

AG AboutGender

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Call for articles

Doing intersectionality: Unexplored places

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Since the introduction of the term in Kimberlé Crenshaw's well-known essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" in 1989, intersectionality – as both a concept and as an analytical tool – has sparked heated debate, also geographically conditioned, within a wide variety of disciplinary fields, interested in highlighting, in their respective areas of studies, the complex intra-actions (Lykke 2010, 51, inspired by Karen Barad 2003, 815) across differing subjectivities, identities, processes of social structuration, systems and practices of discrimination, oppression and exclusion, as well as between subjectivities and identities on the one hand, and processes of social structuration and discriminatory, oppressive and exclusionary systems and practices, on the other hand.

Originally Crenshaw used 'intersectionality' to take a stance against the US courts' traditional reasoning that, being based on the logic of sameness/difference and a single-category approach, neglected or, even worse, systematically left Black women's rights without protection (Crenshaw 2011; MacKinnon 2016) rather than presenting

‘intersectionality’ as “some new, totalizing theory of identity” (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1244). It is now well established that Crenshaw has understood intersectionality as an “open heuristic device” for approaching the “crossroads” of gender and race (Crenshaw 2011; Collins and Bilge 2016; Bello 2020).

On the one hand, it is not surprising that the focus of intersectional approaches, moved also towards other intersections, leading intersectionality to be considered in a short time as “the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies [...] have made so far” (McCall 2005, 1771). On the other hand, Bilge (2013) and other scholars see this expanding of the concept’s range of meanings as a diluting of its key components, by arguing instead that it is rather “an anti-racist intervention by Black feminist scholars” than “the brainchild of feminism” (Davis 2020, 120). These scholars, therefore, call for a careful re-reading of Crenshaw’s writings. However, the controversies arising within the feminist reflection on the attribution/appropriation of intersectionality (Davis 2019; Nash 2019; Lykke 2020) should not foreclose the possibility of interesting new theorizations or investigations of significant implications of “intersectional analytical practices”.

Even a cursory literature review reveals both the widespread expansion of the use of the term ‘intersectionality’ and the sophisticated theoretical contributions that offer different ways of conceiving it – e.g., as a research paradigm (Hancock 2007a, 2007b; Walgenbach 2010) or a theory (Walby 2007) – and of representing it: The first and effective metaphor of a ‘crossroads’ where violent clashes and car accidents may happen, (Crenshaw 1989: 149), along with at least bronze (Solanke 2011), digestion (Ken 2008, 2010) and the Rubik’s cube (Romero 2018) should be recalled here. Far from being received in polemical or, to some degree, oppositional terms, the wealth of “translations” of intersectionality can be indeed inscribed into the wide “field of intersectional studies” presented by Cho, McCall and Crenshaw herself in the essay “*Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis*” of 2013. On this occasion, these scholars undertake a valuable work of systematization with respect to very different developments of intersectionality encompassing both “centrifugal studies” – influenced by their own disciplinary field – and “centripetal studies” – mainly oriented towards integrating methods belonging to different disciplines. It can be said that they are able to hold together a variety of ways of understanding and *doing intersectionality*.

On another and insightful note, it is also useful to recall the tripartition proposed by Nina Lykke (2010, spec. 68-69) who distinguishes: 1) explicit theories of intersectionality, which expressly use the term introduced by Crenshaw; 2) implicit theories of intersectionality, which have explored the intersections of phenomena (Lykke 2010, 153) such as gender, sexuality, race and class without resorting to the direct use of the word (including the same studies of Black Feminism prior to the introduction of the term); and 3) theories of social category/structure intra-actions “under other denominations”, which espouse alternative terminology and underlie different proposals to analyze complexity, including “interlocking systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective 1977; Collins [1990] 1991); “axes of power” (Nira Yuval-Davis 2006); “interferences” (Moser 2006; Geerts and Van der Tuin 2013); “cosynthesis” (Kwan 2000), “interdependencies” (Hornscheidt 2007).

If these positionings imply a conscious choice to investigate the intra-actions between categories and/or structures in the three above mentioned ways, the widespread dissemination of the term, in the scholarly literature as well as in the popular one and in public policies and research programmes, has nevertheless contributed to the proposition of further critical junctions.

Consider in this regard the often invoked depoliticization (Bilge 2012) or uncritical and “epistemologically ignorant” (Sullivan and Tuana 2007) uses of intersectionality that expose it to become the object of a blackboxing effect, which occurs when “concepts turn into rhetorical devices, something that people refer to without reflecting on implications and contexts” (Lykke 2011, 210). This last aspect deserves a closer look. In fact, detaching intersectionality from a substantial epistemologically critical and (self-) reflexive approach risks reducing it to a mere “term in vogue”/buzzword (Davis 2008) or mainstream term, with the risk of endorsing one of the main criticisms raised against it. All in all, the explicit use of the term ‘intersectionality’ (cf. item 1 above) implies a reference to micro- and/or macropolitical level intra-actions between subjectivities and processes of social structuration, or a critique of the sameness/difference standard model, but it is at the same time to be noted that there are theoretical and empirical contributions that provide for such analysis without resorting explicitly to the term (cf. item 2 and 3 above).

Moreover, the undeniable circumstance of having regrettably become a “fashionable” term is not the only criticism advanced against intersectionality. From an epistemological, methodological, and political perspective, intersectionality has also called forward numerous criticisms from scholars and activists who are skeptical of both its innovative contribution to existing research as well as its potential to change oppressive living conditions. Among these, we shall at least mention those criticisms pointing out that intersectionality can be a potential instrument of political fracture, obscuring complexity due to its potential essentialism because it would inevitably lead to create and reproduce “intersectional identities” which do not adequately account for intersubjective differences, while also risking amplifying oppression (for example, Nash 2008).

In response to the critical approach adopted with respect to the categories as having a potentially essentializing effect, it is important to note that McCall (2005) distinguishes the studies on complexity into “anti-categorical”, “intra-categorical” and “inter-categorical” – all indeed characterized by an anti-essentialist matrix. The former (studies on “anti-categorical complexity”) refers to scholars engaged in projects of deconstruction of master categories in order to deconstruct “inequality itself” (McCall 2005, 1777). However, it should be emphasized that the decategorization process brings with it relevant “political consequences” (Matsuda 1990, 1776) that cannot be neglected, especially with regard to law as a system that operates primarily through categories that could hardly be done without. The “intra-categorical complexity”, on the other hand, concerns studies that complicate, interrogate and critically use categories especially when they propose to investigate “minorities within minorities” (McCall 2005, 1780). Lastly, the inter-categorical complexity – still known to a lesser extent if compared with the two previous ones and that McCall urges to explore – expresses the intent to place “the nature of the relationships among social groups and, importantly, how they are changing” at the center of the analysis (McCall 2005, 1785), rather than the marginalized subjects or sub-groups.

Despite the liveliness of the debate *on* intersectionality and the empirical investigations conducted *within* and *at the margins* of the intersectionality framework, it seems that one of the greatest challenges that scholars have to face still concerns “how to do intersectionality” - *Intersectionality, yes but how?*, as a recent special issue of the Nordic feminist research journal NORA symptomatically was called (Hvenegård Lassen and

Staunæs 2020).

Ultimately, the challenge consists in realizing Crenshaw's invitation to operationalize intersectionality by ensuring that it finally becomes and affirms itself as a living instrument. In fact, more or less well-founded perplexities persist about the effective capacity of intersectionality – however understood – to be translated into the concrete design and implementation of empirical research, capable of capturing, at micro- and/or macropolitical level, the intra-actions between subjectivities and processes of social structuration.

Such an implementation should start from the design of the research, taking into consideration the different contexts of reference, the incidence, in genealogical terms, of their past (e.g., colonial past), up to the analysis of the results (often passing through the construction of indicators), and, with regard specifically to legal reflection, the complicity of law in reproducing “intersectional inequalities”.

A promising approach to the how-to-do-intersectionality question is also called forward in conversation with new materialism and critical feminist posthumanism. These theoretical fields are made up of a heterogeneous body of theories that nonetheless share a focus on agency and affectivity of bodies and bodily materialities, including the transcorporeal relations between human and non-human bodies. Queerfeminist, US-based scholar Jasbir Puar (2007, 2011), for example, offered a critical entrancepoint to intersectionality and intersectional methodologies through the concept of assemblages of philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1988), and Brian Massumi (2002). Assemblages are in these philosophies understood as unstable gatherings of persons and things. They used the concept to characterize the world as fundamentally processual, implying that the social is made up by materially and affectively founded, but constantly fluctuating and interweaving relations between persons and things. Puar warns that even though the interweaving of power relations and identities are part of intersectional analysis, it can get to work as a stabilizing grid of categories, which congeals and fixes positions and identities rather than opening for change and new possibilities. With the assemblage concept, Puar argues for an intersectional analysis that instead is attentive to processes and affectively intensive events, i.e. events, where, for example, sexism, racism, ethnocentrism and nationalism clash rather than materialize as grids, Puar offers

this approach as an alternative to looking at intersecting positionalities with a point of departure in fixed categories such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity and national belonging. According to Puar, the assemblage approach allows for an undoing of fixed categories, and opens the horizons towards the unexpected, posing questions about “what is prior to and beyond what gets established” (Puar 2011, 8).

Also, in line with new materialist thought, Lykke (2010, 51) suggested to use feminist theorist Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action (2003, 815) to characterize what happens at intersectional cross-roads. Differently from interaction (a meeting where entities clash like billiard balls, i.e., in a way which does not imply mutual change), intra-action – whose terminology is included in this call for papers – refers to phenomena which, like paint, cannot avoid becoming entangled, when crossing each other.

Through the essays collected in the present monographic section, we hope to be able to bring out the unexplored “places” of intersectionality, highlighting the implications for social research of the various conceptualizations of intersectionality, the different and often unusual ways of conducting intersectional research through an epistemologically reflexive approach (overcoming the empirical pitfalls) and, in general, the heuristic potential which do not yet appear to be adequately deepened in the fields of legal, sociological, political, economic, statistical, demographic, geographical, psychological, linguistic and sociolinguistic sciences.

Particularly welcome are interdisciplinary contributions that:

- present original theses or arguments with regard to the role of intersectionality in the prevention and contrast of discrimination;
- discuss in an original way the limits and potential of intersectionality, especially for the purposes of empirical research;
- examine the (often) problematic relationship between (some) theories and empirical investigation;
- reflect on and analytically explore the relationship between intersectionality and new materialist, posthumanist and affect-theoretical approaches;
- strengthen the operational implications of intersectionality in terms of social research methodologies and techniques;

- adopt an “integrated intersectional approach”, both static and dynamic, that is capable of photographing the “gaps” of protection and genealogically explaining the structural reasons that produced them (Bello 2020);
- analyze certain salient epistemological aspects, for example with regard to the role that intersectionality may have (or not) in increasing knowledge;
- deepen the controversial relationship between gender and intersectionality through innovative approaches;
- confront the potential and risks with respect to the perspective of the institutionalization of intersectionality;
- ponder the ways of “writing” intersectionality today, that is, of expressing it also from a linguistic point of view, in particular in the written language;
- focus on political uses and intersectional practices carried out by social movements;
- assess the analysis of intersectionality from a postcolonial perspective;
- address other unexplored research areas.

Contributions should follow the “Guidelines for the authors”:
https://riviste.unige.it/doc_about_gender/authors_guidelines_AG_dec19.pdf

They should therefore be between 5000 and 8000 words (bibliography excluded), be written in one of the following three languages (Italian, English, Spanish) and be accompanied by: title in English, a short abstract in English (maximum length: 150 words), some keywords in English (from a minimum of 3 to a maximum of 5). All texts should then be transmitted in a format compatible with Windows systems (.doc or .rtf), following the instructions provided by the Peer Review Process. In this regard, see the guidelines of the Journal: <https://riviste.unige.it/index.php/aboutgender/about>

First version of the abstract (max. 150 words) should be sent by **February 28, 2022** to the following email address: intersezionalità.aboutgender@gmail.com

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Contributions should be uploaded to the platform by **June 15, 2022**.

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September 2022 - revision of articles based on the opinions of the referees

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