

Investigación joven con perspectiva de género IV

Edición y coordinación:
Marian Blanco-Ruiz
Clara Sainz de Baranda



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AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON RESEARCH: WHAT CHANGES AND HOW WE DO IT

Cerqueira, Carla¹

CECS - Communication and Society Research Centre
University of Minho
carla.cerqueira@ics.uminho.pt

Magalhães, Sara I.¹

Center for Psychology at University of Porto
Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Porto
saramagalhaes@fpce.up.pt

ABSTRACT

The term intersectionality is still unknown by many people, though it has been in the academic research and social movements agenda since the 1980s. It entered slowly into public discussion and nowadays can be considered a *buzzword* (K. Davis 2008, 2014).

In this chapter we explore the roots and applications of intersectionality to research. We explore what changes when an intersectional approach is integrated and overview how we do it. We conclude with some critical reflections on the challenge intersectionality brings to research for social transformation and social justice in diverse areas.

KEYWORDS: Intersectionality, Feminisms, Research.

An Intersectional Feminist Perspective on Research: What Changes and How We Do it

The term intersectionality is still unknown by many people, though it has been in the academic research and social movements agenda since the 1980s. It entered slowly into public discussion and nowadays can be considered a *buzzword* (K. Davis 2008, 2014). This term concerns the intersection of different identity categories (gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, social class, nationality, age, etc.) that generates systemic contexts of inequality. It is in this perspective that we part from the understanding of social inequalities as multiply determined, which means, they have to be addressed and understood by looking at their crossings and not in an independent, single-axis way - closing ourselves to a truly intersectional approach.

¹ Both authors contributed equally to the writing of this chapter.

With this in mind we would like to set off by reflecting on two questions: *Some societies have more equality between men and women (employment, working conditions ...), but is this situation the same for all women? Is it possible to talk only about gender and not about other identity issues that intersect to produce social inequality?*

In this chapter our proposal is to highlight the importance of building on intersectionality as a model, as a theoretical, methodological and political response, that can unveil inequalities and set up the structure needed to (re)construct a more equal everyday living. In other words, as Nogueira (2017) reminds us, doing gender is not independent of our personal identity, as the identity is intersectional. And as we stated elsewhere,

Starting from a critical feminist epistemology, the gender dimension emerges as a social limit that shapes the way we are perceived and positions us against those around us in constant identity performativity. This performativity underlines our diversity of contexts and conditions, privileges and oppressions, and goes beyond a uniaxial and hierarchical vision that builds and constrains us. (Cerqueira & Magalhães, 2018: 121-122)

Considerations on intersectionality: definition and frontiers

Anchored on black feminisms and the postcolonial traditions of the 1980's decade, the term intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) referring to the multidimensionality that sustains the subjectivities and the experiences of social groups, and mainly the way these impact in the most oppressed. Intersectionality emerged also due to critical positionings arguing the need to deconstruct, a second wave liberal feminism that maintained, the homogenization of the woman category and to explore the universalization of experiences. It assumes a wide, theoretical and political, proposal that intends escape the matrixes of "single-axis, gender-universal thinking, subjecting intersectionality to the very forms of epistemic domination it seeks to undo" (May 2014: 95). Intersectionality emphasizes, therefore, the importance of thinking the multiple dimensions within a category - e.g, the gender category comprises very different men and different women -, driving away from the hierarchical and patriarchal schemas that feminisms were trying to deconstruct. Intersectionality intends to unveil the multiple and simultaneous system of oppression, namely the way gender, race and social class interact to produce complex experiences of discrimination.

According to Kathy Davis (2008, 2014), intersectionality has been becoming a *buzzword* within the contemporary feminist movement, once it has boosted as a simple terminology to name a complex and comprehensive identity approach that considers, simultaneously and with the same centrality, diverse positionings of which individuals are captive due to different social belongings

(e.g. gender, class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, functional diversity, etc.) (Cerqueira, Magalhães 2017). This proposal emerges from a broader debate within the black feminist movement and the postcolonial liberation movements on the limitation that both had on their demands for equal rights. The concern was to establish more dynamic ways of conceptualizing the social construction of difference and power structures that constrained practices and representations on an individual and/or institutional level (Anthias 2013).

However, reflecting the plurality and complexity of feminisms, it has not been a consensual and unidirectional proposal. Prins (2006) identifies two main non-essentialist approaches: a systemic and a constructionist. The first, a more systemic that highlights the impact that systems or structures have on the formation of identities, rose from the contributions of North-American feminists such as Angela Davis (1981), Audre Lorde (1984) or Patricia Hill Collins (1991). The more constructionist branch from the contributions of the British Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992), Paul Gilroy (1987) ou Beverley Skeggs (1997) and focus mainly on the relational and dynamic aspects of social identity (Prins 2006). Both perspectives assume the important intersectionality premise of going beyond a primary and essentialized gaze at identities and look at the crossings and intersections of the axis of belonging. This decentration will ultimately make visible the ones that wouldn't generally be visible and are currently ignored or marginalized, due to their positionings (Oprisko, Caplan, 2014), retrieving them from a position of intersectional blindness (Purdie-Vaughns, Einbach 2008).

As concludes Conceição Nogueira (2013):

The different feminist researchers (with different methodologies) should be able to allow the (un)clogging and (de)construction of the oppressive categories, the demonstration of how they operate in terms of subordination and privilege matrixes, so that enables as a whole to "construct" valid and useful knowledge that allows reaching and promoting experiences of life, with quality and without experiences of inequality. (Nogueira, p. 238).

Intersectional theory postulates, therefore, the visibilization (Bowleg 2008; Lugones 2010) and enlargement of the political subject of feminisms (Nogueira 2013), enabling to understand and to know the 'reality' with greater proximity to the subjects, explanatory and analytical capacity, while maintaining a strong political, personal and social empowerment component (Magalhães 2016).

This systematization of categories, which can be organized according to matrixes of oppression or privilege, brings a dynamic vision to the construction of identities without relying on an additive view of these categories but focusing on an integrative perspective, multiplicative of oppressions and privileges of each individual (DeFrancisco, Palczewski 2007). As Patricia Hills Collins (1991) highlights it is important to take in consideration the existence of this "matrix of domination" that

organize power globally and displays differently locally, relying on a social and historical particular configuration. In this sense, it is important to see intersectionality as a standpoint theory as it relies on situated knowledge and on the dynamic, and sometimes contradictory, interaction between oppressors and oppressed. This multidimensionality intends to sustain the subjectivities and experiences of the social groups, and mainly the way these impact the most oppressed.

In this sense, intersectionality worked as a mediator as it brought together important debates within the feminist contemporary movement. First, intersectionality brought visibility to the effects of race/ethnicity, social class and gender on the identities, experiences and struggles of women; and secondly, supported the postmodern perspectives on its deconstruction of the oppositional, dichotomic, binaries and the inherent universal status of the modern paradigms (K. Davis 2014).

As reflected elsewhere (Magalhães, Cerqueira, Bernardo 2012: 6), "This is based on the assumption that gender, race, ethnic background, age, class or sexual orientation cannot be ignored and merged into a homogeneous totality". So, intersectional lenses are crucial to understanding reality and their multiple and overlapping points of oppression. In other words, "intersectionality offers endless opportunities for interrogating one's own blind spots and transforming them into analytic resources for further critical analysis" (K. Davis 2008: 77).

Whether we are traversed by privileges or oppressions, and especially by both, in the most varied contexts, it is impossible to minimize the impact they have on the sedimentation or deconstruction of the relations of power in our subjectivity and daily experiences.

As highlights Butler (2004: 145), "identification always relies upon a difference that seeks to overcome, and that its aim is accomplished only by reintroducing the difference it claims to have vanquished. The one with whom I identify is not me, and that "not being me" is the condition of the identification".

Previous conditions converged to the emergence of the concept, and later theory and methodological proposal, of intersectionality. In 1988, Deborah King attempted to combine three of the core dimensions: gender, race/ethnicity and social class. Her formulation based on a threat/danger approached led to the concept of "triple jeopardy" (K. Davis 2014); it can not be ignored as a starting point of the contemporary intersectionality approach. Despite focusing mainly on a more additive vision of imbalances/oppressions, it allowed a more focused analysis of these three identity categories, the "Big Three" - class, race, gender (e.g. A. Davis 1981; hooks 1984).

In what concerns academia, and although the research trajectory within feminist studies is already marked by the importance of looking at the intersection of different systems of oppression and

privilege, few are still the researches/studies that adopt an intersectional look, and that use this denomination (e.g. Neves et al 2013; Nogueira 2013; Oliveira 2010; Cerqueira, Magalhães 2017).

What Changes...

When growing from an intersectional framework we have always to consider that the main change has to be in ourselves. A change in how we perceive and relate with people and their experiences. The change has to be ontological (considering the nature of our existence and of reality itself) and epistemological (reflecting on people's beliefs, knowledge and its limitations); implying that we change our way of producing knowledge by considering specific conditions and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991) that are at stake.

A broader and, at the same time, more specific approach is not detached from a change on the way we look to "social reality" but also on the way we consider people, their subjectivities and their agency as (political) subjects (Nogueira, 2013), recapturing some from the places of (in)visibility (Bowleg, 2008; Lugones, 2010) to which they were usually confined to. As Butler puts it:

When we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. (Butler, 2004: 141)

In this sense, doing research based on an intersectional feminist approach must comprise the visibilization of experiences that were once silenced, unknown (Gopaldas 2013). As a theoretic-epistemological and methodological perspective used in different fields of knowledge, intersectionality allows knowledge construction on the effects of multiple identities and empowerment strategies by deconstructing universal and binary viewpoints (Davis 2014). However, we must not forget the difficulty implied in capturing different belongings and identity categories. A reflexive approach must accompany us on this intention of designing and implementing more integrated and intersectional projects in order to allow us to, at least partially, engage in a viable, broader, feminist proposal (cf. Davis, 2008).

When considering doing research with an intersectional framework three different approaches can be considered: an anti-categorical, intra-categorical or inter-categorical one.

Anti-categorical

The anti-categorical approach is based on the total deconstruction or contestation of the existence of categories. Rose from the 80's postmodern/poststructuralist and anti-racism criticisms, and is part of the discussion on the deconstruction of inequality itself. This approach rejects categorization and criticizes the definition of boundaries in categories and the meanings associated by arguing on the division they create on a too complex society to be reduced to finite dimensions. In this sense, for "this perspective, social categories are construction of history and language that are arbitrary and that contribute little to the understanding of the ways in which people experience society" (Nogueira, 2017: 45).

Methodologically, research will mainly involve biographies, life stories, personal narratives or case studies focusing on the concrete experiences of the individuals in a particular context.

Intra-categorical

The intra-categorical approach recognizes the limitations of the existing social categories and questions how they define their limits. Despite this, it acknowledges the relevance of these social categories to make possible a better understanding of the socially shared experience they enable. The focus here is to unveil the diversity within a social group as categories have an ambivalent status: "if we consider social constructions with localized, unstable and fluid status, they can be assumed (as stable) at a particular moment or in a particular context to produce useful knowledge at a given perspective" (Nogueira, 2017: 46). Central to this approach is the process by which categories are constituted, produced, experienced, reproduced and even resisted to in daily lives.

Intercategorical (o categorial)

This approach congregates the more classic and traditional methodologies and epistemologies, as it considers the stable and durable interactions that social categories represent in a particular moment - despite keeping in mind a critical positioning to this same categories. This approach derives from the sense that social inequalities exist in society and that discussions on the relations between categories can be therefore made. The main concern is to identify the nature of the interactions between social groups and the way they evolve.

Critics have questioned the ability to comprise the complex and diverse features of society without reinforcing divisions and legitimizing the existence of categories falling in simplistic homogenization. The focus is on the complexity of the interactions between multiple social groups within and across analytical categories and not on the complexities within a single group, single category or both. The analysis, therefore, considers always multiple groups comparing them systematically (Nogueira 2017).

In conclusion, we can ascribe intersectionality the role of setting up the tools to the deconstruction of the non-representation, of the invisibilization/erasure, and violation of oppressed minorities (May 2014).

... How We Do It

There is not a better way to do it... the important is to be critical and reflexive on the multiplication of experiences that derive from this feminist intersectional point of view.

Our works always had in mind the fundamental aim of social transformation based on a social justice approach. As incorporating an intersectional lens implies creating spaces of visibility for social inequalities and allowing these to be occupied by various "places of speech" (Ribeiro, 2017), in a dialogue that does not ignore the weight and importance of history and of a context that, although crossed by globalization, is always situated (Haraway, 1991).

We also agree with [Ahir Gopaldas](#) and Glenna DeRoy (2015) as they remind us that:

"only an intersectional approach can help researchers discern the stark and subtle contours of inequities across intersections of privileged and oppressed identities. Only intersectional analyses apprehend the heterogeneity of representations within each category, enabling more accurate conclusions. Only an intersectional approach can expose instances of intersectional invisibility, that is, the low to zero visibility granted to intersections of historically oppressed identities". (DeRoy, 2015: 25)

In fact, to us, there is no such thing as depoliticized, institutionalized intersectionality (Nash, 2008). This always requires a careful look at the analysis that we do not to neglect the roots of the concept and its trajectory. This aspect refers to the importance of locating capitalism in theories of intersectionality. For us, this feminist intersectional approach is radically tied up to social movements as they carry on with the strive for visibility and inclusion, questioning us all on our places of oppression and privilege.

Critical and reflexive comments

Intersectional lenses challenge and changes academic research, public policies and social movements. Despite all the changes that have already been made in this field, much remains to be done. According to Trujillo (2015: 1534), "issues of diversity included in educational plans usually also respond to a heterosexual and white matrix. Race is included, most of the time, as something exotic that we must tolerate, rather than as different cultural forms to be respected". This scenario refers us to the persistence of dimensions that are included while others are

excluded.

As stated elsewhere (Cerqueira, Magalhães 2017), we agree with Christine Bose when highlighting that:

Not only is the global North/global South dichotomy a poor depiction of reality, as geographic mapping of many gender inequalities reveals (Seager 2009), but theoretical developments over the past several decades have begun to expose the intersectional variation across issues and regions of the world and have illustrated how geographic dichotomies can homogenize real conditions. (Bose, 2012: 70)

Social diversity cannot be a stranger in the broader democratic project that allows equal consideration, equal subjectivities and equal positionings from all people. Actually, our main social battle implies the social construction of a 'reality' where power relations, and the relations that sustain societies, at the same time contest, resist and deconstruct institutional power (Castells 2007; Magalhães, Cerqueira, Bernardo 2012).

One of the challenges that researchers face, and academia as an organization, is the holistic comprehension of a phenomenon, allowing to respond positively to Spivak's (1988) question: *Can the subaltern speak?* However, we must highlight that there are diverse interpretations to intersectionality, placing it sometimes in a more mainstream than disruptive paradigm. Despite all epistemological, theoretical and methodological diversity, in our point of view these must be in favour of an activist academy, that questions neoliberalism and which positions research as a sphere that is attentive to various social inequalities and therefore committed to social transformation.

This shaking of structures of privilege, which also cross social movements often headed by white, heterosexual and bourgeois women, allows us to recognize so many other forms of asymmetries. In an era marked by complexity and transnationalization of movements and social struggles, incorporating an intersectional approach makes revindication strategies more solid and allows us to long for more activists and to raise awareness of more people.

Another sphere of reflection and intervention that we consider extremely important, and that begins to be the subject of reflection, is the media, in the sense of allowing the promotion of literacy to/from and through the media. As we argued before, elsewhere, there is a growing "importance of looking at media in its multiple variants as elements/instruments of deconstruction of hierarchies of "personhood" by the promotion of representations that do not ignore the existing power relations and that contribute to attenuate situations of erasure, secondary and social inequality" (Cerqueira, Magalhães 2017: 10). We are in the field of power relations that constantly generate conflicts and points of resistance, as Foucault (1982) tells us. And this seems to us to

be also one of the great potentialities of intersectionality, that of emancipation and political mobilization (Crenshaw 1991) and of the interconnection of thematic agendas, both in academia, in the implementation of public policies and in the actions of social movements. Therefore, we are not only talking about theory but a practical approach that allows us to overcome injustice and bring about social change.

This critical positioning leads us to Sara Salem (2016) when she retrieves Edward Said's concept of travelling theories, worked by Carbado (2013), to sustain that as theories travel, they not only lose their radical advantages but can also fulfil a radical potential. And that brings closer again to the situated knowledge by Donna Haraway (1991) and to the relevance of an intersectional looking because "there is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (Lorde 1984).

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