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Intersectionality as Method

Helma Lutz

Intersectionality has long left the field of gender studies; it is now used 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. But what exactly is intersectionality? A buzzword (Davis, 2011)? A theory? A concept? A heuristic device? A method? An analytical tool for textual analysis? A living practice?

Kathy Davis (2008a,b) regards intersectionality as a theory that goes far beyond its appearance as “buzzword”, as it offers new potential and perspectives for the connectivity of a broad range of social science scholars’ approaches. 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 (2003) 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 intersectionalists’ 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 decentered category it could easily be made superfluous.

Others, like myself, consider the concept a heuristic device or a method that is particularly helpful in detecting the overlapping and co-construction of visible and, at first sight, invisible strands of inequality (Lutz, 2001). This is especially the case when the analysis includes various levels, as I discuss in the next section. The main added value is that intersectionality enables to take variety in power contexts into account, a claim that I further develop in the concluding section.

Levels of Analysis

Intersectionalist scholars that consider intersectionality to be a methodology are currently debating the level at which intersectionality is at work, i.e. the structural or the individual level. Floya Anthias (1998) has suggested a multi-level analysis that works on four levels: the level of discrimination (experience); the actors' level (inter-subjective praxis); the institutional level (institutional regimes); and the level of representation (symbolic and discursive).

In her effort to make use of intersectionality's potential as a method Kathy Davis (2014) makes some suggestions as to how researches can learn to "do" an analysis that includes various levels. She recommends to start with intersectionality's premise that gender as the theoretical mainstay of feminist research needs to be complicated, that is, that it should never be treated as a standalone category, but is always and everywhere related to other differences and mutually constituted by these differences. She then proposes to test this assumption by first identifying a text, a photograph or a TV program which seems to be "about gender", then read, describe and explain it, and in a third step ask Mary Matsuda's famous "other question":

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, p. 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, or cultural representation. However, it requires a rather complicated analytical process and, given the openness of the invisible, it is not clear where or when one can stop (Ludvig, 2006). Matsuda's question means that one needs to avoid (1) the narrow focus on one category and (2) the mentioning of multiple differences without taking them into account. Instead one needs to start with cross-questioning the categories that come to the fore at first sight.

For qualitative researchers, like me, working with biographical interviews and applying the hermeneutical case study analysis, the "other question" functions as a directive to focus on various levels of the analysis.

First, it is crucial to reflect on partiality: the differences in situatedness between the two people involved in the interview. These differences can include class, "race"/ethnicity, age gender, nationality, able-body-ness and religion. Here, it is not advisable to use the mantra of what Judith Butler (1990, p. 143) calls "the embarrassed etc. clause", where the researcher presents herself as white, middle-class, heterosexual

etc. and that's it. Instead it is important to ask what differences are brought to the fore by the interviewee in her/his self-presentation because one can assume that these play a role in the concept of "self", the view of life. As I have shown in an article written together with Kathy Davis in 2005, it is very likely that the interviewee her/himself uses intersectionality in the construction of her/his life-story as much as the interviewer does in her/his analysis. As a result, intersectionality needs to be doubly explored, on the level of the narrator and on the level of the analyst.

Second, it is important to notice that interviewees highlight gender, "race"/ethnicity, class, age, etc. at certain moments in their narration in connection with certain experiences or phases in their lives. The identity category that is used in the first place or most frequently is not necessarily the most important one. Rather it may be that that is the identity aspect that is repeatedly attacked and therefore defended. In our case analysis of the life story of Mamphela Ramphele, an anti-apartheids-fighter and icon of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, a famous and influential intellectual-academic and a former managing director of the World Bank, we identified conflicts of belonging. In her interview and her biography, Ramphele highlights those forms of belonging which were not conceded to her in the first place, that is, those aspects of identity she was not entitled to occupy (see Lutz & Davis, 2005).

Third, intersectionality on the level of power relations is a crucial subject of analysis. For example, in the Ramphele-case self-presentation was embedded in the context of violent and institutionalized racism. As a narrator, however, Ramphele denies that there is nothing more to be said. Instead she shows that in such a society positions are never determined or fixed, but that the respective form of belonging depending on context, locality and point in time can result in gains or losses of power (Lutz & Davis, 2005). Her story is that of a fighter and an exceptional woman. Against all attempts to push her aside or portray her as a victim, she reclaims the competences of an independent actor, organizing her own life and thereby contributing to the creation of a collective history.

By distinguishing these three levels of intersectional analysis we identify the opportunities to employ the categories of intersectionality in a case study analysis. We shift attention away 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" we explore how individuals creatively draw on various aspects of their multiple identities as a resource to gain control over their lives. We show how "gender" and "race", invariably linked to structures of domination, can mobilize and deconstruct disempowering discourses, and undermine and transform oppressive practices. We thereby show that individ-

uals are not always and not in every situation multiply vulnerable. Instead they develop strategies of resistance by drawing on multiple identities. Nancy Fraser (2003, p. 57) 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.

Here the stress is on the understanding of individuals as not dominated by oppression in all fields of life but as people who, under certain circumstances, also make use of the privileged aspects of their identity. This definition 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). The captions associated with the images show an understanding of identities as simultaneously merging advantaged and disadvantaged social positionings.

The Added Value of Intersectionality as a Method

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. However, I want to point out that 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 analyze in detail what precise aspect of all possible differential markers makes the difference, that is, 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, p. 162). The reduction of most social stratification theories being configured within the container of the nation state needs to be overcome by considering the continually shifting "orders of stratification" on the global and regional as well as the national and local level. We should likewise "reject the naturalisation of any construction of social divisions, and challenge the prioritisation of any of them, such as class and gender" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 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 (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 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. Intersectionality as a method can avoid this trap.

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