

Commentary  
The Complexity of Intersectionality

Leslie McCall  
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Feminist analytic philosophers have been working in trying to define and explain the meaning of “gender”, “race”, “sexuality”, etc., using the tools of analytic philosophy in very different ways and from a variety of approaches. Many feminist philosophers, for example, have focused on the question of whether the concepts of “gender”, “race”, “sexuality” and so on are natural kind terms or socially constructed.<sup>1</sup> Although we cannot claim that there is full agreement on either the methods or the theories forwarded, we can perhaps agree that the analysis of the relation between some of these categories is at times regarded as an even more difficult and contentious topic than the analysis of each category separately.

It is at this point that the notion of “intersectionality” comes into play as a proposal for a framework to deal with the complexity of multiple structures (such as gender, race, sexuality, class, age, disability, etc.), on the understanding that the categories with which they operate do not act independently but rather intersect and create specific oppressions. As Ann Garry notes in a recent article, «Feminist philosophers tend to give it [intersectionality] lip service, but often fail to construct theories that integrate the insights brought to bear by intersectional analyses» (Garry, 2011, p.

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<sup>1</sup> See, among many others, Appiah, 1996; Haslanger, 2000, 2010; Saul, 2006; Stein, 1998.

826).<sup>2</sup> Although some work has been undertaken with the concept of intersectionality in feminist analytic philosophy, most of the research has been conducted by feminists in the social sciences and other feminist theorists not necessarily from within the analytical philosophy tradition. This is the case of Leslie McCall, an American sociologist who addresses this topic in a way that can be fruitful for feminist analytic philosophers. The aim of this commentary is to outline and present a critique of her attempt to deal with the question of *intersectionality*.

In her article, *The Complexity of Intersectionality*, McCall defines “intersectionality” as «the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations» (p. 1171). In the first part of the article, she seeks to analyze the relationship between different social categories by outlining three approaches differentiated by their use and understanding of these categories. In the second part, she presents an empirical study as an example of the intersectional approach she favors.

Before focusing on McCall’s own proposal, some background comments are perhaps required to account for the importance of the concept of intersectionality within feminist and women’s studies and to explain how it emerged within these theories. The specific concept of intersectionality was first introduced in the late 1980s by the critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as a way to describe the interconnections and interdependencies among race, gender and class in black women. Her contribution followed Black Feminist attempts at decentering white, western, heterosexual, middle-class woman who had become the central subject of feminist analyses and the measure of feminist politics. Other feminist critical race theorists such as bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) showed the impossibility of separating out the categories and explaining inequalities through a single framework. They challenged the use of ‘woman’ as a unitary category reflecting an essentialized vision of all women. Their aim was to show how the experiences and struggles of women of color could not be explained by feminist or by anti-racist theories. As it is now well known, these two theories seemed to imply that “All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men”<sup>3</sup>, so they considered it necessary to question the two concepts of

<sup>2</sup> Ann Garry (2011) discusses the concept of intersectionality and proposes a wittgensteinian family resemblance intersectional approach. This is one of the few works in feminist analytic philosophy in this topic.

<sup>3</sup> See Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982.

“woman” and “black” to illustrate the differences within these categories and, more importantly, the fact that interaction between these two categories forms specific oppressions such as those of black women. Intersectionality appears as a critical feminist proposal that can explore each intersection and which can shed light on previously hidden exclusions – black *lesbian* women, *muslim* gay men, etc. And at the same time it faces the problem of multiple feminine subjectivities. As Davis states,

‘Intersectionality’ addresses the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely, the acknowledgement of differences among women ... This is because it touches on the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism – the long and painful legacy of its exclusions (Davis, 2008, p. 70).

McCall’s understanding of intersectionality starts from the acknowledgment that social relations are complex, multiple and intersected and she seeks to manage this complexity by distinguishing three approaches that are defined in terms of their stance in relation to social categories: *anticategorical complexity*, *intracategorical complexity* and *intercategorical complexity*. These three approaches are not just conceptual possibilities but emerge from different historical positions adopted with respect to the categorization and the use of categories within feminist theory. Let’s explore them in more detail.

First, *anticategorical* complexity is linked to feminist poststructuralists who, according to McCall, offer a deconstruction and rejection of social categories and interrogate the boundary-making of categories itself. She adds that from this perspective,

social life is considered too irreducibly complex – overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures – to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences (p. 1173).

Some theorists have seen this approach as the most successful, given the great skepticism surrounding the use of categories in a simplistic way. The upshot of such an approach is a critical stance towards *categorization per se* and any research that is based on such categorization.

Second, *intracategorical* complexity is related to Black Feminism and focuses on «particular social groups at neglected points of intersection» (p.

1174).<sup>4</sup> It is critical of the general *use* of social categories. It is the approach that inaugurates the study of intersectionality by focusing on single groups placed at the intersection of multiple categories, but it restricts the scope of investigation to only one dimension (for instance, women and black), rather than «at the intersection of a full range of dimensions of a full range of categories» (p. 1781) – such as considering both women and men and black and white. The method normally used in this kind of approach is the *case study*, which investigates the features of a single group or culture and is typically associated with qualitative rather than with quantitative methods in the social sciences. As McCall states,

‘the multiple’ in these intersectional analyses refers not to dimensions within categories but to dimensions across categories. Thus, an Arab American, middle-class, heterosexual woman is placed at the intersection of multiple categories (race-ethnicity, class, gender and sexual) but only reflects a single dimension of each (p. 1781).

In this way, other categories of Western, man, black, homosexual, etc., do not enter into the analysis.

Third, *intercategorical* complexity is the approach McCall endorses. It requires adopting existing analytical categories strategically: it uses categories but maintains a critical stance towards them. In her words:

The intercategorical approach [...] begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of analysis. The main task of the categorical approach is to explicate those relationships, and doing so requires the provisional use of categories (pp. 1784–1785).

As an example of this approach, McCall presents her own *empirical research* in the second part of the paper. Adopting a statistical approach, she explores whether social inequalities among groups even exist, making these relationships the focus of analysis itself. The difference between this approach and the intracategorical approach is that it deals with complex relationships

<sup>4</sup> Although McCall literally says that poststructuralists *reject* categories (p. 1773), perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they operate with a *deconstruction* of such categories. For instance, Butler (1990) focuses on how these categories have been established through practices and repetitive performance.

among social groups rather than with single social groups or categories. The subject is thus multigroup, analyzing the intersection across all analytical categories and social groups, and her method is systematically comparative between them. Her specific intersectional research focuses on *wage inequality* in regional economies in the United States, using a large-scale quantitative analysis. She classifies individuals into traditional analytical categories and examines relationships of wage inequalities among such groups. She examines the dimensions of inequality first and then synthesizes this information into a configuration of inequality. The main finding is that patterns of racial, gender and class inequality are not the same across configurations, and she concludes that «no single dimension of overall inequality can adequately describe the full structure of multiple, intersecting and conflicting dimensions of inequality» (p. 1791).

Following this brief summary of ‘The Complexity of Intersectionality’, we shall now raise a number of critical points. Although McCall’s aim in the paper is «simply to introduce alternative perspectives that many feminists have overlooked rather than to provide a comprehensive definition or defense of them» (p. 1792), she proposes her empirical investigation as a case of the intercategory study she favors. The first problem we would like to underline is that she does not specify the relation between the intercategory *approach* and the particular *methodology* that should be used. Is the statistical method really appropriate for the intercategory approach? Our tentative answer would be that it is not, because the empirical results of her research merely restate the existence of complexity but do not explain it. In claiming as a result that «no single form of inequality can represent the rest but that some forms of inequality seem to arise from the same conditions» (p. 1791), all she shows is that complexity is at play, that different forms of inequality exist and that they are interrelated, but she does not specify *how* they do so.

As for McCall’s treatment of categories, we contend that there are more possibilities, other than the one she takes, left open for examination. The study of complex, multiple and intersecting social relations from an intercategory approach does not necessarily mean that categories must be used in the statistical and rigid way she uses them. Even if we grant that «if structural relationships are the focus of the analysis, rather than the underlying assumption or context of the analysis, categorization is inevitable» (p. 1786), could we not use categories in a way less rigid and more attentive to differences? For example, qualitative research could also be based on

traditional analytical categories without reinforcing binary and exclusive distinctions such as “woman” and “man”, by continuing to use them in a less rigid and fixed way (taking into account intersexuals, transsexuals or other identities that do not fit into the normative categories such as female/male or woman/man). Such a move does not imply turning the analysis into an anticategorical one, but it does serve to point out how a wide array of methodologies (and maybe not only empirical methods) could fit into the intercategory approach while using categories in a more flexible way.

Another critical point we would like to stress is that, after having defined the three approaches and illustrated her proposal with an empirical case study, McCall does not address the question of the relations and/or compatibility between the three approaches. On the one hand, it would appear clear that the anticategorical approach is incompatible with the other two (intra- and intercategory), precisely because of the requirement of deconstruction of categories. On this point, McCall shares with analytic feminists the rejection of the poststructuralist project that seeks to undermine identity categories deeply. The complex interaction of categories, thus, requires a more complex, messy and fluid treatment (see Garry, 2011, p. 830), but this does not lead to the abolishment of social categories. On the other hand, the intra- and intercategory approaches are not mutually incompatible, as one investigation could focus on a specific group placed at the intersection of categories and at the same time be intercategory in the sense of examining these very intersections with not just one but with multiple dimensions.

Moreover, if the focus of the analysis when following the intercategory approach is the relationship of wage inequality itself, perhaps she is reducing the possibilities of the approach instead of widening its scope. Taking categories as a starting point for the analysis of multiple oppressions of gender, race, sexuality, class, age, (dis)ability and so forth and studying the relationship of inequality could provide much more information than she seems to acknowledge. Besides using categories in a more complex way, the study of relationships of inequality can be studied not only as wage differences but as inequalities in civil rights, access to public services, criminalization, violence suffered, types of housing, sexual freedom, representativity, mobility, etc. which may require a qualitative methodology. It is not that McCall denies that the study of these inequalities are not suitable for the intercategory approach, but she does not take them into account nor does she explore the possibilities of studying the complexity of inequality itself.

These criticisms, while worth making, do not undermine the relevance of this paper as a discussion of the relation between different structures. It is now a commonplace in feminist studies to believe that the experiences of women are not only shaped by gender but by a multiplicity of categories, and intersectionality has emerged as a new theory for dealing with difference. As McCall herself says, «intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far» (p. 1771). Her contribution in this paper is precisely the examination of intersectionality as the very object of study, something that had not previously been theorized in this way. The classification she offers clarifies different ways of working with intersectionality taking into account the historical development of feminism itself.

Furthermore, as she briefly mentions in the paper, examining intersectionality has the value of bringing into focus *lived experience*. If, as Audre Lorde said, «there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives» (Lorde, 1984, p. 183), feminism should deal with more frameworks than gender structure because our lived experiences are at the same time intersected by our age, class, sexuality, etc. Once experience becomes the focus of investigation in examining categories, the need for an intersectional approach arises. Because our experience is intersected, its study must take this into consideration. And the same is true in the other direction: once the relation between different categories of analysis, such as gender, race, sexuality, class, etc., becomes the focus of investigation, then experience becomes a relevant dimension to examine. An approach along these lines can be found in Valentine (2007) in the field of feminist geography, where the author illustrates intersectionality precisely as lived experience and considers the parameter of space as a key dimension of intersectionality.

The study of intersectionality is not only a way of granting experience relevant status in the investigation, but also it can be seen as providing the conditions for any analysis of particular categories. In other words, it has the resources to question a study on gender that does not consider sexuality variations, or a study on race that does not consider other relevant categories and assumes its results apply in general to all the particulars falling under that category. That intersectional studies call into question studies of isolated categories does not mean that they render them false, rather they just warn us about their general applicability: it might be true but only for some particular group of people or in a particular set of circumstances. In this line, and in

agreement with McCall, we might argue that intersectionality is not a methodology but rather a framework, within which different methods and methodologies can be developed (see also Garry, 2011, p. 830). The advantage of questioning restricted accounts would be its positive value as a “framework checker” or “method checker” that provides standards that a method or methodology should meet (*ibid.*).

McCall’s contribution to feminism and social theory is now more than recognized, and as mentioned at the outset, intersectionality is rapidly gaining importance in feminist analytic philosophy. The study of intersectionality implies great complexity, as is implicit in the title, both as regards the examination of social relations from an intersectional point of view and in the study of the concept of intersectionality itself. Both senses of complexity could greatly inform work in feminist analytic philosophy. To our minds, it is worth that feminist analytic philosophers deal with the complexity of intersectionality for two main reasons: theoretically, to contribute to feminist debates on the concept itself and its implications, and politically because it can provide us with the building blocks of a theory that deals with difference, that has the potential to be sensitive to new exclusions and to take into account lived experience.

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