

Towards a Methodology of Intersectionality: An Axiom-Based Approach

Heather Hillsburg is a Women's Studies Ph.D. candidate at the University of Ottawa. Her research interests include affect theory, animal theory, and bridging gaps between feminist theories and methodologies. Her dissertation explores the function of anger in Canadian and American women's literature.

Abstract

This article maps the emergence of intersectional feminist theory and explores the difficulties translating this theory into a methodology. To address these tensions, this article proposes three axioms that centre on things the researcher must avoid when conducting intersectional research and explores how these axioms can alleviate current tensions within intersectional research.

Résumé

Cet article dresse le bilan de l'émergence de la théorie féministe inter-sectionnelle et explore les difficultés de traduire cette théorie en méthodologie. Afin d'adresser ces tensions, cet article propose trois axiomes qui sont au cœur des choses que doit éviter tout chercheur/toute chercheuse qui entreprend des recherches inter-sectionnelles, et explore comment ces axiomes peuvent alléger les tensions actuelles au sein des recherches inter-sectionnelles.

In her analysis of feminist politics and anti-racist political action, Kimberlé Crenshaw explains that the experiences of black women are often erased within both feminist and anti-racist theory (1997). As a result, the double oppression experienced by black women remains undiscussed within both feminist and anti-racist theories and political organizations (1997). Crenshaw uses the example of violence against women to argue that relying on one identity category (such as gender) as the basis of analysis obscures the ways in which other identity markers (such as race) impact women's experiences of violence. Crenshaw proposes a theory of intersectionality to account for this complexity, explaining that it accounts for the interplay of identities at the intersections of race, sex, class, sexual orientation, or other characteristics (1997, 178).

The concept of intersectionality is now widely used in feminist theory and research to signal the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Nash 2008, 2). It also signals a shift away from an additive model of analysis that understands oppressions as independent strands of inequality and, rather, views these vectors of inequality as overlapping and interacting to form complex configurations of subjectivity (Choo and Ferree 2010, 131; Shields 2008). Intersectional theory has become an increasingly popular theoretical approach within social research and is currently the primary analytic tool in both anti-racist and feminist theories (Nash 2008, 1). The question of who embodies an intersecting subject position is debated within identity politics (Nash 2008). For some theorists, intersectionality is a theory that applies to everyone, as all subjectivities are characterized by the interplay of race, sex, gender, class, and other identity markers. Other researchers hold that intersectionality is reserved for people who embody marginalized subject positions. In her analysis of intersectional theory, Nash

asserts that, “this unresolved theoretical dispute makes it unclear whether intersectionality is a theory of marginalized subjectivity or a generalized theory of identity” (2008, 10). Despite these ongoing questions, intersectional theory continues to be an important theoretical concept for much contemporary social analysis.

Despite the popularity of intersectionality as a theoretical approach, researchers have not dedicated the same energy to developing a methodology for intersectional research (Shields 2008, 301; Nash 2008, 4). In fact, one area of research that theorists consistently argue is underexplored is the development of research designs and methods that can apply the tenets of intersectional theory to social research projects (Hancock 2007, 74). The absence of a methodology of intersectionality can be attributed, in part, to the difficulty of constructing a research paradigm that is attentive to “the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis” (McCall 2005, 1773). Due to a relative shortage of literature discussing intersectionality from a methodological perspective, researchers often have to learn how to conduct intersectional research through trial and error (Bowleg 2008, 313). Despite these difficulties, intersectionality continues to guide and enrich social research. As a result, it is important to consider what a methodology of intersectionality might look like, and to ask how researchers can develop and use a methodology which would not only account for the intersections of various identity markers such as race, class, and gender (Crenshaw 1997, 179), but also account for the fluidity of these identity markers.

Developing a methodology for intersectional research is complicated by the need to account for identity categories without relying on them too heavily to guide research. While researchers must approach identity categories carefully and critically, they must also interrogate the naturalization and hierarchical structure of identities. In addition, an intersectional methodology is further complicated because intersectionality as a theory illustrates that there are innumerable subject positions that can be studied, each marginal

and marginalizing of others in a way that is continuously changing. Because there is no single way to approach vectors of oppression or to locate sites of power, it is impossible to develop a prescriptive methodology of intersectionality that can account for how each individual experiences the interplay between race, class, sex, or other markers of power and oppression. Pinning down a single methodology, and naming it specifically as *the* methodology of intersectionality, may render it (and thus the identity categories it purports to analyze) static. The development of a methodology of intersectionality would also be challenging because each academic discipline that conducts intersectional research adheres to a specific research paradigm. What might constitute a successful methodology for one discipline might be inadequate for another. Consequently, a single framework that dictates how researchers negotiate intersectional research is impossible, as the needs of each discipline (as well as the expectations of funding agencies) differ significantly from one to the next.

Rather than attempt to outline a methodology of intersectionality, I propose that an approach that focuses simultaneously on what a researcher does *not* do and on methodological problems that theorists have identified within intersectional research can both be used to address the complexity of intersecting identities. Consequently, I suggest three axioms that can function as an outline of what researchers must avoid as they conduct intersectional research. While an axiom is commonly understood as something that is held to be true, an alternative definition suggests that an axiom is a statement upon which an abstractly defined structure is based (*OED*). The axioms I propose function as the basis for intersectional research, rather than work as given, incontestable truths. In this article, I briefly outline how intersectionality emerged within black feminist thought, as well as how this theory has evolved over time. I then explore current attempts to formulate a methodology for intersectional research and foreground some key methodological problems therein. In the final section of this paper, I outline a set of axioms that focus on research aims

themselves and I conclude by illustrating how these axioms can work to remedy some methodological problems that researchers must confront as they conduct intersectional analysis.

The Rise of Intersectionality

Although Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the term intersectionality in her landmark essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women" (1994), the notion that experiences are mediated by the interplay of race, class, and gender (among other factors) was widely discussed among women of colour before Crenshaw took up the pen. In 1851, black abolitionist Sojourner Truth famously asked, "Ain't I a Woman?" when she spoke publicly about her experiences as a slave and discussed how the abuse she endured on plantations was informed by both her race and her sex. More than a century later, black feminist thinkers such as Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2000), Audre Lorde (1984), and bell hooks (1984) were deeply critical of the conspicuous absence of the experiences of black women within feminist theory. According to these prominent feminist thinkers, the experiences of black women are often ignored in both feminist and anti-racist discourses. These theorists attribute this exclusion in part to the widespread use of a theoretical approach that uses race or gender as independent axes of analysis rather than drawing from a framework that could account for both (and other) axes of oppression (Davis 2008, 68). Rather than isolate one identity category and privilege it over other points of marginalization, intersectional theory sheds light on the ways various vectors of identity, such as race and gender, impact one another to form unique subjectivities and experiences.

Intersectionality now complicates and enriches social science research and textual analysis within the humanities. Ange-Marie Hancock explains that, prior to the emergence of intersectional theory, researchers tended to draw from a unitary approach that isolated one axis of oppression and used it to guide a research project. Within a unitary approach, one category is more important

than all others, and researchers do not address the ways other axes of oppression might complicate this primary category (2007, 68). A shortcoming of this paradigm is that it ignores the interconnectedness of identity categories and erases the ways in which individuals experience the intersections of axes of oppression. Hancock goes on to explain that, as researchers worked to remedy these problems, they began to rely on a "multiple approach," which adds one axis of oppression onto another. While this new paradigm is a useful step in the process of trying to conduct research that accurately captures the experiences of subjugated groups, Hancock is critical of this technique as it locates identity categories as fixed and unchanging. Further, this approach also assumes that the relationship between categories is predetermined (2007, 70). Hancock argues that this model does not account for the experiences of individuals or groups who might fall in between unitary identity categories (2007, 70).

Researchers have also drawn on an additive approach, whereby social inequality increases with each additional layer of marginalization. In the additive model, one identity is added onto another, but this model fails to explore the impact that one identification has upon the next and ignores the notion that identities are in flux. Critics who reject this model maintain that it constructs people's experiences as separate, independent, and summative (Bowleg 2008, 314). Hancock argues that this model not only fails to account for the complexity of multiple oppressions, but that it also pits one minority group against another as they compete for scarce resources or visibility, leaving undiscussed hegemonic assumptions that underpin social stratification (2007, 70). This model also tends to ignore that a person may experience oppression in one sphere but be empowered by the same social location in another context (Sedgwick 1990). It also ignores shifting sites of oppression as it paints groups as uniformly oppressed or enacting oppression upon others. Current intersectional theorists work to move away from this additive model in order to account for the interaction between axes of social subordination (Choo and

Ferree 2010, 131), and envision social locations as “more than the sum of mutually exclusive parts: they create an interlocking prison from which there is little escape” (Hancock 2007, 65). Intersectional research works to disrupt the assumption that identities are fixed and unchanging (Nash 2008, 6) and explores identities as they shift and change.

Researchers continue to move away from this additive model and currently grapple with various approaches that could account for the immense complexity of conducting intersectional research. In her seminal article, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” Leslie McCall engages with three approaches researchers have used as they work to account for intersectional identities in their work. McCall identifies “anticategorical complexity” as an approach where researchers view identity categories as too restrictive to properly capture individual experiences. Researchers thus deconstruct these categories within the research process. For McCall, this approach “appears to have been the most successful in satisfying the demand for complexity, judging by the fact that there is now great skepticism about the possibility of using categories in anything but a simplistic way” (2005, 1773). McCall goes on to outline “intercategorical complexity” (or categorical complexity), which requires that “scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (2005, 1773). Adherents to this approach use identity categories critically as they locate people’s experiences within the parameters of these classifications. It is important to note that, while this approach relies on identity categories to make sense of varying social locations, it is also underpinned by an understanding that social positions and identity categories are continuously in flux (Nash 2008, 5). Finally, researchers using what McCall names an “intracategorical framework” interrogate the boundaries of discursive categories and use these categories strategically. Within the intracategorical approach, researchers focus on a specific group of people at a given point in time at previously undiscussed points of

intersectionality (2005, 1774). Nash maintains that, within this framework, researchers must “attend to the dangers of categorization yet do not necessarily reject the categories themselves” (2008, 5). This approach emphasizes “giving voice” to those who are in positions of oppression and is similar to Hancock’s “multiple intersections” approach (Choo and Ferree 2010, 132), where the focus centres on differences in experience among members who make claims to similar identities (2010, 133). Yet despite the utility of these three approaches, ongoing methodological obstacles continue to arise within the parameters of intersectional research.

Methodological Complexity

Many of the methodological problems within intersectional research projects stem from the dissonance between intersectionality as a theory and the applicability of these theories in research methods. While theorists have widely critiqued additive models, it is tremendously difficult to account for this critique when using research methods such as focus groups, interviews, and quantitative methods. For example, Bowleg explains that, despite efforts to the contrary, conversations between research participants and researchers are often guided by questions that are implicitly additive. Bowleg explains that what is “at issue is how to ask questions about experiences that are intersecting, interdependent, and mutually constitutive, without resorting, even inadvertently, to an additive approach” (2008, 314). While intersectional theorists are vocal opponents of additive models, the question of how to translate this critique into improved research methods is unresolved. Another methodological difficulty centres on how to approach identity categories themselves. All social categories can be fractured into even smaller groupings, resulting in a paralysis of sorts as axes of analysis multiply (Hancock 2007, 66). While identity categories are central to intersectional theory and methodologies, the creation and multiplication of categories makes it tremendously difficult to outline a research project that can account for this complexity. It is also possible that using social categories as the primary vector of analysis might nat-

uralize these categories, leaving the logic of domination that informs them unaddressed (Sedgwick 1990, 24). At the same time, deconstructing these categories as discursive constructs may further oppress already marginalized groups, as identities often function as the basis upon which political alliances are formed and the grounds upon which social gains are won (Gamson 1995, 402).

While this is not an exhaustive list of criticisms of intersectional research or potential obstacles therein, the challenges I have outlined could be partially addressed through a set of three research axioms that I discuss below: a researcher must not police the parameters of intersecting identities; identity categories are not fixed; and researchers must not violate the vulnerability of others. It is important to note that I am not claiming to have solved these research problems through these axioms, nor am I suggesting that addressing these challenges will not generate a new host of difficulties. Rather, my intent in this section is to propose some new ways of approaching identity categories and research methods, in an attempt to account for the complexity of intersectional theory.

Axiom 1: A Researcher Must Not Police the Parameters of Intersecting Identities

The aforementioned debate over who can make a claim to an intersectional identity is indicative of a wider social trend of the policing of identity categories. The now infamous examples of the womyn-born-womyn policies of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and women-only hiring policies of the Vancouver Rape Relief Society indicate that making a claim to a subjugated identity is a contentious political process. This has played out in a Canadian context in the recent decision in *Kimberly Nixon v. Vancouver Rape Relief Society*, in which the BC Court of Appeals upheld Vancouver Rape Relief's opposition to giving Nixon, a male-to-female transsexual, the opportunity to volunteer in this women-only environment (Chambers 2007). This decision, as well as ongoing debates over who can make a claim to an intersectional identity, reminds us that subjectivities are the grounds upon which contentious debates about identities are waged

and civil liberties are won and lost. This dispute causes particular tension among feminist researchers, as the policing of identity categories undermines tenets of feminist social action that call for the importance of self-identification.

Although researchers can (and should) allow subjects to identify their own identity positions, the questions that a researcher chooses to ask within the parameters of interviews or focus groups can unwittingly exacerbate this tension, as it is impossible to account for all possible positions within the interview process. If a researcher poses questions that obscure one facet of a person's identity, the researcher infers that one identity category is more important than another. For example, asking questions specifically related to living in poverty might ignore how a subject's tenuous financial situation is informed by their race or gender. By privileging one identity over another, researchers are determining for their participants which facets of their identity are the most important. In this case, where subjects might view themselves as members of multiple diverse identity groups, the researcher has isolated poverty as the axis of analysis and is implicitly constructing the subjects' identity for them.

Researchers must allow individuals to self-identify as intersectional and locate their own subject position within (and in between) discursive categories. However, this is extremely difficult because researchers must also define their research project from the outset, and part of this process is identifying with whom they will conduct research. Further, it is impossible to account for all possible intersections, and, given time constraints and funding limitations, researchers cannot pose unending questions. In light of these complications, the axiom of refusing to police the parameters of intersecting identities can be translated into asking intersectional questions that allow research subjects to self-identify and discuss which facets of their identity are most important within the parameters of the research project. Bowleg explains that in asking intersectional questions, a researcher can "invite the interviewee to discuss her identities and experiences

however they best resonate with her” (Bowleg 2008, 315). Bowleg urges researchers to ask questions well; that is, asking interviewees about identities as they resonate with them, and adding intersections that the researcher may have overlooked (Bowleg 2008, 315). In this sense, individuals will be able to locate themselves within a demographic group as they answer questions and explain what this group means to them. Further, they will be able to speak to other markers of identity in relation to their lived experiences. On a practical level, open-ended research questions might need to be adjusted slightly, so that a question such as “Tell me about your experiences dealing with racism” could become “Tell me about experiences where you felt marginalized or oppressed.”

Axiom 2: Identity Categories Are Not Fixed

While it might seem obvious to researchers that identity categories are continuously in flux, what is less evident is how to approach these categories knowing that they will inevitably change, or that individuals might deploy identities strategically. According to Nash, “if intersectionality theory purports to provide a general theory of identity, it must grapple with whether intersectionality actually captures the ways in which subjects experience subjectivity or strategically deploy identity” (2008, 11). Following Crenshaw, it is also important to note that many feminist projects rendered black woman invisible or marginalized when they mobilized the category “woman” in hegemonic terms (1997). However, deconstructing points of marginalization, such as the identity “woman,” risks dismissing lived experiences of oppression as discursive constructs. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick cautions against the desire to deconstruct markers of identity and explains that this fixation on deconstruction “has both so fetishised the idea of difference and so vaporized its possible embodiment” (1990, 23) that, as a result, we have “no theoretical room to deal” (1990, 24). Derrida’s notion of *différance* foregrounds how we can draw from social categories to understand lived experiences of marginalization, while also problematizing their hegemonic usages. Derrida explains that *différance* is a “strategy without

finality” (1982, 5), and notes that “*différance* is not an opposition, not even a dialectical opposition; it is a reaffirmation of the same, an economy of the same in relation to the other, which does not require that the same, in order to exist, be frozen or fixed in a distinction or in a system of dual oppositions” (1982, 21). For Derrida, *différance* does not measure differences empirically, nor does it rely on binaries or hierarchies to distinguish one thing from the next. Rather, *différance* is a continuous chain of becoming, with each segment connected to, but differing from, the next (Roudinesco 2004, 21). Derrida is careful to note that *différance* is not a word, nor is it a concept (Derrida 1982, 4), but rather it indicates a process of differentiation beyond previously held limits (Roudinesco 2004, 21).

Within a methodology of intersectionality, researchers can understand identity categories in light of *différance*; that is, identities are not heterogeneous, but rather they form a chain of meanings that cannot be pinned down. As a result, discursive categories and subject positions are made historically specific, and, while each meaning is linked to other understandings of a discursive location, these meanings and subjectivities are not fixed, nor are they necessarily consistent. Understood within *différance*, the researcher and subjects collaborate to outline the specificities of one or many identity markers that will be the basis of analysis. Further, these specificities must be renegotiated and redefined as the research progresses in order to account for identities that are also continuously changing. Bowleg argues that researchers must make explicit both the intersections between ethnicity, sex/gender, and sexual orientation (to name just a few), as well as the social inequalities related to these identities (2008, 322). Understanding identity categories through the concept of *différance* can help researchers make sense of this complexity and account for the centrality of social categories while also using them critically. Within *différance*, what it might mean for one person to have gendered experiences does not necessarily mean that these experiences are universal or even consistent with those of others. As a result, this axiom will allow researchers and participants to deploy

identity categories, but also understand them as fluctuating entities.

Axiom 3: Researchers Must Not Violate the Vulnerability of Others

It is impossible to enumerate the potential subject positions located at the intersections of identity categories. Further, the process of trying to enumerate intersecting identities in order to determine who is the most severely marginalized not only potentially naturalizes points of oppression themselves, but also takes for granted hegemonic ideologies that inform social stratification. Further, while the goal of “giving voice” can foreground subjugated knowledges that might inform policy changes or social reform, “giving voice” can also give rise to paternalistic research practices that allow individuals to ignore their own role in the marginalization of others. Sherene Razack and Marie Louise Fellows write that moments of political conflict and stagnancy often arise when women view themselves as unimplicated in the oppression of others. As Razack and Fellows state, “When we view ourselves as innocent, we cannot confront the hierarchies that operate among us” (1998, 335). In order to foreground how the freedom of one group is contingent on the oppression of another, while avoiding the naturalization of axes of oppression, researchers can conceptualize *all* subject positions as needing attention, concern, and care.

Debra Bergoffen suggests that humans are connected to one another in a way that renders each person dependent upon others (2003, 121). Bergoffen goes on to explain that “as long as the values of integrity, independence, sovereignty and freedom are understood as expressions of an autonomous subject, the law of domination will prevail and patriarchy will endure” (2003, 128). Bergoffen argues that conceptualizing all bodies (not just female bodies) as vulnerable can disrupt the dualism between oppressed and oppressor, and while each person is vulnerable, this vulnerability is culturally, socially, and historically specific (2003, 121). Bergoffen calls this paradigm a heteronomy of vulnerability, whereby each individual is connected to others, and each

person must respect, and thus not violate, the other’s vulnerability. For Bergoffen, then, “heteronomy is the secret of humanity. Here we discover that our humanness consists in the fact that we are neither autonomous nor homogenous—that there is justice in the heteronomy of our mutual vulnerability” (2003, 133). Within the context of intersectionality, rather than search for the most oppressed identity and use this as the point of departure for study, and in place of attempting to understand who oppressed whom as a means to identify and challenge racist, sexist, or homophobic practices, each person must be understood as vulnerable—and this vulnerability must inform the research process. Further, if each person is vulnerable, then research will explore the specificity of this vulnerability (be it along the intersections of race, class, or other identity markers) while respecting, and thus not exploiting, the vulnerability of others. Through this framework, each subject is located in an interlocking network of oppressions and empowerments that render them both vulnerable and capable of exploiting the vulnerability of others. Similarly, the researcher must account for the vulnerability of their subjects and their methodology must not exploit that vulnerability.

In *Frames of War* (2009), Judith Butler explores the logic that enables some lives to flourish and benefit from state protection at the expense of others. Butler is deeply opposed to this logic and proposes that all lives are precarious; that is, the life of one person depends upon the lives of others for survival (2009, 25). Butler’s analysis of precarious lives is similar to Bergoffen’s discussion of vulnerability; both theorists see all bodies as connected to one another and dependent on each other for survival. While Butler argues that all lives are precarious, she is also careful to explain that some lives are more precarious than others. When a person does not have access to food, shelter, political alliances, and protections that make life livable, they are at greater risk of suffering and abuse. Further, subjugated groups are increasingly vulnerable when they are subject to brutality and state violence, as well as to colonial and imperial legacies (2009, 29). In

this example, Butler points towards the notion that, while all lives are precarious, some are significantly more vulnerable to abuse and suffering than others. Following Butler and Bergoffen, and within the parameters of intersectional research projects, researchers can conceive of all subjects as specifically, but not equally, vulnerable, and must account for this vulnerability in the research process.

Choo and Ferree argue that a methodological strategy for intersectional research must consider how to denaturalize hegemonic norms and champion more dynamic analyses that “consider how national and transnational structures of inequality are produced and reproduced in multiple processes such as gendering, racialization, labor exploitation, and generational succession” (2010, 147). For Choo and Ferree, researchers can make these improvements by bringing a more dynamic, process-oriented, non-hegemonic intersectional analysis into play (2010, 147). A focus on vulnerability not only accounts for the social processes that give rise to abuse, but this heteronomy also foregrounds imbalances in power that create subjugated groups from the outset, without pursuing the impossible project of identifying each social location. Finally, following Razack and Fellows (1998), by underscoring social factors such as the unequal distribution of wealth, state violence, racism, and colonialism (among others), feminist researchers will also be able to account for their own position of privilege within social hierarchies.

Conclusion

While I have outlined three axioms to guide a methodology of intersectionality, I do not intend for this list to be exhaustive. My aim, rather, is to provide an outline of criteria to consider when conducting research with intersectional subjects. Further, my goal is to provide guidelines to conduct research that has liberatory results and to provide spaces for self-identified intersectional subjects to make political allies and evaluate their changing identities. Like all tools in the social research processes, and like identity categories themselves, these axioms must also continually be re-evaluated and critiqued by researchers. It is important to note that imple-

menting these axioms also raises specific concerns. Where will future researchers learn the skill of accounting for vulnerability? Will funding bodies be amenable to axioms that will complicate and lengthen the research process? Due to the erosion of existing social safety nets and the growing popularity of neoliberal ideologies and policies, the marginalization felt by subjugated groups continues to grow. It is thus crucial for researchers to continue to refine their methodological approaches in order both to disrupt paternalistic notions of “giving voice” and to collaborate with subjugated groups in ensuring that voices from the margins are heard on their own terms.

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