

### Introduction

## Intersectionality: Legacies and Controversies

*Paul Scheibelhofer*

*Vince Marotta*

Developed by feminist theorists and activists, the paradigm of intersectionality later experienced tremendous popularity beyond institutional and geographic boundaries. Intersectionality aims at grasping the complexity of inequalities on societal as well as subjective levels. Refuting the hierarchisation of different structures of dominance, the intersectional approach studies these structures in their interplay and mutual constitution (Bilge 2010: 58). Heralded as the 'most important contribution that women's studies has made so far' (McCall 2005: 1771), intersectional scholarship ventures to address (and redress) the production and reproduction of inequalities along race, class, gender, sexuality and other relations of dominance. To date, intersectionality is a 'buzzword' (Davis 2008a) that causes scholarly dispute and produces valuable insights into the intricate workings of social inequalities.

### Legacies and Developments

While the term itself was introduced in academic circles by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s, it built on critiques well established in the US by Black feminist scholars (e.g. Collins 1990; hooks 1981) and activists, such as the radical feminist Black lesbian group Combahee River Collective. Also in Europe and Australia, feminists theorists such as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1983), Bottomley, de Lepervanche, and Martin (1984 and 1991) and Pettman (1992) worked on similar issues. By 1977, the Combahee River Collective issued a highly influential statement in which its members criticised the marginalisation of Black women's experiences in mainstream feminist politics (Davis 2008a: 73). In this statement, the group developed theoretical insights and political strategies to fight the 'interlocking' nature of 'systems of oppression' along gender, race, class,

and sexuality. Several decades later, Crenshaw (1989; 1991) would coin the term 'intersectionality' in her critique of anti-discrimination legislations' failure to grasp the complex forms of injustice that Black women experience in the United States. These women, Crenshaw argued, would often experience discrimination that arises at the very intersection of gender, race and class hierarchies. Strategies to fight these different forms of discrimination individually would thus fail their goal. Since these studies were published in the US, Europe and Australia, the concept of intersectionality has experienced an astonishing 'academic career', in which its vast analytic potential as well as complicated challenges were revealed.

Intersectionality, it seems, answered to the needs of many scholars and thus found a wide audience. Proposing a concise means to analyse the complex workings of diverse forms of dominance, the concept of intersectionality offered theoretical and methodological solutions to a puzzle that scholars in several fields of critical inquiry have struggled with. A second reason for the productivity of the concept lies in its promise to link critical scholarship with poststructuralist theories and thus potentially overcome a longstanding impasse. Intersectionality, Davis (2008a: 74) argues, '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 workings of power'.

Its evident value notwithstanding, the concept of intersectionality is far from undisputed. Recent developments and debates have exposed challenges and complex issues of theoretical, methodological and political nature. The following discussion of some of the most salient problems of the concept shows that intersectionality is not a ready-made research 'toolkit'. Scholars 'doing' intersectionality studies face several issues they have to reflect upon in the light of their concrete research project. In turn, it is these studies that

# Spotlight On:

## Intersectionality: Legacies and Controversies

VIRTUAL SPECIAL ISSUE

JOURNAL OF  
INTERCULTURAL  
STUDIES

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group

participate in the further development of the concept itself.

### Travels and Translations

In the past decades the concept of intersectionality 'travelled' (Knapp 2005) across disciplines and research sites. The issue of translation thus became relevant in at least two ways. Firstly, the history of intersectionality is a history of translating a concept developed in the context of political activism into a differentiated and refined academic paradigm. It thus becomes important to ask, what gets lost in this process of 'academisation': whose voices are heard, whose positions silenced? Do the ongoing debates over conceptual, theoretical and methodological problems of intersectional scholarship enhance its political power or rather turn it into 'domesticated' textbook knowledge? A second set of questions concerns the need of translation when applying intersectionality in diverse geo-political contexts. Which issues arise, when particular notions that have a certain history and presence in one context are taken over and applied in other ones? Take, for example, the issue of 'race', which is a widely used term in the US in general and in the Black feminist theoretisations that lie at the heart of the concept of intersectionality. As Knapp (2005: 257) pointed out for the German speaking context, there is no way the German concept *Rasse* could be used in a similar way, due to the use it was put to in legitimating mass killings in the National Socialist past. Whereas the concept of *Rasse* is thus useless for critical inquiry, racism certainly exists in this context too and an intersectional perspective renders important possibilities to study it in its complexity. But this cannot work without engaging in an analysis of the specificities of the particular context and thus translating the concepts.

### Identity or Structure? The Question of Levels of Analysis

That the global travel of intersectionality has not left it untouched becomes evident in the context of another issue intensely debated: the question of levels of analysis. Should intersectional scholarship analyse broad societal

structures of dominance, or study the intricate workings of identity and subjectivation? Scholars argued that, in principle, intersectional studies can and should study dynamics on all societal levels and in their dynamic relationship. Nira Yuval-Davis, for example, posited that intersectional scholarship should analyse how social inequalities are played out 'institutionally, intersubjectively, representationally as well as in the subjective constructions of identities' (Yuval-Davis 2006: 205). But this might be more easily said than done, and, as research practice shows, studies tend to focus on one level more than another. This, in turn, is not disconnected from theoretical context in which intersectional scholarship is conducted. As Bilge (2010: 61) reports, intersectional studies in the United States, firmly grounded in neo-Marxist Black feminist thought, has focussed mostly on the analysis of systems and structures of oppression. Northern European scholarship, in contrast, has rather centred on the detailed analysis of the dynamics of identity formation in the light of complex inequalities (Prins 2006; e.g. Staunaes 2003). And yet again, this focus has received persistent critique by German scholars (Klinger and Knapp 2007; Knapp 2005: 259) arguing for the need to move beyond the micro-analysis of subjectivities to a broad and inclusive social theory.

These differences and disputes obviously represent a version of the time-honoured sociological question of the relation between actor and structure. Intersectionality will, most probably, not solve this issue for good. But the intersectional perspective points to the fact that complex entanglements not only exist between diverse forms of dominance, but that these entanglements articulate themselves on diverse societal levels. While it remains an open question, whether any given intersectional study can and should aim to grasp the totality of these entanglements, it is a reality that studies have to deal with in one way or the other.

### **Which and How Many? Not a Mere Question of Numbers**

Intersectional scholarship sets out to study several relations of dominance

not in an additive manner, but to analyse how these relations co-constitute each other. Not surprisingly, the claim for such a conceptual openness has led to the question of how many relations or 'axes' should be focussed. Whereas oftentimes, intersectional scholarship simply reverts to study the 'Big Three' (Davis 2008b: 24) axes of gender, race and class, this focus has been criticised as limiting the analysis. Whereas some have proposed to vastly broaden the scope and number of axes to be analysed (e.g. Lutz 2002), this strategy can complicate research projects considerably. But the question of which and how many axes to study is not merely an issue of practicality (at what point does complexity turn into research-chaos?) but tackles the more conceptual point of assigning different 'worth' to different relations of dominance. If one of the claims of intersectionality is to reject quick prioritisations of one axe over another, the question arises, how the inclusion of particular axes vis-à-vis the relative marginalisation of other socially relevant differences (e.g. dis/ability or age) is argued. To this question, many have answered that 'race, class, gender' have proven historically stable relations of dominance that affect virtually all aspects of life in virtually all modern societies and thus deserve a special status in intersectional analyses (Anthias 2001; Klinger and Knapp 2007: 20; McCall 2005). As with other debates in the intersectionality field, this is an ongoing and open debate. But in one way or the other, most recent studies seem to adopt a mixed strategy in the line proposed by Leiprecht and Lutz (2006), who argue that race, class and gender should be treated as a 'minimum standard'. Beyond these, other axes should be added to the analysis, depending on research field and research interest.

### Categories, Axes, Relations, Or ...?

A final crucial point of debate to be touched upon in this introduction is the question of how to conceive of the object of analysis. Different concepts and metaphors are used within intersectionality literature. These differences are relevant, as they point to differing theoretical and epistemological standpoints. Kimberlé Crenshaw used the metaphor of

# Spotlight On:

## Intersectionality: Legacies and Controversies

VIRTUAL SPECIAL ISSUE

JOURNAL OF  
INTERCULTURAL  
STUDIES

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group

intersections, while others speak of axes of difference (e.g. Yuval-Davis 2006) or of axes of inequality (Klinger, Knapp and Sauer 2007). Recently,

these concepts have encountered critique for subtly reproducing some of the very problems intersectionality aims to resolve. The above cited metaphors, Walgenbach (2007) argues, transport the idea that 'axes' exist detached from each other before and after they 'intersect'. To overcome this idea, Walgenbach proposes the concept of interdependency. Race, class or gender, in this view, never exist detached from each other but are essentially interdependent in nature. Isabell Lorey (2008) takes up this line of thought when she criticises that much of intersectionality research is actually based on essentialised notions of identity and difference and thus ends up as an exercise in mapping and ordering social realities. For Lorey, a way out of this trap is to read intersectionality in a radically poststructuralist way. Studies should thus focus less on social structures and categories but on sites of friction, slippage and subversion against the social order of things. As Lorey (2008: 146) importantly points out, these are not merely academic questions, but touch upon political implications of intersectionality. We are thus led back to questions posed earlier in this introduction. Lorey's answer is a poststructuralist one – other possibilities certainly exist (e.g. focussing on the shifting and contested nature of relations of dominance and the political struggles aimed against them). As was the case with the other complicated issues discussed above, no 'final' answers exist. Either way, it seems more important that these questions are out there and are discussed, for intersectionality to stay a productive, thought-provoking and critical endeavour.

### Virtual Issue Content

These legacies and controversies are highlighted in the selection of articles chosen for this virtual issue. The journal's first editorial written in 1980 encouraged contributions which adopted a multidisciplinary approach to understanding ethnic and migration issues. Such an invitation led to

# Spotlight On:

## Intersectionality: Legacies and Controversies

VIRTUAL SPECIAL ISSUE

JOURNAL OF  
INTERCULTURAL  
STUDIES

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group

contributions that mixed culturalist, Marxist and feminist perspectives. These contributions relied on the 'Big Three' of intersectionality and thus foregrounded the coexistence of race, gender and class in understanding the migrant experience. These studies were particularly critical of neo-Marxist

and positivist social science research on migration and the experiences of immigrants (Collins 1984; Jakubowicz and Castles 1984; Misztal 1991). While these studies provide a more complex approach to understanding cross-cultural interaction and the host society's reaction to immigrants, they are confined to the 'Big Three' of intersectional scholarship. The work of Gamage (1998) on the Sri Lankan community in Australia shows that migration scholars need to acknowledge the importance of religion in their adoption of the 'Big Three'. Such a multi-factorial approach allows Gamage to illustrate the heterogeneous nature of Sri Lankan community. The burgeoning literature on Muslim immigrants across the globe may suggest that the privileged position of the 'Big Three' may now be over.

The Big Three approach to intersectionality is further contested by Jakubowicz and Meekosha (2002) who contend that the idea of difference in the discourse of Australian multiculturalism should acknowledge the cultures of the disabled. The concept also falls into the trap of what Ulrich Beck calls 'methodological nationalism' in which the 'Big Three' of intersectionality are used to understand the migration experience within national boundaries. According to Purkayastha (2010), what we need is a transnational intersectional perspective that takes into account simultaneous social locations in which the experience of privilege and marginalisation is multiplied across countries. This transnational approach, which acknowledges the dynamics of gender, class and nation in understanding issues of belonging in a global context, is examined by Radhakrisnan (2008). The study explores the transnational experiences of Indian women working in the area of information technology across the US and India.

While some of the papers raise concerns about the limited nature of intersectionality, others focus on expanding the idea. Postcolonial feminist thought and recent scholarship on critical race and whiteness studies have broadened our understanding of what constitutes an intersectional approach. Papers by Perera (1997), Hubinette and Tigervall (2009) and de Finney (2010) highlight how a more nuanced intersectional account is possible when class, ethnicity and gender are incorporated into an assessment of what constitutes whiteness. Pyke's (2010) work on the construction of whiteness and how racialised subjects negotiate dominant whiteness is indicative of this nuanced intersectional scholarship. Critical whiteness studies and postcolonial feminism illustrate how other axes of inequalities become essential in understanding multiple relations of domination. These interlocking systems of oppression that highlight the shifting and contextualised nature of identity has also been addressed by Tsolidis (1993) in her discussion of the synergies and challenging relationship between feminism – in its various manifestations – and multiculturalism.

Other papers illustrate a concern over the levels of analysis raised by scholars in the field of intersectionality. Scheibelhofer (2007) and Joseph (2000) focus on the subjectivities of specific cultural groups and show how gender, socioeconomic positions and religion all play a role in the construction of fluid and multiple identities. Nonetheless, both these studies attempt to transcend the structure and agency dichotomy and demonstrate their interconnectedness. They do this through an investigation of the nature of feminist thought (Joseph) and the construction of 'marginalised masculinities' (Scheibelhofer). Finally, Bottomley's (1997) paper draws on different levels of analysis to critique modernist accounts of identity as sameness and the dominant (mis)representation of ethnicity. She contends that the interplay of gender, identity and ethnicity can only be effectively addressed through the interaction of subjectivity and social structures.

We hope that the selection of articles will contribute further to a discussion on the challenges and potential of intersectionality. The Journal

# Spotlight On:

## Intersectionality: Legacies and Controversies

VIRTUAL SPECIAL ISSUE

JOURNAL OF  
INTERCULTURAL  
STUDIES

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group

of Intercultural Studies will continue the tradition that it began over 30 years ago in encouraging scholarship which is at the cutting edge of intersectional scholarship. Our aim is to play a significant role in showcasing this research and promoting a multidisciplinary approach to migration scholarship that has intersectionality as its guiding intellectual framework.

#### Works Cited

Anthias, F., 2001. The Material and the Symbolic in Theorizing Social Stratification. *British Journal of Sociology*, 52 (3), 367–390.

Anthias, F. and Yuval-Davis, N., 1983. Contextualizing feminism: ethnic, gender and class divisions. *Feminist Review*, 15, 62–75.

Bottomley, G. de Lepervanche, M.M. and Martin, J. eds., 1991. *Intersexions: Gender/Class/Culture/Ethnicity*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Bottomley, G. and de Lepervanche, M.M. eds., 1984. *Ethnicity, class and gender in Australia*. Sydney: George Allen & Unwin

Bilge, S., 2010. Recent Feminist Outlooks on Intersectionality. *Diogenes*, 57 (1), 58–72.

Collins, P. H., 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Power and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Crenshaw, K., 1989. Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 14, 538–554.

Crenshaw, K., 1991. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (6), 1241–1299.

Davis, K., 2008a. Intersectionality as buzzword. A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory*, 9 (1), 67–85.

Davis, K., 2008b. Intersectionality in Transatlantic Perspective. In: C. Klinger and G.-A. Knapp, eds. *Überkreuzungen. Fremdheit, Ungleichheit, Differenz*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 19–35.

hooks, b., 1981. *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Klinger, C. and Knapp, G.-A., 2007. Achsen der Ungleichheit - Achsen der Differenz: Verhältnisbestimmungen von Klasse, Geschlecht, 'Rasse'/Ethnizität. In: C. Klinger, G.-A. Knapp and B. Sauer, eds. *Achsen der Ungleichheit. Zum Verhältnis von Klasse, Geschlecht und Ethnizität*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 19–41.

Klinger, C., Knapp, G.-A. and Sauer, B., 2007. *Achsen der Ungleichheit. Zum Verhältnis von Klasse, Geschlecht und Ethnizität*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag.

Knapp, G.-A., 2005. Race, Class, Gender: Reclaiming Baggage in Fast Travelling Theories. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12 (3), 249–266.

Leiprecht, R. and Lutz, H., 2006. 'Intersektionalität im Klassenzimmer: Ethnizität, Klasse, Geschlecht. In: R. Leiprecht and A. Kerber eds. *Schule in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft*. Schwalbach: Wochenschau Verlag, 218–234.

Lorey, I., 2008. Kritik und Kategorie. Zur Begrenzung politischer Praxis durch neuere Theoreme der Intersektionalität, Interdependenz und kritischen Weißseinsforschung. In: A. Demirovic, eds. *Kritik und Materialität*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 132–148.

Lutz, H., 2002. Zonder blikken of blozen. Het standpunt van de (nieuw-) realisten. *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, 5 (3), 7–17.

McCall, L., 2005. The Complexity of Intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 30 (3), 1771–1800.

Pettman, J. 1992 *Living in the Margins: Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Prins, B., 2006. Narrative Accounts of Origins: A Blind Spot in the Intersectional Approach? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13 (3), 277–290.

Staunaes, D., 2003. Where have all the subjects gone? Bringing together the concepts of intersectionality and subjectification. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 11 (2), 101–110.

Walgenbach, K., 2007. Gender als interdependente Kategorie. In: K. Walgenbach, G. Dietze, A. Hornscheidt and K. Palm, eds. *Gender als interdependente Kategorie. Neue Perspektiven auf Intersektionalität, Diversität und Heterogenität*. Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 23–64.

Yuval-Davis, N., 2006. Intersectionality and Feminist Politics. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13 (3), 193–209.