

Enzo Colombo, Paola Rebughini

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*Università di Padova (unipd)*

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## **Intersectionality and beyond**

by ENZO COLOMBO and PAOLA REBUGHINI

### *1. Introduction*

The origins of the concept of intersectionality are rooted in the feminist debates of the 1970s and 1980s, when Marxist and materialist feminism argued on the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, while black women movements and postcolonial approaches introduced the issue of colour difference and racial discrimination as specific forms of oppression. The possibility to analyse the articulation of class, gender and race/ethnicity, instead of considering them as independent and separate forms of power relations, is at the basis of the notion of intersectionality as an epistemological approach to domination.

The analysis conducted in this article tries to enlarge the theoretical and heuristic potential of intersectionality as an analytical tool not exclusively related to the investigation of overlapping forms of oppression but which also concerns the more general relationship between individual agency and structural determinants. The aim is to shift the debate from the sum of categories to the wider agency/structure problematic, showing how intersectionality can make a new contribution to the traditional agency/structure debate.

The idea of treating intersectionality as a wider analytical tool arises from our studies related to the sociology of youth, second-generation immigrants, and generational relations in multicultural and pluralist societies; from an interest in how young people – not necessarily situated in marginal positions – manage categories such as ethnicity, age, gender, and cultural capital, while at the same time such categories shape the contexts in which those young people are involved (Colombo and Rebughini

2012). Our proposal is that observing intersectionality from a standpoint not necessarily related with the premise of domination by standardized categories can help bring out the complex dynamics of situated opportunities and constraints. Considering intersectionality as an element of the agency/structure interplay can assist investigation of when, how, and what categories become relevant in power dynamics. Hence, the aim of this article is to depict how intersectionality can be a useful perspective from which to analyse the classic agency/structure relationship, highlighting its time and space dimensions, as well as its relationships with gender and cultural categorizations.

## 2. *The success of a metaphor*

Intersectionality is a metaphor born of struggle and battle. It stems from black women's experience of the simultaneous intertwining of race, gender and class in their lives. It emphasises that oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, crossing, and interwoven systems that, although they have grown out of different logics, in their particular combinations produce specific forms of inclusion and exclusion. As Carastathis (2014, 304) observes, «the metaphor emerges as a critique of white solipsism within feminist discourse», and it has been effective in directing attention to the diversities within women's experience of oppression, marginality and exclusion. While severely criticizing both white women for considering their position to be a universal experience of all women and black men for ignoring the importance of gender issues in racial discrimination, the idea of intersectionality has helped to foreground new activist practices to address black women's specific needs (Corlett and Mavin 2014).

The term «intersectionality» was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to critique the single-issue agendas of feminist and anti-racism social movements, as well as additive approaches to discrimination and oppression (Bilge and Denis 2010, 4; Crenshaw 1989; 1991). Although the idea of intersecting social categories to evaluate their reciprocal effect was present long before the term was coined – as Kimberlé Crenshaw recognised – and although since Simmel sociologists have been aware that no social category works in isolation (Collins 1991), the metaphor of intersectional-

ity has the merit of underlining the multidimensionality of the subject's lived experience.

As Jean Ait Belkhir (2009, 303) states, the metaphor of the simultaneous intersection of race, gender and class in people's lives «is one of the greatest gifts of black women's studies to social theory as a whole and for an integrative understanding of racism, sexism, and classism». Still, as often happens with welcome gifts, the idea of intersectionality has been rapidly appropriated and adapted to the specific exigencies of recipients. Currently, it has become commonplace within gender studies, and is becoming increasingly usual within ethnic, racial and social stratification studies, to look at the ways in which people's lives are shaped by multiple and intersecting systems of categorization.

Indeed, the «discovery» of intersectionality has been often presented in enthusiastic terms and part of its fortune is due to its being in tune with poststructuralist and postcolonial stances that embrace a radical anti-essentialism and privilege plurality, mixing, changes, and ambivalence over monistic approaches. Moreover, the focus on complexity, variability and situatedness matches the growing globalization that exposes individuals to flows of ideas, images, goods and people (Appadurai 1996) and makes salient the interpretive perspectives that highlight the processual social construction of reality.

Criticism and resistance, instead, stem from theoretical and methodological as well as political concerns about intersectionality. The contemporary widespread and blurred use of intersectionality has been criticized both by its «founding mothers» – such as Crenshaw and Collins – and by the scholars more interested in increasing the theoretical coherence of this analytical tool, as well as its centrality in gender studies (McCall 2005; Nash 2008; Yuval-Davies 2006). They have criticized a light use of intersectionality as a fashionable «buzzword», adopted by theorists who did not intend to «miss the boat» (Davis 2008, 67), and enchanted by the promising applications of its open-endedness. After all, the image of a crossroads of categories, representations and stereotypes seems applicable to any sector of social research. Hence, its popularity has been characterized by a growing theoretical confusion and by a sequel of denunciations concerning the lack of a valid method with which to study its empirical bases (Winker and Degele 2011).

Political criticism against a blurred and uninformed use of intersectionality is mainly related to the need to maintain its origi-

nal meaning as an instrument to give voice to the «oppressed», and to intercept forms of domination and categorizations of inclusion and exclusion. In its original intent, the intersectional perspective aimed to investigate the «qualitative differences» of oppression, as in the case of black women (Choo and Ferree 2010). It stressed the fact that categorizations are never neutral and always associated with power relations and inequalities. For many politically engaged scholars and activists, intersectionality should refer to the condition of marginal subjects only, in order to promote their empowerment and the recovery of their voices and experiences. As Kwan remarks (1996, 1275)

straight white maleness arguably is a multiple identity, but intersectionality theorists would resist the claim by straight white males that theirs is an intersectional subjectivity. Central to intersectionality theory is the recovery of the claims and identities of those who, like African American women, are pushed to the margins of racial discourse because of assumptions of patriarchal normativity, and simultaneously pushed to the margins of the feminist discourse because of assumptions of racial normativity.

A too casual and naïve use of the term produces a sanitized and depoliticized version of intersectionality (Collins 2009, xiv) that erodes its potentiality in promoting the enhancement of marginal subjects who are suffering a multiple matrix of oppression.

Although aware of the relevance of the criticism, we suggest that intersectionality may be useful for developing a specific analytical perspective which yields a more composite understanding of the relation between structure and agency, as well as for supporting a critical position that helps the analysis of power processes, also through the de-structuration of the dominant position. We agree with Jennifer Nash (2008, 12) that «in conceiving of privilege and oppression as a complex, multi-valent, and simultaneous, intersectionality could offer a more robust conception of both identity and oppression».

We suggest that the idea of intersectionality is useful as both an analytical tool and a way to depict subjects' phenomenological experience. In the former case, it suggests «where and how to look» better to grasp the complexity and variability of current social relations. As Phoenix and Pattynama (2006, 187) observe, «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». In the latter case, intersectionality may be a suitable keyword with which to refer to subjective experiences of a plurality of different and interrelate social divisions that produce contradictory and ever-changing social locations (Anthias 2013a). It highlights how different systems of social categorization are, at the same time, both *irreducible* – cannot be explained by reduction to other categories – and *dialogical* – operate in the contexts of each other, producing amplifications of inequality or privilege and opening room for changes and resistance (Anthias 2013b). By stressing the ambivalence and fluidity of social location, intersectionality helps to avoid essentializing social identity and considering social categories as ontologically inevitable. It foregrounds the ongoing process of conflict, mediation, resistance and adaptation that characterises the dynamic relations between social structures and agency.

Often, research on gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, belonging, and social stratification focuses on «issues» and «topics» (mapping different groups and dividing the field among different «experts») and fails to pay due attention to the «processes» by which categories are produced. Attention to the processes of production, contestation, and management of differences suggests that intersecting forms of domination produce both oppression and opportunity (Zinn and Dill 1996, 327). Intersectionality may be useful for the analysis of not only the «matrix of domination» but also the «matrix of privilege» to show how any single categorization only works in relation to other categorizations to produce a field of opportunities and constraints. By stressing the social construction of categories, intersectionality helps to deconstruct the dominant social locations that are often not problematized or even noticed. Rather than representing a synonym for oppression, intersectionality «emphasizes how all subjective experiences of selfhood are continually transformed, re-enacted, and re-negotiated as a function of shifting landscapes of social context» (Diamond and Butterworth 2008, 375).

### 3. *The locations of categories*

Theoretical and methodological criticisms of intersectionality often point out that it fails to distinguish which categories are important in defining subjects' social locations and should be taken into consideration. The list of salient categories is potentially limitless, and the concept is unable to define which, when, where, and why particular differences are given recognition while others are ignored or remain in the background (Ludvig 2006). As Judith Butler observes (1990, 143), the inevitable «etc.» that follows any possible list of relevant social divisions that intertwine in the definition of social location is an uncomfortable admission of a «sign of exhaustion as well as of the illimitable process of signification itself». In response to this criticism, Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) points out that some social divisions – especially the classic trilogy of gender, race/ethnicity and class – tend to shape most people's lives in most social locations, although they assume specific meanings and relevance in specific historical situations and in relation to specific groups.

In our view, intersectionality should not be interested in defining a precise set of «objective» or «universally relevant» categories. Instead, it should suggest looking at how social categories assume crucial political importance in specific contexts for particular people. The question of «how» the categories are produced, used or contested, and the meanings that people attribute to such categories in their interactions count more than the (inoperable and useless) attempt to produce a fixed and exhaustive list of alleged relevant differences. The idea is that the current propensity to include dimensions different from the classic gender, race/ethnicity and class – i.e. sexual preferences, age, education, disability, spatial location, religion, to name but a few – rather than being a sign of inconsistency, mirrors the current experience of fluid and multiple identifications. At the same time, this helps in considering the complexity of contemporary forms of discrimination due to conditions, processes and decisions that take place far beyond the possibilities of subjects' action and control; possibilities often related to the subjects' ability to manage the space of manoeuvre and resistance that the various structural dimensions have left open in the specific contexts in which they are to act.

Considering the specific set of intersecting categories that constitute distinctive social locations in particular contexts shifts

attention away from an analysis of the characteristics of the subjects (who they are, how are they labelled: i.e. black-poor-woman) so that the analysis focuses on the dynamics of practical action (how the categories and representations work, how structure and agency interact). Contrary to the apparent uselessness of the effort to take account of «all» categories that help define social positions (a regression that, with its emphasis on the individual dimension and the tautological recognition that all individuals are different, presents an incongruous image of asocial subjects), analysis can focus on the dynamic processes (Staunæs 2003) of the «doing» and the «situated uses» of categories. These are the contexts, the forms of relationships, the hierarchies of power, and the subjects' goals, capabilities and interpretations of the situation that make some differences more or less important in a specific interaction. It is not the focus on the effect of pre-existing, fixed categories, but on the situated functioning of categorization processes, that constitutes the strength of the intersectional perspective. Intersectionality helps to organize the conceptual focus around political alliances rather than identity categories themselves; that is, it helps «to recognize social categories as specific, historically based, contextualized, intersecting and constructed through power while simultaneously remembering that our common heritage is that we share the experience of life within this web of intersections» (Cole 2008, 451).

A second relevant criticism highlights the risk that, because intersectionality suggests the simultaneity and the complexity of intersecting categories in constructing institutionalized practices and lived experiences, it ends up by concealing the specificity of the different categories. Although intertwined, gender, class and race/ethnicity have different histories, stem from different logics of exclusion, and draw strength from different rhetorics (Yuval-Davis 2006; 2011). While considering that relevant social categories mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another, it is important to maintain the capacity to grasp the specific rhetorics, modes of production and reproduction, institutional sites, and material and symbolic interests that underpin the plausibility and legitimacy of specific differences. Gender, class, ethnic/racial, age or sexual preference differences may follow different logics and leave room for different strategic or tactical actions. Rhetorics supporting different categorisations can claim the recognition of difference or deny its importance, reify difference or suggest



getting rid of it. Moreover, the ways in which differences are conceived can change depending on the characteristics of the context, the audiences, and the stakes. Also in this case, in our view, paying attention to the social processes of categorization is a good way to avoid the risk of both collapsing all categories into a single logic and transforming categories into essences that are independent from any contextual connection. Categories are fundamental organizing principles of social relationships, and focusing on the work of social categorization stresses the social construction of differently situated social groups and their varying degrees of advantages and power (Zinn and Dill 1996, 324).

Assuming an intersectional perspective does not necessarily deny the existence/relevance of categories and their specific socio-historical constitution (as the alleged «anti-categorical» perspective does); rather, it highlights the «inevitability» of categories, albeit gainsaying their «a-social» foundation. Categories (and identifications) are necessary; they allow positioning, subjectivity and political action. Nevertheless, they are constantly constructed, imposed, adapted, and contested in interactions, depending on contexts, audiences, personal goals and the resources available. It is precisely because categories have different logics, use different powers, are produced by and produce different subjects that the intersectionality perspective makes evident the character of social construction of social categories and the spaces of resistance and agency opened by their intersection.

#### *4. A constructionist approach to intersectionality: a two-step move*

At this stage, we can consider intersectionality a useful analytical tool with which to highlight that different categories act not only by «adding» disadvantages or privileges but also by creating peculiar social locations. These are neither the mechanical effect of reified social differences – a structural feature of society which imposes its consequences on individual life – nor the personal achievements of autonomous and isolated individuals who can act freely, independently from contextual restraints. Consequently, the intersectional perspective can highlight the dynamics of agency and structural constraints as a series of situated interplays in which categories can have different roles, weights and consequences in designing power dynamics.

An analysis able to take different social categories seriously – considering their social history, logics, forms of legitimation, actors, and contexts – may require a two-step procedure. We suggest an analytical pathway that puts together two of the well-known types of intersectional analysis presented by Leslie McCall (2005): inter- and intra-categorization. The first step is to adopt an inter-categorical approach in which analysis focuses on structural categories, considering them as *given* dimensions that affect particular social behaviours, symbolic representations, and the distribution of resources. This entails taking seriously the categories that institutions, customs, laws, public debate, media, symbolic representations, mundane practices, language, and actors themselves consider viable for the production of appropriate and meaningful accounts of social experience. The analysis considers how specific intersections of the categories relevant in specific socio-historical contexts draw distinct boundaries that define identities and hierarchies of power. In this case, intersectionality helps to assess, through a comparative analysis, how opportunities, capabilities, duties, privileges, material and symbolic resources are differently distributed among the relevant social locations created by the different intersections.

The second step is to move towards a comparative intra-categorical analysis, looking at how individuals, situated at a specific intersection of structural categories, give meaning to their social location and act accordingly. This entails treating categories as political tools that people can use – with different degrees of autonomy and efficacy – to define the situation, to legitimise inclusion and exclusion, to attribute or contest identities. In this case, categories emerge as always ambivalent and under-construction. Therefore, they cannot be simply taken for granted; instead, they should be analysed empirically in terms of their contextual uses. A comparative intra-categorical analysis can show how different categories may leave different amounts of room for action, mediation and resistance in different contexts, highlighting the socio-historical character of any categorisation and opening space for change. The intra-categorical analysis focuses on the dynamic process of categories construction more than on categories themselves. It sheds light on the contingent specificity of every social framework, emphasising change rather than structure (Prins 2006).

Paying attention to the quality of the situation means concentrating on the agency of individuals as well as on the constraints

and limits of the situation. A dynamic and constructionist approach to intersectionality – as well as to the power relations and social positions involved in each intersection – can shed light on the ways in which practices and identifications are co-authored by subjects and structures. It shows not only how categories affect individual lives, but also how subjects construct, translate, manage and transform categories in everyday life. The attention to how categories produce and are produced by power highlights that what is at stake in the management of categories is the production of hegemonic representations of reality, and that such a production is always the result of struggles between different interests and world images.

Indeed, adding inter-categorical and intra-categorical analysis helps «to deliver a convincing methodological convergence between structural categories derived from social theory and the analysis of sociocultural practices» (Bürkner 2012, 191). In this way, intersectional analysis may afford better understanding of the interaction between agency and structural constraints. It can depict a more complex framework for social action in which both a rigid structural determinism and a naïve emphasis on individual creativity or resistance are replaced by a process-centred perspective (Choo and Ferree 2010) based on a social constructionist approach that considers the position of political subjects and their agency as a contested process of creation, resistance, struggle, and translation in a field of power relations.

Intersectionality is useful for criticising the alleged «naturalness» of the dominant categories that, being hegemonic, do not let their effects be easily seen. Yet it also helps to highlight that social categories are constructed, and how people «play» (with varying degrees of ease) within them to open space for autonomous action. Hence, there is no fixed or ideal set of categories to consider; what matters instead is the possibility to impose some relevant categories as such. The focus should be shifted to the struggle around categorization: when, how, and the extent to which a category has become a political tool. This requires bringing power into intersectionality, not because intersectionality is necessarily based on the overlapping of already-existing dominant categories, but because within the situatedness of an intersection of categories it is possible to investigate how such categories become power devices, how they are used, how they are contrasted. This means investigating the extent to which a

category can enhance agency or be a device of structural constraints.

To sum up, the widespread interest in intersectionality, and its growing presence in theoretical debates beyond gender studies, remains associated with its analytical potential: the possibility to analyse multidimensionality, simultaneity, pluralism, and social construction of categorizations, as well as their discrete forms in the specificities of the situation. We think that this point should be developed further as one of the main possible contributions of intersectionality to a more informed and effective understanding of the connection between agency and structure. In the following section, we shall suggest how this could be done.

### *5. The agency-structure debate from an intersectional perspective*

We have said that intersectionality is in tune with poststructuralist and postcolonial approaches in deconstructing the binary modern opposition between agency and structure, and in supporting the idea of the coproduction of structures and subjectivities. Indeed, the encounter between poststructuralist approaches – first and foremost the foucauldian one – and the feminist theory of intersectionality can open a new path for a contextualized approach to agency and for a situated and historicized analysis of structures. In this regard, «intersectionality provides a critical lens to analyse articulations of power and subjectivity in different instances of social formations» (Bilge 2010, 23); it can shed light on both the conceptualization of agency and the bond – not the dichotomy – between agency and structure.

Agency and the tensions between agency and structure have been at the centre of sociological debates, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, searching for a way to overcome the ancient dualism between subjectivity and objectivity, intentional will and determinism. Pierre Bourdieu (1980) and Antony Giddens (1979) have been among the best known proponents in such debates, although the discussions have involved many other scholars with different theoretical orientations, such as Margaret Archer (1988), Jeffrey Alexander (1988), Jürgen Habermas (1984; 1989), Hans Joas (1996), Alberto Melucci (1996), Alain Touraine (1984), to name but a few.

The two decades of the 1980s and 1990s were characterized also by the crisis of the functionalist, structuralist and Marxist

approaches, by the worldwide spread of French poststructuralism, postmodernism and deconstructionist interpretations united in their endeavour to demonstrate the impossibility of a self-transparent and free-will subject. Accordingly, actors are always constituted and constituting, and agency cannot be a self-explanatory concept: there is no ontological priority of agency over context. Agency cannot correspond to the heroism of a self-referential resistant subject, and in this respect feminism and gender studies have made a fundamental contribution (Felski 1995). Dissidence, rather than pure resistance, can highlight agency, and – as postcolonial research demonstrates – such dissidence sometimes does not correspond to the values of the researcher (Abu-Lughod 1990).

The approaches more attentive to domination, such as those of Foucault and Bourdieu, have recognized the ambivalent active and passive role of the actor in the construction of structural constraints, as well as in the productive function of power. Paradoxically, the reference to practice as a bridging concept between agency and structure – popularized by the different but complementary approaches of Bourdieu and Giddens – has fostered the classic overlap between agency and autonomy, the idea that agency is related to intentionality and will, while practices recall the inevitable constraints produced by social life. Indeed, all the protagonists of the agency/structure debate have had difficulties in focusing, at the same time and with equal attention, on agency and structural constraints. Some of them have been more interested in analysing structural developments arising from routines or power relations, while others have mainly reflected on agency as the product of individual will, capacity for resistance, and attitude toward a rational or tactical choice. A number of scholars have also tried to draw up classifications of agency by focusing on intentionality, resistance, self-reflection, rationality, or other possible characteristics (Barnes 2000).

The difficulty of working simultaneously on both agency and structure may be due to a lack of focus on the issues of time and space, and to the tendency to sidestep *situatedness*, as in the conceptualizations of routine and embodied dispositions put forward by Giddens and Bourdieu. Although the centrality of time has been evoked in various analyses of agency – to analyse temporal orientations of action and the influence of previous experiences – the combination of time and space has been rarely explored in the agency/structure debate.

In our opinion, the opportunity to work on the dimensions of situatedness as the specific location of the dynamic interplay between time and space is the main contribution that intersectionality – more specifically in its comparative intra-categorical version – can make to the agency/structure debate. Intersectionality can show how people make choices within the flow of situated circumstances; it can show the interplay between agent creativity and possibility of choice within the structural constraints of social categorizations and social positions; it can highlight the interplay between the «here and now» of contingent situations and the permanence of constraints such as social inequalities, the interplay between temporal situated representations, and solidified categorizations such as stereotypes.

The fact that structural constraints cannot be separated from the creativity of action – because any action can potentially create new structural constraints and any action is based on socialization to rules and environments – can be grasped in the flow of time and in the situatedness of specific locations where different constructed categorizations intersect. Indeed, in the circular recursivity of constraints and creativity of action, of structural routines and innovative attitudes, categorizations are not stable and paradigmatic references; rather, they are constantly under construction. If, on the one hand, they can be criticized as stereotypical, rigid and oversimplified representations – typically in the case of gender, racial and ethnic representations – on the other hand, they are never as rigid and monolithic as they appear, and their components can be used, appropriated and interpreted in different ways according to the context, the actors involved, and the dynamics of power relations.

Hence, the intersectional approach can shed light on the ongoing constructivist characteristics of categorizations because it makes it possible to focus on their intersection and fluidity in a specific social location. And at a particular moment in time, knowledge, opinions, criticisms on categorizations constitute a set of cumulated references and a fluid plural material of discussion and interpretation. Agency emerges as a «result» of intersecting categories, rather than being an autonomous force opposed to them. It is the plurality of convergent categories, with their different logics and languages, that open room for adaptation, translation, resistance, and change.

Categorizations, as well as identities and identification patterns, constitute settled references and routines that can be activated

and reinterpreted by actors in specific situations to orient their action, to give sense to a context, to interpret a new environment. This means that there is not just a reproductive pattern, but an active interpretation of the settled material that constitutes the social structure in which actors are involved. The creativity and imagination behind any active interpretation should not be considered as subjective gifts, but rather as projective capacities to evaluate and reconfigure the situation, to deal with a repertoire of references, with local constraints, with the consequences of one's choices. This also means that, in the situatedness of a context, actors are able to make judgments and evaluations, to scrutinize the characteristics of the situation and adapt themselves, to justify their choices and their reasons, to claim the justness of their references on the base of a more universalistic idea of justice (Colombo and Rebughini 2012).

In this respect, categorizations do not simply intersect in a deterministic way, or as an overwhelming «matrix of domination» (Collins 1991); rather, actors can use them, resist them, and adapt them with reflective distance, according to the margins of flexibility of each situation. Certainly, the literature on intersectionality does not explicitly deny that in other contexts the same categorizations can entail different, more complex and more ambivalent, combinations related to the complexity of the multidimensional conceptualization and social construction of the categories. Indeed, Kimberlé Crenshaw herself claims in her seminal article of 1989 (Crenshaw 1989) that intersectionality is first of all a methodology with which to study the «relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations» (McCall 2005, 1771). Yet, it is important to underscore that – beyond situations of absolute domination and violence – this practical evaluative dimension is related to the contextualization and situatedness of actors' experience. If categorizations, as stereotypes, are unavoidable cognitive elements with which to order the complexity of social references, to orient expectations, select attention, and construct «systems of relevance» (Schutz 1964), they can be contextually negotiated and translated. Consequently, there is always a certain degree of reflectivity in the use of categorizations, in the way in which they are imposed, refused, negotiated.

Intersectionality can highlight that actors' agency is always involved in time and space, in the becoming of situations.



Hence, intersectionality is not just another «mediating concept» to overcome the dichotomy between, on the one hand, intentionality and subjectivity, and on the other, constraints, routines and objectification; rather it can show how – in the action itself as doing and thinking, in a specific section of time and space, within specific constraints and opportunities – the intrinsic pluralism of subjectivation processes can produce innovation, improvisation, social change.

Overall, our suggestion is that intersectionality's intra-categorical perspective can highlight how categories are constructed and interpreted in the situated and contextualized interplay between agency and structural constraints. One of the main epistemological premises of intersectionality is the claim that there are no finite and definitive categories. Nothing fits in an homogeneous and stable frame: the categories that we use to order reality have no foundation in a stable and material reality. Because they are constructed in language and practical situations, they cannot be claimed as «true», even though they can be «real» in their consequences (Collins 1991).

The differences among contexts and combinations of the relevant categorizations involved in each context rise different agency orientations. Comparing different contexts and combinations of categorizations enhances the creativity of actors through the transposition and translation of previous experiences into new situations (Melucci 1996). As a matter of fact, this was also the original intuition of Goffman's idea of frame (1974), and before him, of Simmel's analysis of modern city life: in everyday life actors are involved in the plural embedding of different frameworks that elicit different strategic attitudes and different experiences of reality. They are often positioned at the intersection of different categorizations – age, gender, economic stratification, ethnicity, and so on. The more these categorizations are reciprocally distant or contradictory, the more actors will be induced to develop a creative capacity for practical evaluation, mediation, judgment and adaptation.

Still, intersectionality paves the way to an analysis quite different from that developed by the interactionism of goffmanian sociology, where situatedness is often emphasised as a given reference, and where strategy and tactics are considered the main instruments with which the individual can cope with the constraints of the situation. Intersectionality as an analytical tool



can yield further information about the ability of social actors to evaluate the situation critically, by evaluating themselves in light of the intersection and interplay among different categorizations. Focusing on comparative intra-categorical analysis makes it possible to investigate how individuals are located in a specific intersection of structural categories, as well as how they give meaning to their action in that specific social location and in the immanence of that specific section of time. This means that it is possible to focus on individual agency, whose «degree of freedom» is shaped by social position and by the specific set of limits and resources created by a particular intersection of different social forms of categorization.

Moreover, intersectionality may help to recognise that categories are socially constructed but, once produced, they are also «structural»: they are able to define the context and to promote some course of action while hindering others. Attention to intersections shows that categories such as gender, class, ethnicity and age, as well as other forms of cultural difference, are neither unitary nor universal and fixed; they may change, and people may change them in relation to personal capacity, will, and external conditions (Hayes 2010; Levine-Rasky 2011; McDowell 2008; Purkayastha 2010; Valentine 2007).

## 6. *Beyond intersectionality*

The success of intersectionality as an analytical tool is closely related to the lively and sometimes heated debate that has surrounded the use of this concept. In this article we have tried to develop the potential of intersectionality as an analytical and heuristic tool with which to move beyond the classic dispute on the agency/structure dichotomy. Yet, this is just one possible development of a thick concept that cannot be confined within narrow and static definitions. Overall, we have tested the concept of intersectionality by looking beyond well-established theoretical debates such as those on constructionism and determinism or situatedness and historicity. Our suggestion has been to apply the concept of intersectionality considering that social categories do not always work in the same way in different contexts. On the one hand, categories are potentially infinite, but their symbolic and historical weights are not the same, and they are always

defined by the context; on the other hand, the reactions and creative capacities of individuals result from the encounter of intersecting social categories. The pluralism of categories, whose meaning and power can change quickly, makes social contexts more unpredictable and unstable. This can produce new forms of domination, but it can also foster the dynamicity of the contexts and give rise to individual agency.

Therefore, since social categories are at the same time inevitable and irreducible, but also malleable and dialogical, intersectionality can stress the fluidity and instability of social location; it can help to avoid the essentialization of both social categories and identities; and it can shed light on the ongoing processes of reciprocal influence between the construction of structure and the creation of agency. Because the situated relevance of social categories is basically unstable, the point is not only to determine what kinds of categories are fundamental in defining subjectivations and forms of dominations; it is also interesting to analyse the encounter of the meaning and power of categories with the agent's capacity to oversee and manage them. The interest of intersectionality as an analytical tool with which to bypass the agent/structure opposition is related to the situated functioning of categorization processes whereby categories are not rigid structures already in place. Thus, intersectionality can highlight the reciprocal generative force of the agent/structure couple in a way different from the traditional approaches to this classic sociological problem.

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## Intersectionality and beyond

The possibility to analyse the articulation of class, gender and race/ethnicity, instead of considering them as independent and separate forms of power relations, is at the basis of the notion of intersectionality as an epistemological approach to domination. The analysis conducted in this article tries to enlarge the theoretical and heuristic potential of intersectionality as an analytical tool not exclusively related to the investigation of overlapping forms of oppression but which also concerns the more general relationship between individual agency and structural determinants. The aim is to show how intersectionality can make a new contribution to the traditional agency/structure debate. Our proposal is that observing intersectionality from a standpoint not necessarily related with the premise of domination by standardized categories can help bring out the complex dynamics of situated opportunities and constraints. Considering intersectionality as an element of the agency/structure interplay can assist investigation of when, how, and what categories become relevant in power dynamics. Since social categories are at the same time inevitable and

irreducible, but also malleable and dialogical, intersectionality can stress the fluidity and instability of social location; it can help to avoid the essentialization of both social categories and identities; and it can shed light on the ongoing processes of reciprocal influence between the construction of structure and the creation of agency.

*Keywords:* Intersectionality, agency/structure, social construction, social location.

*For correspondence:* Enzo Colombo, Department of Social and Political Sciences (SPS), Università degli studi di Milano, Via Conservatorio 7, 20122 Milano, Italy. E-mail: enzo.colombo@unimi.it

*For correspondence:* Paola Rebughini, Department of Social and Political Sciences (SPS), Università degli studi di Milano, Via Conservatorio 7, 20122 Milano, Italy. E-mail: paola.rebughini@unimi.it

