



Title: Discussion about the notion of 'intersectionality' in terms of our changing understanding of gender

Authors: Piantato G.;¹* Piantato E.;²

Type: Original article

Keywords: intersectionality, gender;

Abstract

In this paper we are going to consider the usefulness of Intersectionality as an analytical tool, in order to define gender identity. After a brief explanation of the concept of 'gender' and its examination through different feminist approaches before the introduction of the Intersectional Theory, we explore the notion of Intersectionality itself, with reference to the importance that the term has assumed in the Black Feminist Thought. Then, we will discuss an empirical case based on the experience of domestic violence against marginalized women in diverse communities, with the aim of giving a practical example of the contribution of Intersectionality.

The purpose of our analysis is to demonstrate the way in which Intersectional approach was fundamental to examine in depth and improve the notion of gender and how it was used by feminist discourse to build arguments to explore the complexity of women's oppression.

¹ Student in MA Gender Studies, S.O.A.S., London, UK

² Servizio Psichiatrico, Az. Osp. Alessandria,

* Autore per la corrispondenza, mail: epiantato@ospedale.al.it



1. Definition of 'gender' before the introduction of Intersectionality

Gender identity is the inner individual perception of themselves as male or female. It is directly linked with the concept of gender role, a series of social values and ascribed ways of behaving that are typically considered suitable for either a man or a woman in regards to gender relations. Gender tends to be taken for granted and directly linked with the birth's sex; however, it is possible that gender and sex do not overlap, since some people develop a gender identity that is different from their biological sex. This naturalized binary gender order goes hand in hand with 'heteronormativity' that considers heterosexuality as the norm and that results legitimized by naturalism—the reality has to be comprehended exclusively through natural laws that govern the entire universe (Degele and Winker, 2011 pp. 55).

Hierarchical relations of power exist between men and women and they confine the latter in a position of subordination. Gender hierarchies tend to be accepted as natural, but actually they are socially determined relations, enforced by institutions such as the state and the family, the division of labour and so on, that lead to a condition of disparity between the two categories.

Feminism has the purpose of challenging the taken for granted assumption of gender and also gender inequalities brought by this binary opposition, investigating women's oppression through their social roles and experiences. It embraces a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches aimed at dealing with the social and cultural construction of gender and sex and at delivering rights and equality for women.

Biological determinism provided a fixed and binary idea of 'gender', focusing on a mere physical interpretation of the term. This binary conception led to a rigid model of gender identity that determined a fixed dichotomous system in which two static categories, male and female, were opposed. Firstly, the male-female juxtaposition was reinforced by Naturalizing approaches that insisted on the idea of 'biological bodies', considering the division into male and female as 'natural'. In support of the belief that physical differences are the expression of inner characteristic, in Sherry Ortner's (1974) work men-women opposition is stressed by the consideration that men are associated with culture and the public sphere while women are linked to nature and the domestic sphere, proposing again a model that constrains women in a disadvantaged position.

Then, considering Psychoanalytical approaches, in spite of feminists' critique of the primacy of the 'phallus' in Freud's theorization of identity and the perpetuation of the idea of



women's inferiority—due to their experience of 'lack of the penis', theorists such as Freud and Lacan, took a step forward Biological determinism. Freud argued that in the 'pregenital phase'—before genitals begin to influence individuals' sexual behaviour, children do not differentiate between gender or sex; so bisexuality is considered the innate sexual orientation, while heterosexuality is seen as the result of repression during the 'phallic stage'—when gender identity is noticeable. Hence, the development of the idea of unconsciousness removes sexuality and gender from their dependence on biology, so gender differences result to be not innate but artificially constructed through socialization (Chodorow, 1994).

Taking into account Materialist approaches, inspired by basic Marxist concepts, the focus was on the effects of capitalism and on the economic and material conditions under which social relations develop. Emphasizing the structural features of the social world and highlighting the idea of 'class', Materialist theories claimed that human nature is defined by society and that material conditions are fundamental in the social production of gender. Hence, gender and sexuality cannot be interpreted in a biological way but they have to be considered as socially constructed. Due to the strong link between capitalism and patriarchy—social system that stresses the primacy of the male category, it is evident the repetition of the rigid structure that separate and oppose men and women; this division led to a condition of subordination of women that lacked in political representation and, considering the division of labour they were limited in entering in remunerated work (Walby, 1994).

Thus, it is clear the achievement of feminism in analysing the concept of gender identity, that evolved from a starting idea of gender binary as 'natural' to an understanding of this as a category that is 'socially and culturally constructed'. However, despite the efforts of feminist movements arisen between the 1970s and the 1980s that focused on issues such as the theme of sexuality, the struggle against violence, the condition of women in the workplace and in the family structure, the feminist discourse had evident limits. Taking a look forward at the second-wave feminism, 'women' were considered as a monolithic block and no attention was paid into the difference between 'womanhood' itself. Taking gender as the first category to recognize women's condition of inequality (Carbin and Endenheim, 2013 pp. 243) and stressing the idea of 'common oppression' of women (hooks, 1984), the movement aimed at encountering the interests of a unique peculiar category, white educated middle-class women that dominated feminist discourse (hooks, 1984), excluding those who did not enter such group.



2. *Concept of Intersectionality*

Intersectionality is a multidisciplinary approach that allows examining women's experience of both identity and oppression, resisting to feminist hierarchy and exclusivity (Nash, 2008 pp. 2).

The term was created by the lawyer Kimberlè Crenshaw, with the purpose of demonstrating how black women could not recognize themselves within the white middle-class agenda of the feminist movement (Carbin and Endenheim, 2013 pp. 235). The essentialism of feminism was clear considering its inattention to racial, ethnic, class, religious and sexual differences between women themselves and, in contrast with this exclusion, Intersectional approach highlighted the experiences of those marginalized women whose voices have been ignored by feminist discourse (Nash, 2008 pp. 3).

Intersectionality is a key issue for feminist thinking and has transformed how gender is discussed (Shields, 2008). McCall (2005) defined this approach as 'the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields has made so far' (McCall in Nash, 2008 pp. 2) and this success is undoubtedly due to the promises of this brand new approach—focus on the complexity of women's experiences of discrimination and on the uniqueness of these different experiences.

Intersectionality provided 'a potential for new feminist agendas' (Brah and Phoenix in Carbin and Endenheim, 2013 pp. 238) and was seen as a 'new methodology' (McCall in Carbin and Endenheim, 2013 pp. 238) that -taking into account the political, economical and historical context- showed the interaction of different levels of inequality, proving that all women cannot have the same experience of oppression. It was defined as a new method since the approach implies a shift away from defined categories, to focus on dynamic processes of interaction between multiple aspects of identity that women develop regarding particular social relations, backgrounds and structures of power. Intersectional analysis has the potential to capture the 'complexity in social life' (McCall in Carbin and Endenheim, 2013 pp. 238) since, instead of summarizing the effects of various levels of oppression it focuses on the interwoven nature of these categories, whose combination generates exclusive forms of discrimination (Degele and Winker, 2011 pp. 51). It is generally agreed that intersections create both situations of oppression and opportunity. Operating in a condition of power, the advantaged side provides the access to status and opportunities denied to other intersections;



moreover, an intersectional position could result disadvantaged regarding one group but advantaged regarding another one—white lesbians, for example, are in a disadvantaged position because of their sexual orientation that deviates from the heterosexual norm but in relation to other lesbians, they enjoy racial privileges. (Ashmore et al. in Shields, 2008)

Hence, this analytical tool allows an understanding of how the category of gender intersects with other aspects of identity, in particular class and race; the concept of class refers to the social origins of an individual, their cultural resources of education and profession and their social network (Bourdieu in Degele and Winker, 2011 pp. 55); classism is a form of discrimination that perpetuates wealth inequality on the basis of an individual's belonging to a particular class (Degele and Winker, 2011 pp. 55). Race refers to the notion of 'human groups that, through symbolic classification, become "Races"' (Weiß in Degele and Winker, 2011 pp. 55); racism, legitimized through recourse to naturalism—natural difference between 'us' and 'others', is defined by power relations that lie on a structural asymmetry of power between human groups, that have been symbolically divided into races (Degele and Winker, 2011 pp. 55). Other forms of structural discrimination can be noticed in ethnicities, nationalities, religions that differ from the 'norm'—the majority in society, but also age and disabilities. It is important to notice that there is no hierarchy between these different categories but they are considered as diverse levels of identity whose intersection leads to unique and peculiar experiences of oppression.

The aim of Intersectionality is not to reveal which groups are the most victimized or privileged but to point out individuals' differences and similarities in order to overcome discrimination (Symington, 2004 pp. 2). This emphasis in subjectivity translated into the feminist discourse gave the possibility to each woman to recognize herself at least in one of the categories pointed out by Intersectionality, 'making it a profound self-identical feminism' (Davis in Carbin and Endenheim, 2013 pp. 245). Since individual social identities deeply influence an individual's experience of gender, feminists understood that the individual's social location as reproduced in intersecting identities has to be in the most prominent position in analyzing gender, that must be explained in the context of power relations embedded in social identities. (Shields, 2008).

3. Black Feminist Thought

Black feminism's contribution to Intersectionality is generally defined as that of 'theorizing

the relationship between gender, class and race' (Davis in Carbin and Eнденheim, 2013 pp. 244).

Black feminism emerged from the discontent of that category of women that remained excluded and unidentified within feminist discourse, dominated by white bourgeois women that ignored the issue of white supremacy as racial policy and the privileges they had because of their racial belonging (hooks, 1984). White women considered themselves oppressed, from a sexist point of view, by patriarchal society but, at the same time they refused to recognize their own feminism—that excluded any other category of women from their understanding of oppression, as racist and themselves as oppressors towards black women (hooks, 1984).

Black women had a strong self-defined standpoint of their condition of oppression and their experience generated a different feminist consciousness that concerned the material reality where they lived (Hill Collins, 1989). So, black women were not the mere combination of 'Afrocentric' and female values—an aggregate of race and gender, but their experience was shaped also by their material condition, the social class they belonged.

Black Feminist Thought aimed at encouraging a collective black identity on the basis of the unique and exclusive view that black women had of oppression. Black women had to face simultaneous forms of discrimination as racism from white community, sexism from the category of men—whites but also blacks, and also classism, considering that they were at the bottom of the occupational ladder—their social status was lower than any other group (Hill Collins, 1989); hence, it is clear that this category is a group on its own whose standpoint of the notion of oppression could deeply enrich the feminist discourse.

Patricia Hill Collins, exponent of the Black Feminist Thought, was one of the first to borrow the term coined by Crenshaw. Both the theorists were influenced by African American radical feminist critique and used Intersectionality as a 'metaphor' for the interaction of various sections of power structures. This metaphor was reconsidered by European feminists that adapted the concept to their particular field of research, changing the definition in Intersectional 'theory' or 'methodology'. The favourite 'instersecting categories' of identity are gender, race and class since they are thought to be more than 'merely cultural' (Butler; Fraser in Carbin and Eнденheim, 2013 pp. 235).

Difference began to be used not in reference to men and women opposition, but in 'experiential terms' with the connotation of diversity between women themselves; this difference turned into the idea of Intersectionality in the moment in which it was understood that the combination of multiple levels of discrimination did not bring the experience of



subordination to be greater but it radically changed the nature of such subordination (Maynard, 2001 pp. 123).

Hill Collins (1989) emphasized the importance of subjective experiences, where gender, race and other power structures interweave and result in different forms of oppression, overcoming the idea of 'black womanhood' and contrasting the prevailing white feminism and its 'objectification' of black women.

It is important to recognize that differences into the category of women exist and that it is not possible to consider a universal 'women's experience'. But, being aware of a situation of common subordination of women, although it is shaped in different forms by the intersection of various levels of oppression, contributes to build strong arguments in favour of women's rights and gender equality. Despite the evident contribution of Intersectional approach a debate around the risk of fragmentation arose; the attempt to relate to a wide range of women looking at the specificity of their oppression could lead to divisionism and separatism. The only way to avoid fragmentation is that oppressed groups have to be directly involved and effective organizers of the struggle against their own oppression (McBean, 2013).

4. Empirical case

Intersectionality in practice, considering the emerging domestic violence literature, gives different perspectives to understand the experiences of marginalized women in diverse societies. Scholars appealed to the Intersectional approach to examine how different forms of inequality converge with gender, challenging the supremacy of the latter, that was considered as an 'explanatory model of domestic violence' (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 39).

The aim of this domestic violence literature is focusing on battered women that come from different cultural backgrounds and social locations and analyses the way in which categories such as gender, sexuality, race and class define differently the lives of these women.

The traditional feminist approach focused on the 'common experience' of battered women that were represented as a monolithic group; hence, scholars progressively questioned this method since it failed to consider the multiple levels of oppression that affected these women in distinct way across race, class, sexuality, nationality and culture—diverse cultures define violence differently (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 41). In feminist perspective, violence against women was considered an effect of 'socially constructed and culturally approved gender inequality', a model that goes beyond the first theoretical approaches that



'pathologized battered women', but that is still founded on the idea that gender inequality is the principal factor that decides domestic violence (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 42-43). Scholars argue that none category can be privileged in defining domestic violence since the social context shaped by the intersection of systems of power and oppression creates constantly different levels of gender inequality. Theories on lesbian battering challenge the primacy of gender inequality in explaining the dynamics of the abuse, since the offender and the victim are both women; although there are analogies between heterosexual and lesbian battering, they cannot be considered as the same phenomenon also due to the fact that in lesbian battering the violence happens in the wider context of homophobia in the society (Renzetti in Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 43).

Empirical evidence shows that the heaviest violence takes place especially amongst low-income women of colour (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 44). When we consider violence against women in Native communities, immigrant communities and communities of colour, a set of issues such as the background of White supremacy, colonialism, patriarchy and economic exploitation have to be assumed instead of evaluating this violence as if it was merely rooted in the culture of these communities (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 47). Culture is a fundamental factor to interpret domestic violence but it is important to reject a simplistic concept of this, since different communities' cultural experiences of violence are negotiated through structural forms of oppression—racism, colonialism, heterosexism and so on (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 45).

Intersectionality allows legitimizing the experience of those women that have been excluded from the dominant cultural discourse about battered women, taking into account racial differences and diverse immigrant backgrounds (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 49). Intersectional approach was used to illustrate the added difficulties that battered women from the margins of society experience and to refuse the idea that the victims are fragile and lack of agency (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 54).

Hill Collins stressed that battered black women have to assume and deal with their victimization, that can be used as mechanism of control since 'it strips African American women of agency' (Hill Collins in Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp.).

Being the state institutional support inadequate to meet the necessities of the victims of domestic violence, battered women have to experience also this other form of violence (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 44). Hill Collins argues that anti-violence movements' key to success is the rejection of the simplistic views of violence that sustain that 'men dominate



women, whites oppress people of colour and oppressors victimize the oppressed' (Hill Collins Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 57); it is fundamental to recognize the role played by the intersection of gender, race and class among the group of battered women and not to 'build an alliance on the foundation of shared victimization'—even though black and white women share a common history of violence perpetrated against them by men, white women must be conscious of the advantages they receive from their white skin privilege (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 57). To sum up, Hill Collins sustains that anti-violence movements have to develop a view of violence based on Intersectionality to examine the possible multiple ways in which battered women experience domestic violence with the purpose of encountering victims' necessities; also a critical self-reflection by members of the associations to recognize their own accountability in the perpetuation of oppression and empathy—not sympathy, for the pain of the victims (Dupont and Sokoloff, 2005 pp. 57).

5. Conclusions

The contribution of Intersectional approach in defining gender is undeniable. Intersectionality not only took a step forward the idea of 'global sisterhood' but it also gave the possibility to examine the complexity and the diversity of women's experiences in order to make the feminist discourse able to address to the entire women's category. It argues that a form of oppression can be produced by and, at the same time, can determine other forms of oppression, whose combination generates exclusive systems of discrimination and it tries to explain how these systems create inequalities. Intersectionality emphasizes the concept of subjectivity not in a way that privileges personal experience but because of the importance of the alternative and specific view of oppression that marginalized groups have developed. Specificity and multidimensionality are key issues of this approach that rejects the simplistic concept that 'men oppress women', that women are defined in relation to men as 'those' who do not have a penis, that do not have power and that do not participate in the public arena, but focuses on the complexity of nature of women's subordination.

Understanding and respecting differences between women's category enable to build arguments based on women's strength and diversity, not by mentioning every kind of oppression but being sure that every individual can feel represented in the struggle against the oppression of women.



References

- Ashmore, R. D., Deaux, K., & McLaughlin-Volpe, T. (2004), 'An organizing framework for collective identity: articulation and significance of multidimensionality', *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 130, n.1: pp. 80–114
- Bourdieu, P. (1986), 'The forms of capital', *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Greenwood Press, New York, pp. 241–258.
- Brah A and Phoenix A (2004), 'Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 5, n. 3: pp. 75–86
- Butler, J. (1998), 'Merely cultural', *New Left Review*, vol. 1, n. 227: pp. 33–44
- Carbin, M. and Edenheim, S. (2013), 'The intersectional turn in feminist theory: A dream of a common language? ', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 20, n. 3: pp. 233-248
- Chodorow, N. (1994), 'Gender, Relation and Difference in Psychoanalytical Perspective', *The Polity Reader in Gender Studies*, Polity Press, Cambridge, pp. 41-49
- Davis, K. (2008) 'Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 9, n.1: pp. 67–85
- Degele, N. and Winker, G. (2011), 'Intersectionality as multi-level analysis: Dealing with social inequality', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 18, n.1: pp. 51-66
- Dupont, I. and Suffolk, N. J. (2005), 'Domestic Violence at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender: Challenges and Contributions to Understanding Violence Against Marginalized Women in Diverse Communities', *Violence Against Women*, vol 11, n. 1: pp. 38-64
- Fraser, N. (1998), 'Heterosexism, misrecognition and capitalism: A response to Judith Butler', *New Left Review* vol. 1, n. 228: pp. 140–149.



Hill Collins, P. (1989) 'The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought', *Signs*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, vol. 14, n. 4: pp. 745-773

Hill Collins, P. (1998), 'The tie that binds: Race, gender and U.S. violence', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 21, n. 5: pp. 917-938.

hooks, b. (1984), 'Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory', *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre*, South End Press, New York, pp. 1-15

Maynard, M. (2001), 'Race, Gender and the Concept of "Difference" in Feminist Thought', *Feminism and Race*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 121-133

McBean, S., 'What is intersectionality?', *Revolutionary socialism in the 21st century* retrieved at <http://revolutionarysocialism.tumblr.com/post/58187691338/what-is-intersectionality> [13-08-2013]

McCall, L. (2005), 'The complexity of intersectionality', *Signs*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, vol. 30, n. 3: pp. 1771–1800.

Nash, J. C. (2008), 'Re-Thinking Intersectionality', *Feminist Review*, vol. 89, n.1: pp. 1-15

Ortner, S. B. (1974), 'Is female to Male as Nature is to Culture?', *Woman, Culture and Society*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp. 67-87

Renzetti, C. M. (1998), 'Violence and abuse in lesbian relationships: Theoretical and empirical issues', *Issues in intimate violence*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, pp. 117-127

Shields, A. S. (2008), 'Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective', *Sex Roles*, Volume 59, Issue 5-6, pp. 301-311

Walby, S. (1994), 'Towards a Theory of Patriarchy', *The Polity Reader in Gender Studies*, Polity Press, Cambridge, pp. 22-28



Weiß, A. (2001), 'Rassismus wider Willen. Ein anderer Blick auf eine Struktur sozialer Ungleichheit' [Racism against its Will: A Different Look at a Structure of Social Inequality], Westdeutscher Verlag, Wiesbaden