

Intersectional what? Social divisions, intersectionality and levels of analysis

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Abstract

This article contributes to the growing debate on intersectionality by proposing a theoretical framing which attends to different levels of analysis in terms of *what* is being referred to (social categories or concrete social relations); societal arenas of investigation; and historicity (processes and outcomes). It discusses questions of social ontology, categories, groupings and more concrete social relations relating to boundaries and hierarchies in social life. The article presents a particular analytical sensitivity which attends to the dialogical nature of social relations, the centrality of power and social hierarchy, and the importance of locating these within spatial and temporal contexts.

Keywords

Class, ethnicity, gender, intersectionality, levels of analysis

Introduction

Intersectionality approaches provide an important corrective to essentialising identity constructs that homogenise social categories. Although social divisions such as gender, ethnicity and class have been understood through the lens of intersectionality for at least two decades, and have had a profound effect on feminist theories in particular, this approach has only recently acquired a more central place in academic and political life. Moreover, intersectionality has now become part of policy initiatives, which have begun to recognise multiple intersecting inequalities (for example within the Equality Act 2010 in the UK (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010)).

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For Knapp, it is because intersectionality has become ‘a formula merely to be mentioned, being largely stripped of the baggage of concretion, of context and history’ that it has been such a ‘fast travelling concept’ (Knapp, 2005: 255). This article focuses on the specific issue of the analytical levels that need attending to in any framing which is dedicated to the complexity and mutual interdependency of social divisions. Winker and Degele (2011) also raise the issue of levels and argue for an intersectionality approach which focuses on ‘interactions between inequality-creating social structures (i.e. of power relations), symbolic representations and identity constructions that are context-specific, topic-orientated and inextricably linked to social praxis’ (2011: 54). However, although this is a position that I concur with, I use the term ‘societal arenas of investigation’ for the types of foci that they refer to as different levels of analysis. I propose a theoretical framing which attends to different levels of analysis instead of questions about *what* is being referred to (social categories or concrete relations), *societal arenas of investigation* and *historicity* (processes and outcomes). I also explore the notion of intersection, which I argue is one of the pivotal concepts used (see also Bilge, 2010).

Intersectionality: A range of approaches

This article makes the assumption that ‘intersectionality’ does not refer to a unitary framework but a range of positions, and that essentially it is a heuristic device for understanding boundaries and hierarchies of social life. I will refer, therefore, to an intersectional framing rather than to intersectionality theory. This differs from some current views that it constitutes a theoretical and empirical paradigm (Hancock, 2007: 249–250), on the one hand, or the idea that it is a buzzword (Davis, 2008), on the other. However, the plurality of the ways in which it can be advanced is acknowledged.

At a very broad level, and put simply, intersectionality posits that social divisions interrelate in terms of the production of social relations and in terms of people’s lives. For example, gender is seen as inflected by other social divisions such as ‘race’ and class, and they are seen as mutually constitutive (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Collins, 1993). This highlights divisions amongst ‘women’ (and other social categories), by pointing towards processes of racialisation and class, and the disadvantages that follow.¹ The focus on gender, ethnicity/race and class does not imply that sexuality, age, disability, faith and so on cannot be incorporated. For example, there has been important recent writing on sexuality (Taylor et al., 2011) and disability (e.g. Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009), thereby broadening analysis away from the ‘big three’. As Dhamoon notes, ‘the privilege assigned to this trinity is not intrinsic to the study of categories but indicative of the choices researchers have made ... in specific historical contexts’ (2011: 5).

It is worth noting, in this context, that the idea of the existence of interrelations in the domain of the social is not new and arguably constitutes the very foundation of classical sociological theory.² The concern with the links between different forms of identity and hierarchy is not new either, and there has been a long-standing

interest, both theoretical and political, in exploring the connections between different forms of subordination and exploitation.³ In other words, the interconnections between social divisions were recognised without being named as 'intersectionality'. The impetus in the formulation of intersectionality arose within a feminist politics articulated powerfully by black feminists (see, for example, Combahee River Collective, 1977/1982; hooks, 1981). The political underpinnings of intersectionality are clear in the work of pioneers such as Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberle Crenshaw amongst others.

The work of Patricia Hill Collins on gender, race and class became central to feminist theory and method before the term intersectionality was coined. She treats these as ideological (Collins, 1990, 1993, 1998, 2001) or discursive practices emerging in the process of power production, and as historically contingent (as would be suggested in the work of Foucault, 1972).⁴ Using the notion of interlocking oppressions organised through a 'matrix of domination' (1990: 276) relating to various domains of power (identified as structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal), she provides an approach which relates to the social, economic and political context 'within which intersecting oppressions' linked to gender, race and class are organised.

Kimberle Crenshaw, a socio-legal theorist, has been credited with coining of the neologism 'intersectionality'. Her approach focuses on the overlapping of categories of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1994). This has been very influential, leading to an interest in the production of data or policy research and practice that recognise the *specificity* of the discriminations experienced by racialised women, who have suffered from intersectional invisibility (Crenshaw, 2000). Within the UK, the work of Avtar Brah as well as Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis located the articulation of social divisions within the context of power relations and the state, and was central to the entry of intersectionality approaches within the European context (Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1983, 1992; Brah, 1996).

There has been a proliferation of recent writing on intersectionality, pointing to the limitations of some existing intersectionality frames and attempting to provide better theoretical and methodological underpinnings (e.g. Bilge, 2010; Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Davis, 2008; Dhamoon, 2011; Erel et al., 2011; Ferree, 2009; Gimenez, 2001; Hancock, 2007; Knapp, 2005; Levine-Rasky, 2011; Lutz et al., 2011; McCall, 2005; Taylor et al., 2011; Verloo, 2006; Walby, 2007; Winker and Degele, 2011; Yuval Davis, 2006). The positions taken range from the idea that intersectionality is the best means we have for exploring the multidimensional and complex articulation of forms of social division and identity (Brah and Phoenix, 2004), through the view that intersectionality serves as a useful buzzword but cannot aim to be a theory as such (Davis, 2008), to the view that intersectionality tends to reduce all forms of difference to a list and treats them as equivalent (Erel et al., 2011; Gimenez, 2001).

It is not my intention to review these contributions but suffice it to say that pitfalls associated with intersectionality include the 'listing' of differences (often reduced to identities) that intersect and the impossibility of attending analytically to this plurality, as well as potential competing claims about which are the most

important of these, or how many differences should be incorporated.⁵ There is also a potentially endless list of hybrid positions or cross-cutting groupings that can be yielded (such as black working class, lesbian, young, poor, rural, disabled and so on). Ultimately, there is the danger of a focus on individual differences (raising the question about what differences matter, when, where and how).

The idea of sections that come together is also a problem as these may be treated as given (rather than constructed in social practice). This may fail to consider the construction of social categories, identities and divisions as part of the exercise of power within particular contexts and in relation to the state, economic interests and practices, as well as in relation to discursive facets of social relations (see Ferree, 2009, for an emphasis on the political and the discursive, and Hart and McKinnon, 2010: 1048, for the view that they are part of the organisation of social order). Issues of power and social structure as well as political economy have arguably been sidelined, as have those of class.⁶ There is also the issue of how political mobilisation can take place given either a deconstruction or an individualisation of difference. Another issue relates to whether the concept of intersectionality has universal applicability or is only applicable to marginalised groups (e.g. Nath, 2009). If it purports to understand social relations, however, it must aim to be more generally applicable (see Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1992, for such a view).

There are therefore a broad range of issues which are raised and not all can be covered by this paper. I propose that we should not focus too much on the problems of the metaphor of intersectionality but retain its early concerns found in anti-racist feminism (e.g. Combahee River Collective, 1977/1982; hooks, 1981), which challenged dominant and exclusionary academic and political frameworks and knowledge production. This requires locating social categories and divisions within a broader social framing that attends to power, hierarchy and context – both spatial and temporal. Greater analytical rigour would contribute to a more robust intersectional framing in terms of ‘what’ is being referred to as intersecting, and what that means. This does not require that the objects of reference (seen as intersecting) should be the same (in fact this opens up the possibility of different foci), nor does it mean that ‘intersecting’ has to have one meaning – merely that it must be defined in particular instances. In the following sections I will explore these issues.

What is being referred to: Different levels of analysis

First level of abstraction: Social ontologies

At this level of abstraction gender, ethnicity, ‘race’ and class relate to social ontologies, that is to conceptions about different realms in the world or ways the world is organised. These act like maps, pointing to where sets of relations are situated, manifested in categories and materialised in concrete relations. The positing of these ontologically separate realms gives rise to categories of gender, ethnicity, ‘race’ and class (as well as sexuality, age, disability and others). At this level,

social ontologies do not point to the people themselves: this is the function of social categories, which provide criteria for specifying how people are sorted or placed.

Using these ideas it is possible, very schematically, to provide a kind of 'map' for gender, ethnicity, 'race' and class.⁷ Ethnos (ethnicity and race) delineates and specifies the ontological space of collectivity. Gender can be located in terms of the social construction of the ontological space relating to sex and biological reproduction, and class can be located in the social construction of the ontological space relating to the production and reproduction of economic life (Anthias, 1998; Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1983, 1992).

However, social categories themselves work at two different levels, one more abstract and the other more concrete. I shall first look at the more abstract level, which needs to be analytically distinguished from the level of concrete social divisions.

Second level of abstraction: Social categories as categories of discursive practice in the making of boundaries and hierarchies

The social categories of gender, ethnicity, 'race' and class construct particular criteria by which people are ordered into the categories but the categorising of people should not be elided with particular population categories/groupings as they relate to social life. For example, the claims that people make and their practices may be different from the ways in which they have been sorted out in terms of auditing systems of the state, or in terms of social representations at any particular point in time and space: for example a person may claim they are British but may be seen as being a member of an ethnic minority. This is not to imply that these are mutually exclusive categories but merely indicates that placing people into categories involves a sorting exercise that can be done in different ways, and indeed that people themselves may not always act or identify in ways denoted by these.

Although categories should not be treated in terms of universals or essences, at this level we could ask to what extent they share parameters and what their differences are. Although class, ethnicity, 'race' and gender categories (as well as others such as sexuality or ability/disability) are not equivalent, they have commonalities and differences; they have different historical and ontological bases, but they all involve boundary-making and hierarchy-making processes. As boundaries they construct binary versions of difference and identity, they homogenise within and they construct collective attributions. In this sense the categories *appear* to operate separately, i.e. they have a dynamic influence both as representations and as identity claims and attributions but in fluid and situated ways within a time and space context. How the categories appear in discourse and practice will differ over time and how they manifest themselves as categories of action in local and specific contexts and in terms of people's lives will also vary: investigating categories over time and place draws attention to context, meaning and variability. For example, the categories produced in social policy and in auditing bodies of the state will differ according to political concerns and the identification of problems.

Patricia Hill Collins (1990) has also pointed to gender, race and class being discursive means in the exercise of power, using a Foucauldian framework. If this is the case, then intersectionality cannot proceed only with the axiom of the mutual constitution of categories par excellence but has also to deal with *the functioning of the categories separately as salient aspects of discourse and practice*.

McCall's (2005) work has furnished a great deal of reflection on categories, particularly in terms of the methodological issues involved. McCall has distinguished between three different exercises in understanding the complex workings of categories. The first approach (anti-categorical) *refuses* categories, allowing for a narrative approach to complexity in terms of individual lives. As McCall says, this approach is based 'on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories' (2005: 1773). As this, logically, would disable any intersectional investigation as such, it is often conflated with an approach that researches differences *within* each category (intracategorical), looking at how gender is cross-cut by race and class, for example. The third approach (intercategorical) focuses on connections *between* the categories as reflecting actual groupings of people (e.g. comparing data on gender and ethnic compositions of labour markets). In all approaches, categories are seen to refer to gendered and ethnicised populations (seen as categories) as they appear in the domain of social discourse and auditing mechanisms of the state.

At the more abstract level of analysis, however, categories essentially sort people out into differences and commonalities. Indeed, social categorisation is always found in human societies (Durkheim and Mauss, 1967; Levi-Strauss, 1949). Questions arise about the specific and local criteria assigned to a category (e.g. sex difference, sexuality, ethnicity, race, age, height, educational achievements, appearance, colour of eyes). Categories are part of the social landscape as forms of discourse and practice and enter into the social field as primary units of social representation and social organisation. However, they exist within spatial and temporal contexts and are emergent rather than given and unchangeable, located in the operations of power. Such a view refuses the idea of categories as fixed elements of the social landscape but not categories themselves.

The separation of the categories of gender, ethnicity, 'race' and class⁸ (amongst others) is necessary as a first step towards a framing that attends to their articulation. These categories are *irreducible*: by this I mean that they cannot be explained through a process of accretion (in the sense of adding one on to the other, thereby reducing them to the sum of their parts) or reduction to other categories (in the sense that race, for example, cannot be understood purely in terms of class). However, it is important not to reify them and therefore their irreducibility does not mean that they operate as stand-alone categories in the realm of social practice. Moreover, categorisations, however salient, cannot be immediately translatable in terms of the concrete relations that people find themselves in. These are not outcomes only of the salience of these categorisations, but of their intersections and of their embeddedness within a complex array of social relations, located within different arenas of social life and within temporal and spatial contexts.

This brings me to the discussion of concrete social relations, which I see as particularly relating to the level of the intersectional.

Third level of abstraction: Concrete social relations

Whereas the former level relates to constructions of boundaries which allocate value, social relations of hierarchy and inequality are embodied in concrete social relations. This also implicates the subjects themselves, who may also sort themselves out in terms of positionalities and allegiances. This process of *differentiation and identification* may not necessarily tally, however, as argued earlier.

Certainly categories sort people into groups and this has a profound effect on their social identities and actions. However, it is important to make the distinction between category and group and to resist a notion of group that entails what Brubaker (2004) calls groupism, whereby groups are seen as given, and which under-stresses the group-making process. However, groupings exist at the imaginary and organisational level as well as at the juridical and legal level. Being defined as a member of a minoritised or racialised group may affect how one sees oneself, in terms of belonging and otherness, as well as affecting life chances. Groupings may also have an important role in determining social participation and in fuelling claims for social representation and recognition, which act as vehicles for a range of political, cultural and economic struggles.

However, groups do not exist as such: they are outcomes of group-making processes, i.e. certain patterns of interaction. Categories are involved in a range of group-making and group-breaking processes and outcomes but in complex ways which also relate to different *problematics* (whether the focus is on the formation of identities or structures of hierarchy for example). At this level, there is the consideration of the combinatory nature of the divisions (and therefore their intersections) as they are played out in a spatial and temporal context and in relation to the operations of power.

As an example, the ethnic category (as a form of categorisation of populations) is not equivalent to the ethnic group (as a group or identity of practice). Whilst claims about culture and origin often act as the barbed wire or border guards of group membership and resource allocation, this does not mean that ethnic group formation derives its dynamics either exclusively or necessarily from the ethnic category. Rather, ethnic group formation may be a product of a complex process that involves different types of social relations, including processes of gender and class (but how, and the extent of this, is a question of looking at ethnic formations at concrete levels of analysis and cannot be presupposed).

A *dialogical* formulation of the categories is able to provide specificity to the categories, whilst recognising their interpenetration at the level of practice. By dialogical, therefore, what I mean is that, in concrete or embodied social practices, social categories operate in the context of each other and articulate in terms of their constitution and effects in relation to given places (i.e. in terms of their

spatiality) and times (in terms of their temporality) but in a variable way. They also produce fissures and contradictions and cannot be seen as always leading to either greater subordination or its resolution. Whereas social categories themselves can be seen as analytically distinct (both in terms of their ontological underpinnings and as discursive practices, as argued earlier), concrete social divisions are constitutive in relation to each other and broader social processes but not in an a priori fashion or in the same way.

This is where the notion of intersectionality comes into its own, particularly with regard to the formation of complex inequalities found in relations of hierarchisation and stratification. These include unequal resource allocation and scales of value as well as practices relating to morality (Sayer, 2005), disgust (Lawler, 2005), stigma and so on, which link to inferiorisation and othering. Through these processes, there occurs a construction of places or positions in the social order of things. However, these do not necessarily work in a coherent way, nor are the places or positions mutually exclusive. These may lead to complex forms of hierarchy across a range of different dimensions. This is where the processes involve intersectional constructions and outcomes: at the level of concrete relations of positionality and hierarchisation.

This analysis has radical implications for understanding social stratification and inequality in society. For example, it requires us to reject the delineation of some social categories as characterised by culture and some as characterised by economic features. It also asks us to revise the idea that culture has less saliency in the production of inequality than economic factors (as indeed also rejected by newer approaches to class, e.g. in the work of Skeggs, 1997). Concrete relations of hierarchy exist as outcomes of the operation of power, underpinned by social categories that naturalise, collectivise and essentialise social relations, and through the workings of processes of inferiorisation (stigma, disgust, devaluation, disrespect), exploitation (commodification of persons and deriving interest and benefit from the exercise of power over them as an extension of the Marxist term) and unequal resource allocation (entailing multiple forms of inequality of access and inequality of outcome).

Societal arenas of investigation: Embodied practices

Concrete social relations in terms of social divisions relate to positionalities and hierarchies as they are embodied and articulated within different *societal arenas* at particular conjunctures. Each arena acts as a context (Bourdieu, 1990) for the others and enables an exploration of how they interlink with each other.

This is very different from systems or domain-based approaches to social relations (e.g. Derek Layder, 2006) or to social divisions (e.g. Sylvia Walby, 2007). The argument here is not so much that these arenas exist as autonomous or actual societal structures; it is rather that setting them out helps to organise the types of issues that we focus on, and allows comparison across these; positing

societal arenas is therefore a heuristic tool. The distinctions presented below are heuristic rather than actual, therefore, and enable different foci to be investigated:

- *Organisational (structural position)*: this focuses on how population categories are organised within institutional frameworks, e.g. family structures and networks, educational systems, political and legal systems, the state apparatus and the system of policing and surveillance.
- *Representational (discourses)*: this focuses on the images and texts, the documents and information flows around social divisions in different institutional frameworks.
- *Intersubjective (practices)*: this focuses on practices in relation to others, including non-person actors such as the police, the social security system and so on. It also denotes patterns of practices of identity and otherness (such as practices of bonding, friendship and distancing).
- *Experiential (narratives)*: this focuses on narratives relating to meaning-making and sociality (including the affective, the emotional and the body).⁹ This includes narrations of identification, distinction and othering.

Societal arenas are different for the purposes of analysis but are interrelated aspects of social relations and can be analysed in relation to one another. The arena of the representational, for example, can be analysed both in terms of social practices, which entail the production of texts, media, knowledge and so on, and in terms of how actors narrate, assimilate, respond and agonistically challenge these in their everyday understandings and actions.

In order to highlight the potential of focusing on societal arenas, in the ways I have defined them above, I will take the example of the experiential arena which relates to narrations by subjects. Intersectionality at this level can be illustrated with reference to recent work, particularly in the UK, that has been concerned with collecting narratives of people relating to ‘class’ identities. A particular example is found in the work of Mike Savage (Savage, 2010; Savage et al., 2005), which concerns the choices middle-class people make for being in neighbourhoods with others ‘who are like them’, using the term ‘elective belonging’. It is argued that this plays a key role in people’s definitions of who they are and also provides access to other resources, such as those of education. Accounts of gentrification, for example in south east London (Butler and Robson, 2003), also focus on the choices people make to move to areas where there are people like themselves (Watt, 2009). A major argument here is that this plays a role in middle-class formation.

However, there is the question of the role of distancing from the ‘other’, which may be more than a classed other. As Bourdieu says ‘tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (“sick-making”) of the tastes of others’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 56). As Watt (2009) argues, choices about place and attachments are racialised as well as classed: ‘Such judgements are at their most acute when the expressions of taste and distaste operate hierarchically, i.e. when they are directed against “others” with lower

volumes of capital in *subordinate* class or racialised positions' (Garner, 2007; Tyler, 2003). Therefore, narrations of people here have been far too narrowly placed within the class construct, as they spill over into other forms of difference and disadvantage such as gender and ethnicity as well as locality.

Class elements can also be found within narrations around ethnic resources and ethnic belonging. In research into minorities in the food sector, some subjects used strategies of locating oneself within an ethnic category where positive ethnic capital was involved, and distancing oneself where this was perceived as negative, showing how narrations about ethnicity are often imbued with class elements (Anthias, 2007; Anthias and Cederberg, 2009). Lamont (1992) showed that working-class black men use notions of masculinity derived from white men to define their own class identity, illustrating how narrations of gender are tied to class and ethnicity.

This discussion briefly shows how, at the concrete level of analysis, social categories operate within the societal arena of the experiential in intersectional ways and that at this level it is difficult to maintain that narrations of belonging are only about class, ethnicity or gender, for example.

Historicity and the notion of intersection

The issue of historicity entails looking at processes and outcomes and is crucial because the social divisions appear differently in terms of this distinction. Outcomes (synchronic, like still shots, e.g. unemployment at a *particular time* or as a trend at a particular time) and processes (diachronic, like a moving film, e.g. racialisation and its *patterns over time*) need to be unpacked. Unpacking gendered *processes* and gendered *outcomes* is dependent on their framing within a time context; the distinction actually refers not to differences between them (for example, sexism can be both a process and an outcome), but on the focus of enquiry.

There is a danger of treating outcomes (e.g. gendered or racialised violence) merely as relating to the processes that produce them in the most mechanical way, i.e. to do with sexual difference and 'race' difference. What this means is that you cannot invoke only gender processes to understand gendered practices or outcomes, you cannot invoke only 'race' and racialisation to understand racist practices and outcomes and you cannot invoke only class processes to understand classed outcomes. This is one of the important insights of intersectional frames found in both the earlier versions of intersectionality and the more recent contributions. This brings me to considering further the notion of intersection, which I see as the key axiomatic principle of the intersectionality framework.

Within an intersectionality framing, if what is new is the insistence on intersection, we need to ask what is the process of intersecting? What does it mean to intersect? Is it more than noting the co-dependency of different spheres in the realm of the social? As noted earlier, there is of course the problem of the 'sections', which might assume unproblematic social entities, thereby essentialising them.

Intersection usually denotes some variant of the idea of ‘mutual constitution’, as noted earlier. The mutual constitution of gender, ‘race’ and so on refers essentially to the postulate that they are affected by and affect each other. I would interpret this in a dialectical way rather than a deconstructionist or reductionist way, therefore retaining the existence of categories themselves as important elements of the social landscape. I do not think that it is possible to dispense with the social categories themselves, as they are a necessary component of analysis; they must therefore be specified before any intersectional analysis can take place. This is because, if they are seen as mutually constitutive in a deconstructionist sense, then this entails that the categories themselves do not possess any autonomous or systemic features in their own right and in relation to social processes. It is therefore the salience of the distinct categories that produces the derivative although specific saliency of intersectional or hybrid categories (such as ethnicised women) hailed by some forms of intersectional framing.

One problem with the powerful metaphor of intersectionality is that it may be misleading, as it suggests that what takes place is similar to what happens at an intersection (where things collide or crash together). However, the sources of the social relations, or, more pertinently for most intersectionality paradigms, the inequalities and forms of violence experienced by people, might not be a product of the intersection at all but may be manifested in that space; in other words something happens at the junction which is not necessarily a product of the different roads that lead to it. The idea of points or instances of intersection is in fact problematic as it does not attend to processes. Therefore I concur with those writers (such as Ferree, 2009; Glenn, 2002; Walby, 2007) who are not so much concerned with pointing to the space of an intersection but focus on the dynamic and located dimensions of inequality and division in terms of *relationships* with each other. Therefore the intersection does not denote specific places occupied by individuals or groups (e.g. working-class black women). It is a process; for example, ‘class’ takes on racialised or gendered inflections for specific people in specific places and times within the arenas of organisation, representation, intersubjectivity and experience.

Moreover, the notion of intersection says nothing about the ways in which the production and reproduction of discrimination/subordination take place. One example here is that you need to look at the operations of inequality and violence through the state and other institutional frameworks in which power and economic interest are exercised, and not just at the categories and practices of gender, race and so on. Indeed, broader power relations within social processes and practices need to be considered (as recognised by Collins, 1993, for example). This means we should not take the metaphor too literally (it should therefore be seen as signposting complexity as well as multiplicity). It is not therefore just a question of finding a better metaphor.

My view is that forms of social distinction and inequality are produced in complex combinatories of social location in its broadest sense, forged through multiple sites. Hierarchical relations linked to social divisions are emergent and subject to

historical contingencies depending on different constellations of power in different time/space frameworks. This means that social categorisations are not equally positioned or salient at all times. One or other of the divisions does not always matter in particular contexts or some may matter more than others; for example, ethnicity does not always matter either at the structural or at the identity level – it has a spectrum of intensity and identification (Pieterse, 1997). In other words, it is important to be sensitive to the relationships between social categories, rather than presuppose them.

There is also the question of *dialogical and contradictory* positions and positionings. In relation, for example, to issues of structural position, social divisions can be mutually reinforcing (e.g. as in the case of particular racialised migrant women), but they may also function to produce multiple and uneven social patterns and *contradictory* locations at particular conjunctures. For example, a man may be subordinated in class terms, but is positioned advantageously in relation to his female partner and may exercise patriarchal forms of power over her. Another example is where a woman may be subordinated as a cleaner but has a degree that gives her good life chances in some contexts. An individual may be positioned higher in one social place than another. For example, migrants who occupy a low ranking in the migration country may achieve class benefits as they display relative wealth to poorer villagers on visiting or returning to their homelands.

However, there are social locations where the dialogical articulations produce an amplification of inequality and disadvantage, and these need attending to. This involves examining both the specific combinatories that produce systemic inequalities and their transformatory potential. The approach has to be historically sensitive as there are new and emerging complex constellations of disadvantage.

Concluding remarks

This article argues that for an intersectional framing to deliver its promise there is a need to distinguish different levels of analysis in terms of questions about *what* is being referred to (social categories or concrete relations), *arenas of investigation* (organisational, representational, intersubjective and experiential) and *historicity* (processes and outcomes).

In this article, I have argued for the need to go beyond a focus on intersectional categories and to look at the broader social landscape of power and hierarchy. I have also argued for the need to consider the categories themselves and not only focus on their intersection, as this does not exhaust the field of investigation of these very categories. In other words, I have tried to locate this exercise in both a broader and a more defined set of questions without abandoning the intersectional project itself. Rather, the latter can be applied at specific levels in different ways but particularly relates to the level of concrete social relations. I have argued that being clear about the levels of analysis we use is one important means of delivering some of the promise of an intersectional framing.

One particular issue is the extent to which intersectionality can be incorporated within social policies that are concerned with multiple inequalities. The issues raised are difficult, as indicated by discussions of the multiple discrimination frameworks of the UK and the EU (Kantola and Nousiainen, 2009; Verloo, 2006). In terms of legal or policy initiatives, legal frameworks identify fixed legal categories and may have difficulty in dealing with complexity. This also relates to the problem of dealing with social correction on the basis of identifying people in terms of the social categories they inhabit (however intersectional) as opposed to dealing with inequalities in a more systematic structural way. There is also the difficulty of dealing with the inequality of women within their own communities and within their own families, i.e. outside what is usually thought of as the public domain. It is also difficult to identify points of intersection. Particular issues include how the equality duty (as in current UK legislation; see Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010) can be implemented at intersectional levels and what public bodies need to do as they cannot predict which combinatories intersect in producing specific outcomes. There is also the danger of fixing some categories and making others invisible. Even if we assume that public bodies can only be responsive, there is still the problematic requirement that a subject be able to identify where the disadvantage comes from. Given these difficulties, I believe a more radical rethinking of forms of inequality and the social relations involved needs to accompany the exercise of improving public provisions to deal with discrimination and disadvantage.

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Notes

1. Whereas class is seen as a central social division, its analysis is under-explored within intersectionality frameworks partly because the impetus in these debates is found in redressing ethnic and gender disadvantage and delineating the different patterns this takes.
2. In the Marxist schema we find a prototypical intersectional framework (the intersection between economy and society rather than social categories, however) (Marx 1859/1977). In the work of Durkheim we find ideas about complexity and systems, as well as forms of materiality and representation. His premise about the *sui generis* nature of society (Durkheim, 1895/1970) and of social facts points towards one of the central underlying principles of contemporary intersectionality frames, i.e. the irreducibility of social relations to others on the one hand, and the need to look at the social as a complex system of interrelated parts on the other. Weber too (Weber 1947/1964) is concerned with the intersubjectively constituted nature of social life, and with the intersections of economic class and status.
3. This includes work by Lenski (1966) on social stratification, Lerner (1973) on black women in America and the work of feminists within a political economy approach relating gender to class (e.g. Gardiner 1975, Beechey 1977). Race theorists have explored the connections between race and class (e.g. Myrdal 1962, Sivanandan 1976, Miles 1989)

4. Others have argued, however, that Foucault's approach is inimical to an analysis of social divisions such as gender, ethnicity and class (see, for example, Bilge 2010).
5. The idea of intersecting 'groups' is found in some work, including that of Crenshaw (1994) and within the limited intersectional framing of recent EU and UK equalities legislation (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010; Burri and Schiek, 2009). This raises the issue of how many should be taken into account: answers have ranged from three (the gender, race and class trilogy) to nine (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010). Potentially, there could be an infinite number of cross-cutting categories, i.e. more and more 'hybrid' groupings. This might constitute a new 'embarrassing etc.' (as Butler 1990 has called it), which involves also the danger that salient social categories and divisions (although not static or given) are collapsed into this endless specification.
6. This links partly to the difficulty of the concept of class, as it can stand both as a description of economic position and as a theoretical term to explain the production of economic position.
7. This means not that I am rejecting the concern with other realms such as those of sexuality or ability/disability but rather that I am using these well-argued realms to exemplify the analysis.
8. I will retain the emphasis on gender, ethnicity and class in this article although recognising that other social divisions/identities such as sexuality, disability, faith and age can be included in an intersectional analysis.
9. See, for example, Ahmed (2004) for an analysis of embodiment and the sociality of emotions.

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