



HAL
open science

Intersectionality

Ann Phoenix, Pamela Pattynama

► **To cite this version:**

Ann Phoenix, Pamela Pattynama. Intersectionality. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 2006, 13 (3), pp.187-192. 10.1177/1350506806065751 . hal-00571273

HAL Id: hal-00571273

<https://hal.science/hal-00571273>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Editorial

Intersectionality

As we were editing this special issue we learned of four international conferences on intersectionality as well as of discussions of it in other national forums and in print. While it would be far fetched to suggest that everyone is talking about intersectionality, it is certainly an idea in the process of burgeoning. Indeed, the idea of focusing a special issue on intersectionality was generated from the *European Journal of Women's Studies* 10th anniversary conference where Kathy Davis and Pamela Pattynama stimulated a discussion so animated that it seemed obvious that we should open the pages of the journal to debating it with a view to establishing areas of agreement and points of contention in intersectional theory and practice.

Why are so many feminists both attracted to, and repelled by intersectional analyses? In various ways, the six articles in this collection provide insights into this question. Together, they make clear that the concept is popular because it provides a concise shorthand for describing ideas that have, through political struggle, come to be accepted in feminist thinking and women's studies scholarship. Long before the term 'intersectionality' was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the concept it denotes had been employed in feminist work on how women are simultaneously positioned as women and, for example, as black, working-class, lesbian or colonial subjects (see Brah and Phoenix, 2004). As such, it foregrounds a richer and more complex ontology than approaches that attempt to reduce people to one category at a time. It also points to the need for multiplex epistemologies. In particular, it indicates that fruitful knowledge production must treat social positions as relational. Intersectionality is thus useful as a handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it. The articles that follow give an indication of the plurality of ways in which intersectionality is currently being applied, the range of methods to which it has given rise and its utility in research and policy circles. Not surprisingly, they all critique identity politics for its additive, politically fragmentary and essentializing tendencies.

Even those who agree with intersectional theory in principle can

disagree about the possibility of applying its insights to research, politics and policy. Skeggs (2006) argues, for example, that social divisions have different organizing logics. 'Race', therefore, cannot be treated in the same way as social class. This is a major argument in both Nira Yuval-Davis' and Mieke Verloo's articles. Verloo points out that 'different inequalities are dissimilar because they are differently framed'. It is therefore important, she argues, to 'ground policy strategies not only in the similarity, but also in the distinctiveness of inequalities'. This does not, however, require the eschewing of intersectionality since inequalities are not independent of each other.

The very parsimony of the term 'intersectionality' can potentially make for confusion. People use it in different ways, sometimes inconsistently and with ambiguity. The articles in this issue contribute to understandings of how it can be used. Baukje Prins's article, for example, divides what she calls systemic intersectionality (mostly US-based) from constructionist intersectionality (mostly UK-based). This division is perhaps too absolute and does not include the burgeoning Scandinavian work (see, for example, de los Reyes and Mulinari, 2003; Lykke, 2003; Søndergaard, 2005; Staunaes, 2003). It is, however, invaluable in making clear that the systemic approach can limit possibilities for representing complexity. For example, Prins contends that it foregrounds structure in ways that treat power as unilateral and absolute and assumes that the human subject is 'primarily constituted by systems of domination and marginalization'. In doing so, it disqualifies some of the ways in which people choose to identify because it treats identity as predominantly a matter of categorization and naming. Prins argues that the constructionist approach allows for more nuanced complexity and contradiction.

Some of the articles refer to Judith Butler's (1990) sceptical discussion of the 'etc.' that often appears at the end of lists of social divisions, and her claim that it signals both exhaustion and an illimitable process of signification. Nira Yuval-Davis disagrees with Butler on the grounds that 'such a critique is valid only within the discourse of identity politics where there is a reductionist correspondence between positionings and social groupings'. Instead, she argues that it is crucially important to separate 'the different analytical levels in which social divisions need to be examined . . . the ways different social divisions are constructed by, and intermeshed in, each other in specific historical conditions'. Yuval-Davis questions Butler's premise – that the process of signification is illimitable – by suggesting that 'in specific historical situations and in relation to specific people there are some social divisions which are more important than others in constructing specific positionings' while some social divisions are relevant to most people in most locations. At the same time, she argues, categories of signification have to be viewed as part of a creative, constructive process in which the relationships between positionings,

identities and political values are all central and not reducible to the same ontological level.

The irreducibility of social groupings also exercises Alice Ludvig. She maintains that it is impossible to deal with all the complexities that result from infinite lists of differences. Rather than attempting to address such differences simultaneously across several women, she demonstrates how the particularities of gender can only be understood by considering the specificity of time and place in constructions of structural differences between women. Ludvig's theme, that different voices can be seen to intersect in one narrative, is also the main theme of Marjo Buitelaar's article. As an anthropologist, Buitelaar uses linguistics to discuss the relevance of the concept of the dialogical self in analysing gendered identifications and intersectionality. The result is an innovative demonstration of how a single interview, even an initially disappointing one, can allow analytic insights into intersectionality through the multiple voices that are orchestrated in any one narrative.

A further contribution made by the articles is the demonstration of some of the ways in which intersectionality can inspire political action and policy development. The articles by Nira Yuval-Davis, Mieke Verloo and Anna Bredström all suggest ways to move forward politics and policy while recognizing that further thinking is necessary. The articles by Alice Ludvig, Marjo Buitelaar and Baukje Prins focus on narrative accounts. All, however, also make a contribution to understanding how individual stories are politically embedded and have political consequences. All the articles manage the difficult balancing act of simultaneously foregrounding specificity and politics.

In addition, all the articles focus on methodology, taking forward insights that are beginning to be produced in the literature (e.g. McCall, 2005; and see *EJWS* Vol. 12(3), 2005). In doing so, all help to address a recurrent criticism of intersectionality – that it does not have any methods associated with it or that it can draw upon. Anna Bredström's article makes a particular contribution to disarming those who are sceptical of an intersectional approach. She demonstrates how the lack of attention to some differences in favour of others (even by those who recognize the importance of an intersectional approach) produces analyses that are less policy relevant and analytically sound than would otherwise be the case.

This special issue includes work from a range of disciplines with understandings of intersectionality that include the psychosocial, cultural discourses as well as relations and practices of inclusion, exclusion, marginalization and centring – both visible and invisible. The articles are all theoretically engaged (and critical in the widest sense), but are also concerned with methodology and politics. They focus on microanalytic readings of everyday practices and on macroanalytic social processes.

The special issue begins with three articles that address politics in

different ways. Nira Yuval-Davis's article starts the collection by discussing recent developments of intersectionality. Arguing that the discussion has retained its political importance, she shows how debates have moved beyond a focus on the relationships between the divisions themselves towards discussions on conflation or separation of the different analytical levels in which intersectionality is located. Yuval-Davis calls for political dialogue to be led by those 'whose needs are judged . . . to be the most urgent'.

Mieke Verloo looks at the intersections of multiple inequalities and how they are dealt with at the European level. Verloo demonstrates that strategies effectively addressing multiple inequalities should be more than a simple adaptation of the current tools of gender mainstreaming. Further development of intersectionality theory, complex methods and tools, increased resources but also a rethinking of the representation and participation of citizens in an era of post-identity politics are all necessary.

Anna Bredström focuses on the relevance of intersectionality to feminist HIV/AIDS research. Bredström shows how prominent (feminist) scholarship on sexual health continues to treat race, ethnicity, culture and religion as merely additional to gender. Drawing from Black and postcolonial feminism, she challenges unproblematized 'cultural differences' that have come to replace older ideas of racial biological differences. She argues that queer readings of differences between women and between men may help scholarship to avoid the trap of treating women as if they have no sexual agency. Taking heteronormativity/heteropolarity into account is not enough: gender and sexuality should be perceived as unstable categories making impossible any prediscursive identity. Bredström argues for a contextualized intersectional approach in which systems of oppression are seen as mutually constructing one another and suggests that the primary concern should be with 'the ways in which notions of otherness [of racialization] are constructed through a gendered and sexualized idiom'.

The three articles in the second half of this special issue conduct intersectional analyses of interview data. Alice Ludvig problematizes the impossibility, inherent in the intersectional approach, of taking into account all significant differences. The axes of differences cannot be isolated and any project that strives to encompass a situated subject is necessarily incomplete. Moreover, the question of who defines when, where and why differences are operative is often not addressed. Ludvig discusses Leslie McCall's suggestions for how to deal with the complexity of intersectionality and opts for an analysis of a single narrative self-presentation to look at differences both within and across individuals. She shows how the specificity of time and place affect the particularities of gender. Ludvig's approach also gives insights into the ways in which a single actor is structurally positioned.

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on dialogism and polyphony, Marjo Buitelaar argues that identity is the temporary outcome of responses to the various ways in which we are addressed. To underline her argument, Buitelaar analyses the life-narrative of an adult daughter of Moroccan labour migrants and shows that the narrator speaks from shifting I-positions with many voices, and (re)shapes her identity through the 'orchestrating' of these collective voices. While the life-story suggests the use and orchestrating of many voices, it is dominated by a 'Muslim voice'. Buitelaar concludes that this voice allows the narrator to express religious identification and, at the same time, allows her to inscribe Islamic discourses in a Dutch political discourse.

In the final article, Baukje Prins argues that the effective workings of multiple axes of inequality can only be accounted for in the narration of multilayered stories. According to Prins, the life-stories of her now adult Moluccan and Dutch classmates suggest that, contrary to postmodern insights, questions of origins have continued to be significant for identity formations. She argues against those who believe that issues of origins and routes are most salient to people from minoritized ethnic groups. Instead, she argues that 'all identities are performatively produced in and through narrative enactments that include the precarious achievement of belonging'. Prins's observation makes clear the importance of not making unfounded assumptions about identities and the construction of categories. She concludes that when (collective) roots cannot be established, the forging of new routes is hampered.

Together, the articles make a productive contribution to feminist understandings of intersectionality. However, as Verloo states, we need 'ongoing organized political articulation, struggle, debate, and deliberation' – particularly since no concept is perfect and none can ever accomplish the understanding and explanation of all that needs to be understood and explained within the field of women's studies. We hope this issue will stimulate further debate.

REFERENCES

- Brah, Avtar and Ann Phoenix (2004) 'Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality', *Journal of International Women Studies* 5(3): 75–86.
- Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- De los Reyes, Paulina and Diana Mulinari (2003) 'Intersektionalitet som teoretisk ram vs. mångfaldsperspektivets romma retorik', *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* 23(3–4): 159–62.
- Lykke, Nina (2003) 'Intersektionalitet – ett användbart begrepp för genusforskningen', *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* 23(1): 47–57.
- McCall, Leslie (2005) 'The Complexity of Intersectionality', *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30(31): 1771–802.

- Skeggs, Beverley (2006) 'Which Bits to Exploit? Making Value from Emotional Telling on Reality TV', PhD course on Intersectional Analysis, Aalborg, 18–20 January.
- Søndergaard, Dorte Marie (2005) 'Making Sense of Gender, Age, Power and Disciplinary Position: Intersecting Discourses in the Academy', *Feminism and Psychology* 15(2): 189–208.
- Staunaes, Dorte (2003) 'Where Have All the Subjects Gone? Bringing Together the Concepts of Subjectification and Intersectionality', *NORA: Nordic Journal of Women Studies* 11(2): 101–10.

Ann Phoenix
The Open University
Pamela Pattynama
University of Amsterdam

