A Path towards Interdisciplinary Research Methodologies in Human and Social Sciences: On the Use of Intersectionality to Address the Status of Migrant Women in Spain

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Abstract: This paper addresses the theoretical issue of how to develop novel interdisciplinary epistemologies and methodologies in Human and Social Sciences by using the intersectionality theory, developed in Feminist and Gender Studies, as a tool. In the first part, the paper introduces the concepts of locationality and translocationality. These are important epistemological foundations of feminist theory to deal with the complex subjectivity that inhabits the postcolonial and globalized world. Intersectionality is presented as a tool that enables the analysis of interconnected factors that shape social locationalities and promotes developing new methodologies. What is in the name intersectionality, how it works, what novelty is there in it, and how it can be further developed are questions answered in this paper. In the second part of the paper, the concept of intersectional-gender is put forward to examine the complex social locationalities of women in transit and to read the status of migrant women in Spain. Finally, the paper decries the resistance to interdisciplinarity in Southern European institutions, and particularly in Spain, and suggests the use of intersectionality as frame for interdisciplinary research methodologies in Human and Social Sciences.

Keywords: Interdisciplinarity, Intersectionality, Locationality, Feminist and Gender Studies, Race, Gender, Class, Culture, Religion, Migration

Introduction

SCHOLARS IDENTIFY DISCIPLINES as domains of inquiry that pursue an object of study within a frame of shared terminology, categories, concepts, and methodologies. Disciplines are divided along these lines. Yet, it has been largely recognized that in many cases such divisions do not provide an appropriate framework for academic research. As a matter of fact, many disciplines appear increasingly open to external discourses and multidisciplinary approaches. Moreover, continuous calls for interdisciplinary research methodologies have been made. Interdisciplinarity is fundamentally defined as “giving up territory” and abandoning a “tribal approach to knowledge” (Lyon 1992), which

2 In 1983, Clifford Geertz observed a trend toward “intellectual de-provincialization” in the social sciences as they move away from their “snug and insular enterprise” (Geertz 1983: 3). Yet, the territory or border metaphor, though common in discourses about interdisciplinarity, describes institutional disciplines structure but hides the power of interdisciplinarity. The metaphor of river proposed by Arabella Lyon instead acknowledges the narrow origins from which disciplines spring (Lyon 1992) and draws attention on the fluidity and becoming of the process of
turns out to be extremely difficult when abandoning a territory is perceived by the academic establishment as a loss in power. Interdisciplinarity involves not only border crossing and traveling concepts, but also the exploration of new epistemologies from an integrative approach and development of new methodologies to address either new issues or old ones in new ways (Thompson Klein 1990). In contrast to multidisciplinary research, interdisciplinary studies require academic structures open to accommodate novel epistemologies arising from the use of interdisciplinary research methodologies.

Although some multidisciplinary academic structures have been recently created in Southern Europe, it is not clear whether they are already able to truly accomplish their proposed goal to impulse new interdisciplinary research projects. Indeed, while continuous calls for interdisciplinarity have been made, it is very hard to find a place for it within Southern European academic structures where applying for academic positions and grants always involves choosing the exact discipline that wraps the research proposal or teaching project.

This paper intends to approach the issue of how to develop novel interdisciplinary epistemologies and methodologies using as a frame the intersectionality theory from Feminist and Gender Studies. I deem that the intersectionality approach offers to social and human sciences researchers a methodology to deconstruct old schemes and structures and produce more integrated epistemologies to address the challenges of the postcolonial globalized world. In particular, intersectionality is proposed as a methodology able to address the complex locationalities of women in transit, which are my research focus. As foundational ground of the intersectionality theory, the complex social locationalities of women in transit in the postcolonial globalized society are firstly addressed in the following section.

The Complex Social Locationalities in the Postcolonial Globalized Society

The “politics of location” is considered one of the most important epistemological foundations of contemporary feminist thought (Braidotti 2003). Introduced by Adrienne Rich in the mid-1980s, the politics of location claims for not transcending the corporality, but reconnecting the abstract thinking with the particular living bodies. Since patriarchy does not exist in a “pure state,” the politics of location addresses when, where, and under which conditions, women struggle against discrimination in the specific and different socio-cultural contexts in which they live (Rich 1986). The politics of location aims at using all the different socio-

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3 See for instance the Centre for Human and Social Sciences of the National Spanish Research Council, which declared goal is to pursue interdisciplinarity (http://www.cchs.csic.es/en/content/presentaci%C3%B3n). Yet, calls for Spanish research funding (http://www.micinn.es/portal/site/MICINN/menuitem.7eac5cd345b4f3409df1001432ea0/?vgnextoid=abf192b9036c2210VgnVCM1000001d04140aRCRD) and positions (http://www.aneca.es/eng/Activities/Teaching-staff-evaluation/Procedure) are still very strongly structured along disciplinary boundaries.

4 In my academic carrier, I continuously experienced the difficulty to fit in just one closed disciplinary field. I went to Law School in Italy and then worked as a lawyer. Later, I enrolled in a Ph.D. program on Human Rights and started my research project on Women’s Rights. Although the program welcomed different approaches and perspectives, Feminist and Gender Studies were not even considered as a discipline. My postdoctoral training was in Anthropology, first in the US and later in Spain. During my entire academic path, I have gone through the stimulating experience of smuggling through the disciplinary boundaries of Law, Sociology, Anthropology, Human Rights, Gender Studies, Philosophy, Ethnic Studies, and Migration Studies. However, not “belonging” to any disciplines makes it difficult to fit in calls with predefined discipline options.
cultural conditions of each specific context as conceptual resources to interpret and represent the mechanisms of social interaction and subordination.

Over the last twenty years, the concept of locationality has undergone several specifications, reformulations, and modifications, and turned out to be extremely fruitful to address the complex subjectivity of migrant women in Western countries (Brah 1996). The either/or approach, assuming social groups and identities as if they were rigid and static, seems inadequate for explaining the subjectivities “in transit” that inhabit the postcolonial and globalized societies. To address the social locationality of being at the border space between groups, Patricia Hill Collins introduced the concept of “outsider-within” location to describe the marginalized condition of Black women who no longer belong to any group and live at the interweaving of multiple systems of subordination (Hill Collins 1998: 8).

Subsequently, the term “translocational positionality” was coined by Floya Anthias (2001, 2002 and 2009) to address the interplay of different factors of identification and discrimination such as gender, ethnicity, and occupational level, and their at times contradictory effects. The term intends to stress that locations are not fixed but related to contexts and time, involving continuous shifts and becoming. The notion of translocation refers first and foremost to social space as produced within contextual, spatial, temporal, and power relations. Translocationality also refers to social spaces defined by boundaries and hierarchies, and stresses that it is determined by a set of external conditions as well as by practices and strategies of identity negotiation and belonging. Through this way, translocationality allows to analyze the relation/reaction of social structure and individual agency (Anthias 2002).

Migrant women from the so-called “Third world” are located within complicated matrixes of social relationships by simultaneous processes of racialization, genderization, and labor marginalization. Women “in transit” have to face multiple forms of social exclusion within their community of origin as well as in the host society. They have to fight against internal and external forms of discrimination, sharing the culture of their community while fighting against its forms of gender subordination. In particular, Black Muslim migrant women living in Europe form part of the visible minorities and may represent the maximum fragility of the condition of being “in transit.” They live at the crossroad of intersecting conditions of subordination and represent the ultimate position of social exclusion for being migrant, Black, Muslim, and women. Yet, from a theoretical point of view, these women also represent the maximum potential of subversion of established models since they tune their gender identity in the migratory process and reinterpret their tradition, without abandoning their religion and culture in their search for gender equality.

Neither “insider” nor “outsider,” the “translocational” identities that populate the postcolonial global society, particularly the “in transit” locations of migrant women, come out from the hybridism, multiple belonging, and “borderline-ness.” Translocational subjectivity of women in transit is understandable through the multiple and interacting psycho-socio-political belongings, and the constant negotiation between their cultural minority group and the society at large (La Barbera 2011).

Although this is intended as a theoretical and methodological paper, I would briefly mention that my current fieldwork is devoted to examine how migrant women living in Madrid manage the process of identity transformation, due to migration, and how they negotiate and reinterpret their tradition, religion, and culture. My participant observation and interviews conducted until now have offered inspiring insights on the complex subjectivity of migrant women in Spain and constitute the material from which I try to theorize the locationality of women in transit as a concept.
The Intersectionality Theory

Since the 70s, Black feminists challenged the very foundation of feminism denouncing the privileged position from which white, able, middle class, heterosexual, and Christian-formed feminist scholars conceptualize the concept of gender as it were a neutral one (Lorde 1982, Combahee River Collective 1986, Spelman 1988, Harris 1990, hooks 1990, Hill Collins 1998). Scholars generally agreed that race, class and gender (as well as ethnicity, nation, age, and sexuality) and the way they are interconnected are crucial to understand social reality. Since then, these issues have been addressed under different terminologies such as gender-race-class matrix, multiple axes of inequality, or “multiple discrimination”. In 1983, Marilyn Frye used the powerful metaphor of a birdcage to explain the interconnected factors that create women subordination. Looking too closely at just one wire of a birdcage makes it is impossible to see the birdcage as a whole. By methodically but separately inspecting each wire, one will still be unable to understand how the birdcage is structured and why a bird cannot just freely fly away. Only by stepping back, it is possible to see the whole intersections of wires and understand how the cage traps a bird and prevents its freedom of flying (Frye 1983, 4).

From this ground, in 1989 Kimberlee Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” (Crenshaw 1989 and 1991), which during the 90s flourished and spread providing a new impulse and direction to a vividly discussed issue on both sides of the Atlantic (Yuval-Davis 2006). As a response to a long tradition of essentialism within feminist and race scholarship, the intersectionality approach focused on the subjects that fall in-between the fixed and isolated categories used to examine social life (Nash 2008). In just two decades, intersectionality has widely transformed feminist theory and research (Berger & Guidroz 2009) and has become a buzzword (Davis 2008) nowadays within the English speaking feminist academia. The intersectionality approach is indeed currently at the core of Gender Studies. Yet, it is quite ignored among Southern European scholars. Only recently the debate on intersectionality has arrived in Germany (Knapp 2005) and it is still quite ignored in countries such as Italy (Del Giorgio & Lombardo 2009) and Spain (Bustelo 2009). Due to this reason, I deem important to detail here what is in the name intersectionality, how it works, what novelty is there in it, and how it can be further developed.

Intersectionality refers to the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects produced by the interaction of social, economic, political, cultural, and symbolic factors intersecting in each context (Brah & Phoenix 2004). Intersectionality is meant as a tool for analyzing the structural, political, emotional, and representational level of discrimination as interconnected factors. It also allows to distinguish between power relationships and the individual versus collective representations of it (Berger & Guidroz 2009). Intersectionality addresses the ways in which the structures of race, class, and gender shape women’s lives and influence their behaviour. It also provides a set to inquiry on women’s perception of themselves and their place in society as well as the patterns that women use to describe their complex social locationality (Thornton Dill 1983).

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6 Think of the forum on “Intersectionality” by the African American Policy Forum (http://aapf.org/learn_the_issues/intersectionality/), the conference “Celebrating Intersectionality: the Multi-Faced Debate in Gender Studies” at Frankfurt in January 2009 (http://www.cgc.uni-frankfurt.de/iNtersectionality), and the special issues of the European Journal of Women’s Studies published in 2006 and 2009.
Through intersectionality we can understand the structural and dynamic effects of the interactions between the different forms of discrimination. It specifically addresses how sexism, racism, and classism, along with other discriminatory systems, contribute altogether to create and reinforce women’s social inequality. Intersectionality recognizes that race and class are always interconnected with gender in a way that makes not only senseless, but also counterproductive to disconnect the analysis of the different forms of discrimination. It reveals how the different dimensions of social life are distorted by the single-axis analysis and how policies that separately address discrimination based on race, gender, and class cause the paradoxical effect of creating ulterior and ultimate dynamics of disempowerment (Crenshaw 1989, Hill Collins 2000).

The intersectionality approach focuses on the locationality of each person as an inextricable whole, and is able to capture and theorize the simultaneity of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, culture and religion, educational and occupational level, not only as factor of identification/discrimination, but also as social processes in countinous becoming (Anthias 2002 and 2009, Brah & Phoenix 2004, Yuval-Davis 2006, Nash 2008, La Barbera 2009).

Intersectionality examines how the different and connected factors of identification/discrimination create, maintain, and reinforce formal and informal systems of power (Berger & Guiroz 2009). Intersectionality moves away from additive models by analyzing each discrimination as constituted by the intersection with the others, and recognizes that classes are always gendered and racialized, and gender is always classed and racialized (Anthias 2002, Hancock 2007). Assuming that no form of discrimination stands alone, intersectionality promotes awareness of the interconnected dimensions of both evident and hidden structures of discrimination. When dealing with racism, one should ask: “Where is the patriarchy in this?” and when dealing with sexism, one should ask: “Where is the heterosexism in this?”, as well as when dealing with homophobia, one should ask: “Where is the classism in this?” (Matsuda 1991: 1189).

In summary, intersectionality offers to social and human sciences researchers a methodology to deconstruct essentialist notions of identity, de-center dominant discourses, and produce situated and critically reflexive epistemology towards a more integrated approach for policy making (Davis 2008). This approach provides a novel framework to develop understandings and strategies of analysis for the complex social localisations of women in transit, which is further examined below.

**Intersectional-gender**

As a migrant feminist scholar I depict the new subjectivity of women “in transit” as a suffered but fruitful locationality since its openness and constant becoming provides a productive space for developing new political thoughts. The “in transit” locationality implies the deprivation of “home protection” – meant as family, town, social network, or nation-state – and the search for new psychological and concrete spaces to settle down. Through a conceptual and emotional re-elaboration of multiple belongings, the existential, psychic, and social condition of being at the borderline is transformed from a marginalized condition of exclusion into a fruitful epistemological position from which to interrogate and theorize individual and group’s mechanisms of social identification, exclusion, and discrimination. Through this way, the fragile position of cultural hybridism produces a ground for a strong impulse towards social change.
Thinking about the distinctive locationality of migrant women leads to elaborate new interrelated concepts of what gender and cultural differences mean in the global society, how do they work together, and how do they may be reconceived. To this end, I use the term intersectional-gender to stress the importance of focusing on gender as a determinant aspect of identity, and underline at the same time its intersectionality as an inherent and constitutive feature (La Barbera 2009). Intersectional-gender emphasizes not only how race and class inter-act with gender and produce multiple interlocking forms of subordination, but also how all the social factors intra-act shaping gender identity. Moreover, the factors shaping identity are not reducible just to gender, race, and class, since culture, religion, ethnicity, sexual identity, body-ability, and economical or educational levels also matter. In this sense, placing gender within an endless list of social categories involves the risk of neglecting that gender crosses all of them.

Intersectional-gender is an interdependent category originated at the interweaving of gender with the other social categories of identification and discrimination. To conceptualize gender as intersectional by itself means that it is connected, inter- and intra-acting with race and ethnicity, sexuality and body-ability, culture and religion, and educational or occupational level. I, thus, address the intersectionality of gender as a constitutive rather than additive process.

The notion of interrelatedness of gender with the other factors of social discrimination has been noted in feminist and gender studies since long time (Lorde 1982, Frye 1983, Jaggar 1983, Rich 1986, Spelman 1988, Nicholson 1994). Yet, the strategic importance of coining a new term for intersectional-gender relies on the fact that words are the tools to create concepts, and concepts the tools to understand, analyze, interpret, and shape social realities (Dewey & Bentley 1949). I claim that the concept of intersectional-gender strongly and unequivocally asserts the complexity of gender, shedding light on how gender is originated at the crossroad with the other conditions of social identification/discrimination. This conceptualization leads to the awareness that an integrated approach is required to understand these intertwined factors of discrimination that – as a web of dis/em-powering conditions strictly interconnected – shape the identities of women “in transit.”

Using intersectional-gender as an analytical tool, I am devoting my research to the analysis of the complex social locationalities of “women in transit” who are living in Spain and examine the gender identity negotiations during migration. The aim of my research is twofold: first, to analyze the Spanish legislation and public policies on gender and migration. Second, to examine the ways in which legislation and public policies influence the process of formation and transformation of gender identity of women in transit living in Madrid. My purpose is to analyze law as a cultural phenomenon and a social process. Because I understand that legal interpretation needs the development of a horizon that includes extra-systemic perspectives (Mengoni 1996), I merge ethnographic research and the analysis of Spanish legal texts on marriage, domestic partnership, gender violence, immigration, and religious freedom. I choose ethnography as a primarily qualitative research methodology characterized for depth and diachronity through a long-period participation in the daily life of the subjects of study and open-ended interviews.

Adopting an intersectionality approach and, in particular using intersectional-gender as an analytical tool, my research on gender identity and its transformation in the migratory processes requires overcoming discipline boundaries and exploring interdisciplinary meth-
Nevertheless, lack of true interdisciplinarity in Spanish academic institutions affects the development of integrated research projects dealing with the status of migrant women in Spain, which could orientate Spanish legislation and public policies.

**Perspectives: Towards Interdisciplinary Research Methodologies**

In my research I have adopted the intersectionality approach to analyze the complex locationality of women in transit. The research questions of whether gender identity is transformed during migration, and how do law and politics in the host country influence the process of identity negotiation, require an integrated and interdisciplinary approach. Using my own research project on the status of migrant women in Spain as an example, in this paper I propose intersectionality as a path towards interdisciplinary research methodologies in Human and Social Sciences.

As a conclusion, it is worth to recall that intersectionality is a disciplinary “border-crossing” concept that travelled from feminist theory through other disciplines within Human and Social Sciences, challenging the traditional discipline divisions and pushing towards new directions to structure research questions, projects, and methodologies. I argue that intersectionality implies shifting our attention from disciplines to the object of study, and reframing the academic structures according to the methodologies required to approach the research questions. Intersectionality calls for drawing concepts, categories, and terminology from different disciplines and creating new tools and strategies of research. Through this way, intersectionality impulses new relationships between disciplines not limited to occasional overlapping, but consisting in fusions and hybridizations. Adopting these novel methodologies can generate novel epistemological flows that blow up the traditional disciplines boundaries.

I argue that to create or enhance interdisciplinary academic structures in Southern Europe would facilitate the development of such methodologies, and provide a home to those that – in the effort to adapt their research methodologies to the requirements of the subject of study – find themselves as outsiders within the discipline divides for not belonging anymore to any specific academic field.

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7 My research combines different perspectives: Feminist and Gender Studies, Law, Political Theory, International Migration Studies, and Anthropology of Law. I call this approach Feminist Legal Applied Anthropology.
References


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