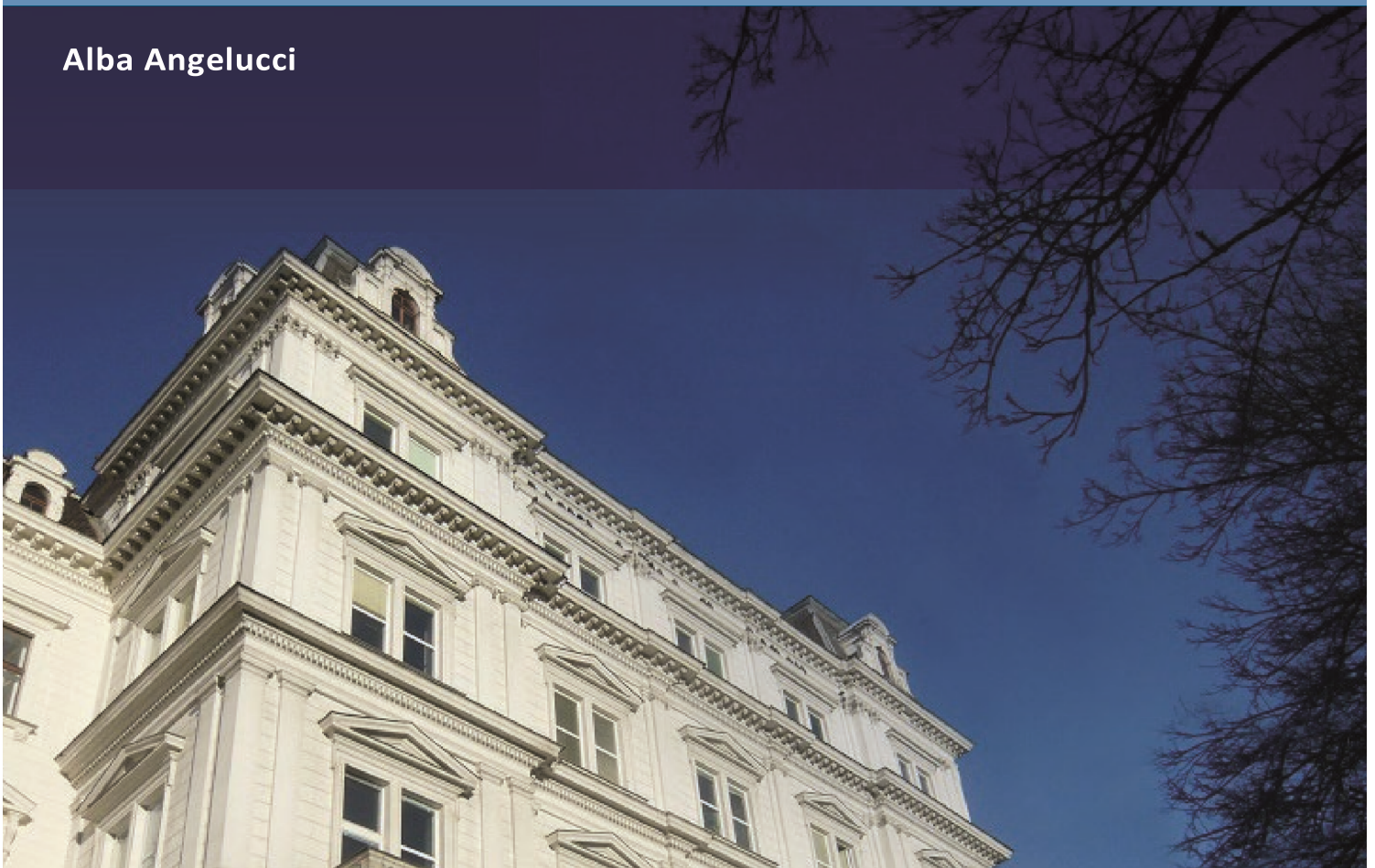




# From Theory to Practice. The Intersectionality Theory as a Research Strategy

**Alba Angelucci**



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## **From Theory to Practice. The Intersectionality Theory as a Research Strategy**

**Alba Angelucci\***

Alba Angelucci holds a PhD in Economics, Society and Law – curriculum Sociology: Governance, Social Participation, and Citizenship. Her doctoral thesis is titled Gender, Space, and Urban Citizenship: an Intersectional Analysis. A comparative study between Milan and Rotterdam, and it uses the Intersectionality Theory as its methodological framework since it analyses the intersection between gender and space in the construction of different patterns of urban citizenship. Her main research interests include migration, discrimination and segregation processes, gender studies, and social policies. Alba was a researcher in the DiverCities Project (<https://www.urbandivercities.eu/>). In February 2017 she was a Visiting Researcher at the Department of Sociology, University of Vienna.

\*University of Urbino Carlo Bo

Department of Economics, Society and Politics DESP

Via Aurelio Saffi, 2

61029 Urbino PU

**Abstract**

What is the Intersectionality Theory? How can it be used for investigating social phenomena? This paper is aimed at scrutinizing the methodological challenges that the wide application of the Intersectionality Theory in social sciences has brought to light, presenting some practical examples of intersectional research. After showing strengths and weaknesses of the intersectional paradigm, this work will try to rebut some of the most relevant criticisms of the Intersectionality Theory which have emerged so far within the academic debate. Then, the paper will discuss how it is possible to minimize potential drawbacks and to foster positive aspects of this approach, delineating an intersectional method, which can be used as a guideline to direct eventual future intersectional research.

## Introduction

This paper is aimed at discussing the Intersectionality Theory (henceforth IT) from a methodological perspective and at delineating some possible ways to apply it to the study of social phenomena. Therefore, it will address the main weaknesses and the main strengths of the intersectional research and it will try to define under what conditions IT can express its best potentialities in social research.

Before going into the methodological aspects, though, it is useful to quickly introduce IT, and I would like to do it immediately by quoting its intellectual mother, Kimberlé Crenshaw:

‘[...] Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you’re standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both. These women [*ed. black women*] are injured, but when the race ambulance and the gender ambulance arrive at the scene, they see these women of colour lying in the intersection and they say, “Well, we can’t figure out if this was just race or just sex discrimination, and unless they can show us which one it was, we can’t help them’ (Crenshaw, 2004: 2).

The accident metaphor immediately brings us to the centre of the issue: what happens when multiple forms of discrimination or of disadvantaging conditions converge on the same subject? The idea at the basis of the IT is that when this happens the result is not the mere sum of the negative effects of the different forms of discrimination, but a new, peculiar, discriminating process which can have completely different and unexpected consequences on the subject. Consequently, these cases need to be treated and studied specifically.

Therefore, IT, which has its roots in the post-structuralist feminist debate and within feminist critical and political movements such as black feminism and Movimiento Chicano (Wallace, 1979; Davis, 1981; Combahee River Collective, 1978; Gomez-Quíñones & Vásquez, 2014), was born to analyse the way in which social and cultural categories intertwine, creating peculiar kinds of discrimination. IT was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1989). As a jurist, Crenshaw aimed at elaborating a theory that could be used as a juridical instrument to fight those kinds of discrimination that Afro-American women experienced in workplace. Indeed, she was convinced that the peculiar position of these women who were bearing two different ‘vulnerabilities’, namely being *black* and being *women*, was subjected to a specific discrimination deriving from the intersection of gender-based discrimination and race-based discrimination that, paradoxically, resulted in being hidden rather than emphasized by the same intersection.

Therefore, the available juridical instruments (the ‘*race ambulance*’ and the ‘*gender ambulance*’, going back to Crenshaw’s metaphor) were inadequate not only to fight, but even to acknowledge the peculiar kind of discrimination suffered by those women which

was *qualitatively* different from the one suffered by white women or black men. Indeed, the resulting discrimination is not a mere addition of the other two (that would be just a quantitatively different discrimination, a heavier one) but a new type of oppression coming from the intersection of the two characteristics of being black *and* of being a woman.

The specific case considered by Crenshaw, namely workplace-related discrimination, is particularly significant and appropriate to clarify what has been stated so far. Indeed, when subjected to heavier forms of discrimination both in relation to white women and to black men, black women find it difficult to claim their rights before the law: their employer could easily demonstrate that there is no acting racial discrimination, because not *all* black people are discriminated against in that workplace (indeed, black men may experience a significantly different situation compared to the one experienced by black women). The same happens for gender-based discrimination: not *all* women are subjected to prejudice and unfairness, therefore, no gender discrimination is taking place.

Nonetheless, discrimination is taking place there, and it has consequences on black women's lives. Where, then, does this specific discrimination come from? Crenshaw argues that it comes from the intersection of the two characteristics in which these women are positioned and that make them vulnerable in a different way compared to other women and to other black people. Quite paradoxically, rather than constitute a multiplier of visibility, this intersection makes discrimination invisible to all available juridical instruments and to social and academic debate.

Therefore, Crenshaw elaborated this theoretical paradigm that was aimed to unveil the intersectional discriminating processes acting between the categories of race and gender. The resulting discrimination has its own peculiar and specific form that can even have very different expressions and consequences with regards to the two originating discriminations. Due to the significant weight that it has on the processes of oppression and discrimination within the intersectional analysis of these processes, the category of class was added to those of race and gender. This triad (class, race, and gender) constitutes the base of what Patricia Hill Collins calls *matrix of domination* in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990). With this expression, Hill Collins refers to those elements which also include other categories such as sexuality, age, and religion whose intersection creates the conditions for oppression and discrimination. Her main focus here, as the title of the book suggests, was the oppression experienced by African-American women in the US society. Though, by using the expression *Intersectionality Theory* to substitute the one of *Black Feminist Thought*, the author intended to widen the discussion to include all women subjected to different kinds of discrimination due to different axes of disadvantage.

This is because, although all women are subjected to oppression and discrimination, each one of them experiences disadvantage in a different way in that each one is positioned in a peculiar and unique intersection of *vectors of oppression and privilege* (Hill

Collins, *ibid.*), that makes her differently vulnerable. Framing this discourse within IT, Hill Collins understands these *vectors* in terms of *categories* that, intersecting with each other, engender discrimination. Therefore, notwithstanding its origins within the juridical studies, immediately after its introduction IT was used by sociologists as an instrument to read and understand discriminating processes. In particular, it has been mainly applied to the field of immigration studies, especially by those scholars who were interested in studying the phenomena connected to female migration. Nonetheless, it has been applied also to the analysis of discrimination based on other axis of disadvantage, such as ageing, illness and disability, just to give a few examples.

### **What is the ‘nature’ of Intersectionality?**

So far, we have not decided upon the ‘nature’, so to say, of intersectionality. Indeed, the debate about how to consider this approach is still open among scholars. It is possible to summarise three main interpretations, which do not necessarily exclude each other:

- 1) Intersectionality as a *theory*
- 2) Intersectionality as a *methodological approach*
- 3) Intersectionality as a *practice/praxis*

The first definition is actually included within the same expression ‘Intersectionality *Theory*’ and it could be considered as the first way in which intersectionality has been understood when it first appeared in the scientific debate. It was born, indeed, as a set of conceptual elements aimed at defining the context and the background of multiple discriminations, revealing their consequences and providing some food for thought for further investigations.

Quickly, its practical application within the empirical research allowed its potential to emerge as a *methodological approach*. In a first moment, its use in empirical research continued by trial and error, and it has been time by time tuned for the pragmatic purpose of the considered topic and research. This gave IT the opportunity to grow and develop new ways of approaching empirical research, as it will be shown below.

The final and more recent step is the application of IT by feminist and queer movements as a *praxis*, that is to say, as the playground for the claiming of both differentiated and equal rights for all. Within these movements, intersectionality has become a way to address specific needs and vulnerabilities and to spread light upon those intersections that have been silenced by the mainstream feminist movements.

### **What is a social category?**

Although all of the three ways listed above are worth being taken into account by social research, this work will mainly address the second definition, namely intersectio-

nality as a methodological approach, without dismissing its main theoretical implications for empirical research.

Therefore, the first topic to address is: What is a social category? How to consider it? Even if this could appear to be a banal question, it is not so trivial and it is important to address it in order to have the right instruments to investigate the methodological potentialities of IT. This is because, although intersectionality deals with a number of issues, such as subjectivity, practices, symbols, institutions, structures and so on and so forth, from a methodological point of view IT treats these issues by identifying within them basic categories that the social researcher can work on. It is possible to say that categories are at the same time the object of the intersectional research and its tools, which are utilized to investigate broader issues. Therefore, in this work I will primarily refer to social categories, considering the other issues mentioned above somehow represented by specific social categories.

As stated before, IT has its roots within the feminist debate, and in particular within that kind of post-structuralist feminism which has in Judith Butler one of its main scholars. Looking at the way in which Butler defines the category of gender, we can infer, then, the way in which all the possible categories have to be considered.<sup>1</sup>

In her book *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990), Butler introduces the expression 'performativity of gender' to define the way in which gender roles and gender definitions are far from being natural. They are instead a *social construction* performed in daily interaction and reiteration of social and cultural norms. According to Butler, gender is attributed and interiorised through everyday interactions and social practices, and although everyone was born with a more or less defined biological reproductive system, the category of gender (as well as the one of sex, which is even more deeply misunderstood as a biological category due to its connection with the biological base) is socially constructed and attributed.

The same process which informs the construction of the category of gender may be referred to all the social and cultural categories (and subcategories) that can be considered by an intersectional approach. Therefore, with the term category here, the intersectional approach does not refer to a static entity with a clear and essentialized identity. On the contrary, it refers to a dynamic, never-ending process of construction and negotiation of meanings, roles, social identities: the social category is a complex element which IT takes as its basic unit of analysis.

<sup>1</sup> However, this is not the only way to look at categories and to interpret them. As it will be argued in the next chapter, different perspectives have been adopted towards categories and, consequently, also categories have been understood in different ways. In particular, US and European scholars adopted slightly different approaches to the intersectional analysis (Davis, 2008b).

### The systematisation of the Intersectionality Theory

Due exactly to the complexity of its subject, at a certain point it was necessary to systematize the theory from the methodological point of view, and the two classifications provided by Knudsen (2006) and McCall (2005) go exactly in this direction.

Susanne Knudsen distinguished between two different approaches to the categories, defining them as *additive* and *transversal* intersectionality (Knudsen, 2006). In the first case, categories are analysed separately, as entities per se. Their impact in constructing social differences and disadvantages is seen as multiplied by the coexistence of different categories, but they are not understood as mutually interacting. On the other hand, the second approach (that is the most *intersectional* one) analyses the way in which categories intertwine, and the processes of differentiation and discrimination standing at the crossroads among them.

The second classification is provided by Leslie McCall (2005). She defines intersectionality as '*the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formation*' (McCall, 2005: 1771) and distinguishes three ways to approach the complexity of the intersectional analysis:

1. *Anti-categorical complexity*
2. *Intra-categorical complexity*
3. *Inter-categorical complexity*

*The anti-categorical complexity* approach is the approach of post-structuralist and deconstructivist feminism. Considering categories as the result of linguistic processes, the aim of this approach is to delegitimize categories in themselves and to refuse them. Therefore, power and knowledge are analysed through inclusion and exclusion mechanisms.

*The intra-categorical complexity* approach is mainly adopted by black feminists and, among others, by the same Kimberlé Crenshaw. It is, indeed, the first approach that arose with Intersectionality Theory and its aim is to explore crossing categories in order to underline the position of peculiar disadvantaged social groups standing at their intersection.

*The inter-categorical complexity* is the approach coined by the Leslie McCall in order to explain her positioning within the framework of IT. She uses analytical categories strategically, analysing them comparatively with quantitative methods. Therefore, the inter-categorical approach can be considered the categorical approach *par excellence*.

Each one of these three approaches defines a different way to handle and analyse categories, and, consequently, each one adopts different analytical tools: the anti- and intra-



categorical approaches utilise prevalently qualitative instruments of analysis, while the inter-categorical approach adopts quantitative methods.

The two classifications provided by Knudsen and McCall are not mutually excluding. Indeed, they refer to two levels of analysis that have both to be taken into account in intersectional research: the first refers to the way in which the *interrelationship among categories* is understood (as a hierarchical cause-effect chain or as a network of intersections and interrelations among discriminating processes mutually shaping each other); the second one has to do with the *degree of 'trust'* (or at least tolerance) that scholars assume *towards categories* (from a complete rejection by the anti-categorical approach to a total reception by the inter-categorical one). Therefore, it is possible (and opportune) to clearly define the position of an intersectional analysis referring to both categorizations.

The choice of one of the approaches proposed by McCall depends on the perspective of each scholar and on their own theoretical paradigm and field of study, and, therefore, may significantly vary among different intersectional analyses. On the contrary, the adhesion to a transversal or an additional perspective is less questioned. Indeed, the transversal perspective is the most accurately *intersectional* one in that it answers to the need for the unveiling of processes standing at the crossroads of categories. The additive perspective, instead, focussing exclusively on the results of the intersections, misses to analyse the processes which create new and peculiar forms of discrimination. This perspective treats the intersection of two or more disadvantaging categories as a just *quantitatively* different discrimination, a *heavier* one, failing to grasp the *qualitatively* different nature of the emerging discrimination, and completely dismissing the mutual shaping of the categories in their interaction. Therefore, intersectional scholars mostly adopt a transversal perspective, through which socio-cultural categories are understood in non-hierarchical and interdependent way.

Furthermore, giving to the term a different meaning to the one used by Knudsen, the intersectional analysis can also be defined *transversal* in terms of dialogue and collaboration among multiple disciplines and fields of studies, in that this is one of the characterizing aspects of this kind of analysis.

### **Delving into the methods: examples of intersectional analysis**

In order to explain in the clearest way possible what has been stated so far, the next pages will provide two examples of intersectional analysis. Although the examples provided are taken from a specific field of study, which is the one of citizenship, it should be taken into account that what is going to be said regarding the specific subject of citizenship is applicable to every subject, topic or field liable to be studied in an intersectional perspective. Therefore, I would ask the reader to make an effort in imagination and abstraction.

The first example is the work by Epstein & Carrillo *Immigrant sexual citizenship: intersectional templates among Mexican gay immigrants to the USA* (2014), and the second one is *Mothering as a citizenship practice: an intersectional analysis of 'carework' and 'culturework' in non-normative mother-child identities* (Longman et al., 2013). Among a huge number of works, I opted for these two because they use the intersectional analysis in two slightly different ways, and therefore are useful in highlighting different strengths and weaknesses of intersectional research.

### ***Migration, Sexuality, and Citizenship: intersections at the borders***

Epstein & Carrillo's *Immigrant sexual citizenship: intersectional templates among Mexican gay immigrants to the USA* (2014) is based on an empirical research conducted in San Diego, California, on 76 Mexican gay and bisexual males between 2003 and 2004. The authors try to fill a gap in literature by means of intersectional analysis, that is: *sexual citizenship* has always been investigated as something pertaining to *de jure* citizens, while *immigrant citizenship* has been seen as non-sexualised. The authors try to connect these two aspects – sexuality and migration – in order to provide new insights into citizenship and to highlight, from migrants' standpoint, peculiar positions of disadvantage and discrimination. In addition to the intersectional perspective, this work claims for a *multiscalar* approach to citizenship: authors argue that national policies and local lived experiences are so closely intertwined and mutually dependent that it is impossible to investigate the former without considering the latter.

Analysing the intersection between migratory background and sexuality in relation to citizenship, Epstein & Carrillo identify three citizenship templates – *Asylum, Rights, and Emotional Attachment* (Epstein & Carrillo, 2014: 260) – able to describe the specific different positions of Mexican gay and bisexual male immigrants within the USA. Although interesting, it is not important here to discuss the findings, but rather its analytical framework and the way in which intersectionality has been used by the authors.

First, they use intersectionality in a preliminary step of their research when defining the object of their investigation. Immigrant sexual citizenship is in fact an intersectional concept standing at the crossroads of two macro-categories: the one of *origin* and the one of *sexuality*. This insight enabled them to point out an issue so far silenced, and to let emerge the criticalities connected to it. Then they defined, within the two abovementioned categories, other specific subcategories to better delimit the investigation's field. As for the category of 'origin', they selected the specific case of Mexican immigrants, while for the category of 'sexuality' they chose the cases of gay and bisexual people. They also delimited their investigation to the gendered category of male.

Second, authors used intersectionality in the analytical step of the research. Their strategic use of categories of sexuality and origin enabled them to analyse processes and relations between them. They managed to understand the effects that the intertwining of legal status and everyday sexual practices has on the construction of different patterns

of citizenship. Furthermore, this perspective allows to focus on practices rather than on macro social theory, considering specific interrelations and subjective positions.

Authors used qualitative research methods – specifically, semi-structured interviews – in order to investigate interrelations between the abovementioned categories (and their subcategories). Even if not explicitly stated, it is possible to classify their way of handling categories into the *intra-categorical complexity approach*. Indeed, categories are not refused, although they are critically analysed. This critical perspective about categories and the use of qualitative methods allows to exclude the inter-categorical complexity approach as well. Authors' aim is not to completely deconstruct social and cultural categories, nor to assume them uncritically, but rather to underline the specific forms that their intersection assumes in relation to citizenship.

On the one hand, this approach has some weaknesses: it does not allow a systematic and critical deconstruction of categories, thus letting their social meanings and their exclusion/inclusion mechanisms work. In this sense, it risks to legitimate and to reproduce stereotypical and hegemonic habitus into the two fields (or better, sub-fields) of sexual and immigrant citizenship.

On the other hand, it has the capability to highlight another emerging category, that is, sexual immigrant citizenship and its inflections. This is a new *sui generis* social construction originating from the two abovementioned categories, even if it is not given by their mere addition.

It is an original category working with its own inclusion/exclusion mechanisms and thus creating a further social field. Therefore, the main strength of this kind of approach is the possibility to unveil discriminating processes and disadvantaged positions that otherwise would remain concealed.

### ***Parenting practices and citizenship: intersections between public and private spheres***

Chia Longman, Katrine De Graeve, and Tine Brouckaert in their *Mothering as a citizenship practice: an intersectional analysis of "carework" and "culturework" in non-normative mother-child identities* (2013), stress other aspects of citizenship. They focus on the strong political (and then public) role of parenting practices in relation to citizenship.

Their work is based on the comparison of two qualitative researches conducted between 2008 and 2011 in Belgium. The first focuses on undocumented immigrant mothers, the second on Belgian white adoptive mothers of Ethiopian-born children. Both of them stress the relation between everyday parenting practices connected to childrearing and caregiving, and the political impact that they have on the definition of children's identities as citizens, and consequently on the definition of different kinds of citizenship as well. Authors explicitly use an intersectional approach to analyse this relation. Even in this case, it is possible to distinguish two levels of application of the intersectional paradigm.

The first level is at the base of the entire work as it concerns the public/private divide. In fact, rather than thinking about this divide as something sharply defined, with a neat cleavage between the two parts, this work focuses on the interrelations and on the intersections between these two spheres of life. The conceptualisation of mothering practice as a citizenship practice is the result of this intersectional approach to the public/private divide: through this practice, indeed, private and public are connected, and, therefore, this is the place where the political role of everyday and intimate practices is displayed. The intersection of private and public spheres creates a third dimension where different aspects of daily life come into play and where the two spheres mutually shape each other.

The second level of application informs the sampling procedure of both researches: the authors explicitly mention intersectionality as the framework of their respondents' selection. First, they decide to focus on one specific agent of parenting practice: mothers. This is a choice made along the axis of gender and, specifically, of gendered practices and roles. They assume (seemingly, in an uncritical way) that practices of childrearing and caregiving are mostly carried out by women and consequently decide to focus on mothers rather than on fathers or on parents in general. Second, in each research, they search for respondents that share one or two characteristics and differ on all other aspects. This is because the heterogeneity of respondents enables the authors to investigate the specific position of each of them (in relation to the only aspect that remains fixed) and to adopt a different standpoint in each case.

Therefore, as regards the first research within the macro-category of mothers, the fixed characteristic was their irregular legal status, while in the second research the fixed characteristic was given by the intersection of three categories. Respondents had to be *white Belgian*, they had to be *adoptive mothers*, and *their children had to be black*.

As in Epstein & Carrillo's work, even in this case intersectionality is used strategically to define the field of investigation and to delimit the object of the research to specific kinds of people. Nonetheless, there is a substantial difference in this second work compared to the first. That is: while Epstein & Carrillo use intersectional analysis in order to highlight new categories of disadvantage, thus, in a sense, constructing the same categories that they aim to unmask, Longman, De Graeve and Brouckaert, by the means of intersectionality, try to deconstruct the boundaries between the two categories of public and private. This work, therefore, seems to position itself in between the intra- and the anti-categorical complexity approaches.

This blurred definition gives the work strengths and weaknesses. If, on the one hand, the combination of intra and anti-categorical approaches enables them to focus on their subjects and, at the same time, to critically deconstruct categories of public and private, on the other hand it leaves unclear why some categories have to be deconstructed, while others can be strategically used to deconstruct the former ones. For example, they do not pay enough attention to the gendered dimension of caregiving and childrearing

practices. They do not try to deconstruct this dimension, assuming it for granted and risking to reproduce gendered stereotypes.

### **Critiques and weaknesses. A controversial approach to the research.**

Shifting from the specific cases analysed and going onto a more general level, it is possible to notice that, since its very first steps, IT showed its effectiveness and appropriateness in empirical research. It has been used by numerous scholars as the theoretical framework of their empirical research (Bowleg, 2012), or as an analytical tool to investigate gender and racial discriminations (Nash, 2008). But nonetheless, the weakness of its definition and its open-ended aims were quickly noticed and questioned by some scholars (Davis, 2008) who started to criticise the theory from a methodological perspective (Anthias, 2012). Some of these critiques may have important implications from a theoretical and methodological point of view and, for this reason, I will address them in the next pages, trying to provide some insights aimed at overcoming risks and fallacies of IT.

One of the critiques came from Maria Carbin and Sofia Tornhill (2004) who questioned the theory's basic assumptions: according to these scholars, considering categories as roads crossing each other, and therefore as separate entities that casually interweave in one specific moment, the intersectional perspective completely lacks the analysis of the mutual construction of the categories themselves.

Other scholars (Hornshied, 2009; Lutz, Vivar and Supik, 2011; Choo and Ferree, 2010), argue that, more than analysing the categories in themselves, what should be questioned is the dynamic process of categorization and discrimination that is not only *based on* categories but it is also *performed* by them in different ways. As Choo and Ferree put it, what should be stressed are

*'the dynamic forces more than categories – racialization more than races, economic exploitation rather than classes, gendering and gender performance rather than genders'* (Choo & Ferree, 2010: 134).

The abovementioned classification by Knudsen can help to rebut part of these critiques. Indeed, defining two different approaches to interpret and handle categories, this systematization allows to mark some distinctions that enable intersectional analysis to avoid static definitions and interpretation of processes involving categories.

It has already been argued that preferring a *transversal* perspective to an additional one, intersectional analysis overcomes the risk of looking at categories as essentialised and static entities, and underlines the dynamic processes acting at their intersection (Christensen and Jensen, 2012). Furthermore, these processes *create* new categories of disadvantage that, although deriving from the previous ones, are qualitatively different from

them. Therefore, focussing on dynamic processes, this approach analyses how this *second level categories* are engendered.

Nonetheless, even in this way the risk to underestimate the construction of the starting categories considering them as pre-constructed and essentialised entities is still to be addressed. To do so, it is foremost necessary to enter the merits of the analysis, reflecting on the specific tools and methods to be adopted. This is because, using the right instruments, it will be possible to avoid a total preconstruction of the analysed categories, limiting its effects on the research.

Therefore, while it is possible, as stated, to use quantitative methods to study the inter-relationships among categories (as the inter-categorical complexity approach does), it is preferable to use qualitative methods to analyse categories and their interactions. In particular, I suggest to employ instrument such as the biographical narratives (or life-storytelling) (Bertaux & Bichi, 2003), the non-structured or, at the most, semi-structured interviews (Silverman, 2002), avoiding the full structured ones. In this way, the analysis of personal trajectories of people is less influenced by a predefined conceptualization of categories: each one's specific matrix of categories of belonging arises from the research rather than being pre-constructed by the researcher.

However, it would be wrong and inappropriate to claim for a complete absence of the researcher's choice about categories. The researcher has to proceed, instead, with an accurate selection of the categories to be analysed in respect to the aims of own investigation: the point is that these categories, in a first moment, need to be empty concepts, the meaning of which will be determined during the research taking into account interviewees' perceptions.

The other important aspect to be addressed is exactly the choice of the considered categories. Within the field of the intersectional analysis, the researchers' tendency and temptation is to widen the number of categories considered in order to highlight, as much as possible, the complexity of the object of study. This depends also on the character of qualitative research in itself, which has in the openness to the unforeseen and in the in-depth micro analysis its strength. The intersectional analysis, though, can give its best only under the condition that the researcher conducts an accurate, both quantitative and qualitative, selection of the categories to analyse, depending each time on the specific aims and subjects of the research.

As for the quantitative selection, there is not a predefined number of categories to consider: the guideline is that the number should ensure the manageability of the research and the profundity of the analysis. Indeed, this kind of analysis aims at providing in-depth examinations of the particular, rather than general analysis with universality's claims.

On the qualitative side, in selecting the type of categories to analyse the researcher should take into account the different logics of differentiation of categories and their different material and symbolic baggage.

Aiming to unveil discriminating processes that engender oppression, IT has always focussed on the disadvantaged categories, the so-called *marked categories*, paying little, if any, attention to the ones who were the bearers of advantage or even privilege, namely the unmarked categories. It is arguable, though, that a category is always the result of a distinction and, when considering one side of it, the other side is implicitly involved into the analysis as well. I suggest that, in some cases, it can be useful to explicitly consider the advantaged categories and their intersection with the disadvantaged one. This can be even more useful in unveiling hidden processes of oppression. However, whether or not the researcher will include the unmarked categories into the analysis, there is no reason to exclude them *a priori*. Then, the effective selection of the categories to be analysed, evidently, depends on the subject of the investigation and on the aims of the research.

### **Delineating intersectional methodology and methods**

Now that the hidden drawbacks of IT have been discussed, we can try to delineate a *methodological framework* in which it is possible to inscribe our intersectional researches. The first question to answer in this case is: Which level of analysis we want to include within the intersectional paradigm?

As we have seen, indeed, it is possible to apply it at different stages of the research, and it is not necessary to include all of them at the same moment. If we decide to apply it at the very first step of the construction of our research project, this means that we can use intersectionality to position our work in a specific intersectional field of study constituted by two or more pre-existing fields. We can also decide to investigate an intersectional concept (as in the case of sexual immigrant citizenship).

If we decide to apply an intersectional approach on the sampling procedure, this means that we are deciding to focus on specific intersections of characteristics of people and therefore we are going to conduct a sort of profiling procedure. The same can be said for subjects which are not people: for example, it can be decided to focus on the intersections of specific categories of an organisation.

The third step refers to the analytical level of the research. This is where through the analysis of the intersectional processes it is possible to observe the emerging of new categories and the processes occurring within this second level of categories. To do so it is necessary to situate the work in one of the approaches listed above and to tune the analytical tools accordingly.

Summarising what has been stated so far, it is possible to conclude trying to define a proper *intersectional method*. This is constituted by three stages:

- 1) Construction of categories
- 2) Deconstruction of categories
- 3) Observation of emerging categories

The first passage, as mentioned above, is the *construction of the desired categories*. Indeed, in a first moment it is necessary to decide which subjects have to be included within the analysis and therefore it is necessary to state which are the main categories that should be taken into consideration. For example, we can decide to include the main category of *origin*.

The main categories need to be marked; namely, we need to draw a distinction within the main category which enables us to identify the sub-categories which will be the actual material on which we will work. Following the example of the main category of 'origin', we can distinguish within it the two sub-categories of immigrant/native. Finally, it is necessary to select the sub-categories on which the research is going to focus. In the abovementioned example, we can decide to focus only on migrants, only on natives, or on both.

The second step goes in the opposite direction to the first one. Indeed, the second thing to do is to *deconstruct* the same *categories* we have identified before, trying to avoid their essentialisation. To do so it is necessary to choose the right instruments and the right approach. In my opinion, the inter-categorical complexity approach is the more suitable to the purposes of a mere intersectional analysis: it allows to strategically use categories without making them static and essentialised. Adopting this approach, the researcher is able to use qualitative methods or mixed methods (namely, the integrated use of both qualitative and quantitative methods), without falling into the extreme position of anti- and inter-categorical approaches.

Even if this double and opposite movement of the research can appear a contradiction, it is important to pass through both the step of categorisation and de-categorisation. The former allows the researcher to identify the actual intersection(s) on which they want to focus, and to define subjects and fields of the research. Without categorisation, it is not possible to completely inscribe a research within IT (even if you decide to adopt an anti-categorical approach you need to have the starting categories to dismantle). The latter is likewise important because through the deconstruction of categories the researcher is able to focus on intersections and on processes of (re)categorisation, avoiding to consider the starting categories as something fixed and essentialised. Without this second step, the identified starting categories run the risk to be treated as fixed entities rather than as dynamic, never-ending processes continuously acting, and the researcher risks to neglect the importance of processes occurring within the same categories and among them.



The third step is, in a sense, the evident prosecution and finalisation of the first two steps and it concerns the analytical level. Following the first two steps, indeed, it is possible to *notice the intersectional categories emerging by themselves*, revealing those processes hidden in the intersections. The role of the researcher here is exactly to observe the emergence of these new categories and to analyse the intersectional processes occurring on this second level.

Evidently, these three steps are intended to be circular and complementary at the same time, and their actual implementation is deeply linked to the instruments and the approach that the researcher decides to use.

### **Conclusions**

What this paper intended to do was to trace the outline of a proper intersectional method able to address the complexity of social phenomena, limiting the criticalities and the drawbacks of the intersectional analysis. The tripartite method delineated above and the methodological suggestions provided can be used as guidelines to direct an intersectional research. However, it is necessary to bear in mind the hidden fallacies of this paradigm and to consider them within the construction of the research design and within the analysis. For this reason, while an intersectional approach can be used for analysing every kind of topic, it is more suitable for certain perspectives than for others. Indeed, as stated above, aiming at shedding light on hidden forms of discrimination which originate from specific intersections, this kind of research expresses its best potentialities in analysing social processes from a subjective and micro-sociological perspective.

Any pretension of universalisation of this kind of research can be easily contested. Nonetheless, it is arguable that this kind of approach is more than adequate and important to understand contemporary society and its hyper-diversifying (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013) trajectories. These cannot be understood if not in terms of the increasing complexification of the social realm, and IT can be a good ally in coping with this challenge that social researchers are called to face.

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