitimization of essentialized/naturalized inequality. One example that comes to mind is Barack Obama’s self-identification as a ‘post-racial candidate’ during the election campaign in 2008; his attempt can be interpreted as an act of resistance against coercive self-identification in one single category of race when, as a child of a black and a white parent, he could claim at least two. Ultimately, anti-categorialists completely reject (static) categories; they are rather sceptical intersectionalists (see Villa 2011).

While the proponents of the intra-categorical approach do not deny that categories are socially constructed, they argue that such categories are still needed; their aim is to fine-tune by marshalling the internal inconsistencies and complexities of these categories. Lastly, the advocates of an inter-categorical approach look for overlaps and mutual amplification of categories by reducing the analysis to one or two inter-group relations at a time. Their purpose is to focus on commonalities between the categories without falling back into simplistic deduction or the declaration of the primacy of one category. According to McCall’s (contested) view, qualitative researchers favour the first and second approaches, while the inter-categorical approach is embraced by quantitative intersectionalists such as herself (McCall 2005: 1782).

Over the last 15 years a number of controversies have dominated the debate about intersectionality (see also Davis 2008b). First, various researchers contributed to the amendment of the categories beyond the race–class–gender triangle by adding nationality (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992), sexuality (McClintock 1995), able-bodied-ness/disability (Meekosha 1990) and age (Williams 1989). The plea for the recognition of differences such as religion, citizenship status (different ‘belongings’), sedentariness (versus nomadism)\(^3\) and geo-political location (‘the West’ versus ‘the Rest’) has led to further additions to the concept (Krüger-Potratz and Lutz 2002; Lutz 2001) and an attempt to summarize these categories as embodied, socio-spatial and economical diversifications (Lutz and Wenning 2001). This search for an inclusive conceptualization of multi-dimensional inequalities (open to further amendments) argues for the embedded consideration of more than one category (Leiprecht and Lutz 2005) by emphasizing the analysis of the categories’ contradictory and conflicting relations to each other, instead of focusing on distinct and isolated realms of experience (see McClintock 1995). The amendment protagonists have been accused of arbitrariness (the ‘etc.’ reproach), and Anna Bredström (2006), justifiably, considers this multiplicity as the ‘Achilles heel of Intersectionality’; indeed, the question of which differences...
are the most salient needs an answer, one of which is the present author's suggestion to consider 'race, class, gender' as a minimum standard to which other categories can be added, depending on the context and the research problem (Leiprecht and Lutz 2005).

Second, an ongoing dispute concerns the meaning of the categories 'race' and 'class' and the different conceptualizations in the USA and Europe (Knapp 2005; Marx Ferree 2011). Many European researchers regard 'ethnicity' as a more appropriate category than 'race' because, after the Holocaust, 'race' is first and foremost connected with Nazi racial ideology and is considered historical baggage that cannot be used in a positive way. In German mainstream sociology, this has resulted in not only avoiding the term but dismissing 'racism' as an analytical category altogether. However, a growing number of researchers inspired by anti-racist and post-colonial theory claim that 'ethnicity' carries a similar baggage of hierarchization and – in connection with 'culture' – has become a powerful tool of (symbolic, political and social) exclusion (Lutz et al. 2011: 10ff.). The question of whether the answer should be a reintroduction of 'race' into the European debate is the subject of heated discussions (see Crenshaw 2011; Lewis 2013). Likewise, researchers have warned against equating the meaning of 'class' in the US context with the European meaning of the term (Marx Ferree 2011). All in all, these debates mirror a genuine effort to deal with the travelling of theory and its adaptation in multiple geo-political societies and settings.


I shall restrict myself to mentioning a few contributions to these debates. Kathy Davis (2008a,b), for example, regards intersectionality as a theory that goes far beyond its appearance as a ‘buzzword’, as it offers new potential and perspectives for the connectivity of a broad range of social science scholars’ approaches; she argues that its attraction lies in particular in its openness, ambiguities and contradictions. Katharina Walgenbach (2010) goes even further by considering intersectionality as a new paradigm for the scientific community in that it offers a set of terms, theoretical interventions, premises, problem definitions and suggested solutions. Klinger and Knapp (2005) embrace intersectionality’s potential for the building of ‘grand’ theory, but argue that on the structural level the term is unable to identify how and by what means race, class and gender as separate categories are constituted as social categories. Moreover, they are concerned with the intersectionalist tendency to let go of ‘gender’ as a master category (by declaring that no category is sacrosanct) because they fear a political backlash in academia: once gender is regarded as a decentred category it could easily be made superfluous. Others, like myself, consider the concept a heuristic device that is particularly helpful in detecting the overlapping and co-construction of visible and – at first sight – invisible strands of inequality (Lutz 2001). In this context, I consider the proposal by Mary Matsuda to ask ‘the other question’ a helpful methodological tool.

The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call ‘the other question’. When I see something that looks racist, I ask ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something sexist, I ask ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask ‘Where are the class interests in this?’

(Matsuda 1991: 1189)

This may sound like an easy procedure, as it offers the tantalizing possibility of exposing multiple positions and power inequalities as they appear in any social practice, institutional arrangement
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or cultural representation; however, it requires a rather complicated analytical process and, given the openness of the invisible, it is not clear when one can stop (Ludvig 2006).

Recently, some intersectionalists (Cho et al. 2013) have argued that it is more important to ask what intersectionality does than to argue about what it is, pointing to the political legacy and goals of the founding ‘mothers’ in the USA. Insisting that intersectionality is first and foremost a tool for making visible various strands of discrimination, these authors reject the now popular use of intersectionality in a managerial context where it is purely considered as an addition to gender mainstreaming.

Fourth, another hotly debated subject is the question of the level on which intersectionality – considered as a methodology – does its work, i.e. on the structural or the individual level.

Floya Anthias (1998) has suggested a multi-level analysis that works on four levels: (a) the level of discrimination (experience); (b) the actors’ level (inter-subjective praxis); (c) the institutional level (institutional regimes); and (d) the level of representation (symbolic and discursive) (see also the adaptation of this model by Winker and Degele 2011). Lutz and Davis (2005) shift attention from how structures of racism, class discrimination and sexism determine individuals’ identities and practices to how individuals ongoingly and flexibly negotiate their multiple and converging identities in the context of everyday life. Introducing the term doing intersectionality, the authors explore how individuals creatively and often in surprising ways draw upon various aspects of their multiple identities as a resource to gain control over their lives. We show how ‘gender’ or ‘race’ are invariably linked to structures of domination, can also mobilize or deconstruct disempowering discourses, even undermine and transform oppressive practices. We thereby show that individuals are not always and in every situation multiply vulnerable, but they develop strategies of resistance by drawing on multiple identities. Nancy Fraser (2003) gives a good summary of this approach: ‘Rather, individuals are nodes of convergence for multiple, cross-cutting axes of subordination. Frequently disadvantaged along some axes and simultaneously advantaged along others, they wage for recognition in modern regimes’ (ibid.: 57). Here the stress is on the understanding of individuals not only as dominated by oppression in all fields of life but also as people who – under certain circumstances – can make use of privileged aspects of identity.

The concept of intersectionality is also used in the construction of the European Union’s anti-discrimination law – see the picture gallery from Tackling Multiple Discrimination: Practices, Policies and Laws (European Commission 2007). This is an illustration of an understanding of identities as simultaneously merging advantaged and disadvantaged social positioning.

Challenges and future lines of investigation

Looking at the preceding example, it should be evident that intersectionality has long left the field of gender studies; it has been imported by sociology, education, anthropology, psychology, political sciences, law and literary studies, health studies and social work and many other (sub)disciplines dealing with social inequalities and identities. A myriad of divisions among intersectionalists have already been mentioned. In this final part I want to expand on other fields of application.

Agreeing with those critics who want to see intersectionality embedded in the broader theoretical frame of inequality research, I argue for the use of theoretical tools that go beyond a pure assessment of the overlap and co-construction of categories of difference. As a demonstration, I use the example from Steven Vertovec’s introduction to this handbook, where he refers to a New Yorker cartoon which depicts a person replying to a doorstep pollster, saying: ‘How would you like me to answer that question? As a member of my ethnic group, educational class, income...
group, or religious category?’ While this cartoon mirrors the multitude of social identities that individuals can embody and shows that a uni-categorical identification is incommensurable in multi-ethnic societies, it is also evident that this person fails to mention gender or race as markers of diversity. This can be interpreted as an indication that the pollster has already recorded these two characteristics based on visual perception – an instance of the frequent implicit naturalization of these two social divisions while the other aspects are less obvious. Thus, not all categories of difference are equally salient; moreover, their impact on social positioning can be extremely dissimilar. It is, therefore, important to investigate diversity in the context of power relations and analyse in detail which of all possible differential facets makes the difference, creates unequal identities. The sociological theory of social stratification may be helpful here. Social stratification ‘relates to the differential hierarchical locations of individuals and groupings of people on society’s grids of power’ (Yuval-Davis 2011: 162). The reduction of most social stratification theories being configured within the container of the nation state needs to be overcome by consideration of the continually shifting ‘orders of stratification’ on the global and the regional as well as on the national and the local level, and we should likewise reject the naturalisation of any construction of social divisions, and challenge the priorisation of any of them, such as class and gender’ (ibid.: 166).

In her exemplification of such an approach, Nira Yuval-Davis writes:

I find it problematic, for instance, that the construction of the ‘black woman’ is automatically assumed, unless otherwise specified, to be that of a minority black woman living in white Western societies. The majority of black women in today’s world are black women in black societies. This has major implications for a global intersectional stratification analysis.

(ibid.: 162)

Implicit in this statement is the conviction that debates about intersectionality and social inequalities can no longer reduce the analysis of gender, class and race to oppression and discrimination, but need to consider the ‘privileged’ positionings within and between them – a position that is deeply contested, as many intersectionality scholars implicitly and explicitly cherish a master category of oppression.

Another debate that is being conducted is the search for a more adequate metaphor. Many criticize ‘intersection’ as a too rigid visualization, one that ignores the fact that stratification is better depicted as a matter of relations rather than categories. Whether this can be Nina Lykke’s botanical image of a ‘rhizome’, an underground plant stem that moves horizontally in all directions and bears both roots and shoots (Lykke 2011: 211), or her earlier idea of a nodal point, or something completely different, is still an open question.

Notes

1 Marxist–feminist theorists of the 1980s revisited this debate in their analysis (see Barrett and McIntosh 1982, Haug 1978).
2 For various adoptions, see Lutz et al. (2011: 4ff.).
3 See, for example, the current debate about the Roma people in Europe.

References

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