

## Intersectionality, social locations of privilege and conceptions of women's oppression.

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If we think of privilege simply as appearing in individuals rather than being lodged in ways of thinking, we focus on what privilege feeds but not on what sustains it.

- Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman*. (1988, 4)

I am not making a culturalist argument about ethnocentrism, I am trying to uncover how ethnocentric universalism is produced in certain analyses.

- Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes." (1993, 55)

Feminist theory is in a time of transition and of real promise. Over the past several decades, feminists have articulated a necessary critique of false universalization in feminist theorizing. Feminist generalizations about women misnamed or ignored the

experience of too many women, often eliding or crushing out vital information that stemmed from differences of class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age and ability. In the wake of this important critique, feminists have begun to forge new tools to help identify and avoid false universalization, tools which will allow for more accurate theorizations of women's situations, their subordination and the possibilities of their liberation. One such tool is the concept of intersectionality, which holds that forms of oppression interact and modify one another. Another tool is the growing feminist literature on privileged social locations and their epistemological limitations. This paper analyzes the relationship between intersectionality and the sorts of the perceptions and misperceptions of women's oppression that are facilitated by situations of social group privilege. I review current debates about character of oppression and ask the question "how do locations of privilege influence understandings of oppression?"

There is a debate about whether structures of oppression such as gender, race, sexual orientation and class can ever be considered as separable in the sense that they have separate effects and causes. There is also a related debate about whether separate oppressions can be conceived as burdens that are added to one another. I investigate whether it is useful to distinguish forms of oppression in order to provide accurate descriptions of how oppression can work. Interestingly, this approach seems plausible in cases when an oppressed person has multiple privileges but experiences one form of oppression due to one social structure. However, social structures are rarely--if ever--purely of one type; and writers who consistently focus exclusively on one dynamic while ignoring the intersections of other structures of disadvantage can produce biased, inaccurate work as a result. This has been the basis of some harmful false universalizations. Even if there is a grain of truth, then, to the idea that structures of oppressions can be distinguishable, taking this very partial truth for the whole story results in harmful distortions which obscure other important truths.

How does this happen? Agents with multiple social group privileges are often positioned so that the intersections of structures of disadvantage are less readily visible to them. This means that oppression can appear less "intersectional" from the standpoint of privilege. People with multiple social group privileges are situated as to be liable to miss the intersectionality of oppressions; the perspective from their positions can lead them to instead to focus exclusively on the idea that oppressions are separate in their causes and effects. And if, on that basis, writers simply assume that other forms of oppression are separate, additional burdens, the way to perceiving the interactions of oppressions is blocked. Social group privilege often entails a kind of tunnel vision which helps to obscure such moves to many feminist writers; but such moves, I claim, hamper the usefulness of general claims about oppression.

People with some form of social group privilege are by no means inevitably destined to remain unaware of how axes of oppression interact; on the contrary, they can take steps to make this more visible to them. The paper seeks to clarify the challenges involved, by investigating how locations of privilege can affect perceptions of oppression so as to occlude the possibility of intersectionality and thus foster false universalizations. In this sense, my approach is similar to that of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's description of her project in "Under Western Eyes." (1993, 55; cf Mohanty, 2006). I am trying to uncover how false universalizations are produced and

how truer general claims might be made. That is, the goal here is not to cast or avoid blame but to understand the mechanics at work in the development of perceptions of the character of women's oppression, and to analyze the conditions that lead to clearer, more complete and more accurate understandings of women's subordination. (See also Calhoun's important philosophical discussion of responsibility and blame (1989).

After briefly reviewing some problems of false universalization, we consider the epistemological challenges of positions of privilege for understanding oppressions. We then analyze the concept of intersectionality, a concept that promises much more accurate explanations of challenges disadvantaged social groups face and helps to reveals the falseness of much false universalization. The paper next uses these ideas to examine the debate about whether sexism forms a separable form of oppression, that is, whether it is separable from other group-based forms of oppression, such as those based upon class, race, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, ability and age.

### Feminist false universalization and Feminist Responses to it

As is well-known, the feminist critique of false universalization in feminist writing has been gathering force over the past 30 years (although, of course, it is much older than this). False universalization in feminist analysis is defined here as the neglect or misnaming of gendered experience due to the neglect or misnaming of the impact of race, sexual orientation, class and other variables. This sort of false universalization has weakened and confused many feminist analyses of gender, both in older feminist classics, including works by Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft, and in contemporary feminist theorizing and writing. The limitations of older classics have been well documented. (On Beauvoir, see esp. Spelman, 1998).<sup>1</sup> But the problem was by no means limited to the earlier periods of feminist discourse.

Many feminist writers contributed in different ways to the critique of feminist false universalization in recent years. For example, Angela Davis and bell hooks documented the persistent exclusions of Black feminist perspectives in American feminist thought. The authors of *This Bridge Called my Back* identified the exclusions of many women of colour in feminist thought.(1983) Chandra Talpade Mohanty analyzed the distortion of the experience of Third World women in Western feminist scholarship in her classic essay, "Under Western Eyes" (1993). Adrienne Rich (1986) and Marilyn Frye (1992) wrote eloquent critiques of the heterocentrism and heteronormativity of feminist theory and women studies. Black lesbian writers such as Audre Lorde (1984) and the Combahee River Collective (1979) pointed out the need to consider the conjunction of various forms of oppression.

The legacy of false universalization in feminist theory is, in itself, not, encouraging for feminists to contemplate. But these critiques revealed the need for rethinking gender claims and, as a result, many feminists began to forge and refine useful concepts such as intersectionality and to break new ground in understanding epistemologies of privilege.

### The Challenges of Positions of Social Group Privilege for Understanding Oppressions

In one sense, it is a commonplace observation that positions of social group privilege tend to shield privileged people from the vagaries of reality in various ways. Many writers have also noticed that having privileges due to membership in dominant groups can insulate agents from opportunities to acquire knowledge about a given form of oppression whereas having experienced a given form of oppression provides opportunities for understanding its contours. For example, bell hooks explained at the outset of *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984) that in the Kentucky town where she grew up, the African Americans lived in their own neighborhoods and also went to work in the white homes and neighborhoods, whereas the white population knew nothing of the African American neighborhoods. (Cf. Baldwin, 1963, reissued 1992).

Not only do the oppressed have more opportunities to observe the existence of unequal power relations, they have an interest in understanding the workings of those relations. As Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman put it, oppressed groups learn about the point of view of the powerful “through the sharp observation stark exigency demands.” (quoted in Kahane 1998, 220). (Cf. Rich 1979, on the white tunnel-vision she calls “solipsism.”).

Feminist Standpoint theorists have developed the view that oppressed and disadvantaged individuals are well-placed to develop accounts of oppression and thereby to contribute to libratory knowledge. (See the essays in Harding, 2003). Dominant forms of knowledge often inaccurately present themselves as neutral and un-situated. Standpoint theorists counter that knowledge is always situated; it arises from a particular situation. And some situations are more opportune than others for understanding disadvantage. Those in situations of privilege are less advantageously placed for understanding it. “For example,” Sandra Harding writes, “it is absurd to imagine that U.S slaveowners’ views of Africans’ and African Americans’ lives could outweigh in impartiality, disinterestedness, impersonality and objectivity their slaves’ views of their own and slaveowners’ lives.” She points to the resource that the perspective from the lives of slaves “provides on the views typical of slaveowners.” (1993, 141-142).

Nancy Hartsock’s interpretation of Marx provides a particularly vivid illustration of the importance of the standpoint of the oppressed as a source of libratory knowledge. In vol. 1 of *Das Kapital*, Marx contends that while, at the level of exchange, the buying and selling of labour power looks like a mere contract between free individuals, at level of production, the picture changes entirely:

On leaving this sphere of simple circulation or of exchange of commodities... we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*. He who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as the capitalist; the possessor of labor-power follows as his laborer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but – a hiding.

Hartsock comments that only by following the buyer and seller of labour power “into the realm of production and adopting the point of view available to the worker could Marx uncover what is really involved in the purchase and sale of labour power, i.e. –

uncover the process by which surplus value is produced and appropriated by the capitalist and the means by which the worker is systematically disadvantaged.” (Hartsock, 1983 reprinted in Harding, 2004, 38) Marx’s words are rhetorical but he gets the point across: the perspective of the oppressed is indispensable for a more complete picture of oppression.

A crucial element of standpoint theory is the distinction between experience and knowledge. “Emancipatory knowledge,” these writers argue, involves *thinking* from the point of view of those with experiences of disadvantage and oppression. This point is sometimes misunderstood; Harding argues clearly against appropriating the experiences of others, of pretending that they are one’s own. What she recommends is reflection on the first-hand accounts of oppression so as to reveal the partiality of dominant discourse. “What grounds standpoint theories,” Harding writes, “is not women’s experience but the view from women’s lives.” (1993, 141) Because of this, Harding has argued that individuals who have one or more sort of social group privilege can think about and learn from accounts produced by structurally disadvantaged agents and so contribute to emancipatory knowledge.

We will argue that the disadvantages of privilege social locations for understanding oppression have impacted the debate about separate and intersectional oppressions. We turn to those debates next.

### The Meaning of Intersectionality

As noted, intersectionality is the view that different social structures or axes of oppression such as class, sexual orientation, race, and gender intersect and influence one another. Many feminist writers have argued that an intersectional approach is needed to adequately understand and describe how oppression works. Although the concept of forms of oppression that shape and modify one another had been mentioned by many earlier writers, Kimberlé Crenshaw is often credited with introducing the term “intersectionality.” Crenshaw argues that “intersecting patterns” of racism and sexism often produce the experiences of women of colour. “These experiences,” she adds, “tend not to be represented within discourses of either feminism or anti-racism, discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, leaving women of color marginalized within both.” (1991, reprinted 2004).<sup>2</sup> Laurel Weldon writes that “theorists of intersectionality insist that we cannot understand the ways that women are disadvantaged as women nor the ways that people of color are oppressed *unless we examine the ways these structures interact*. Specifically, they claim that certain aspects of social inequality, certain problems and injustices, will not be visible as long as we focus on gender, race and class separately.” (Weldon, 2006, 239, emphasis in original).

Relying on the work of Iris Young (2005), Weldon suggests that intersectionality refers to the intersection of social structures of disadvantage and not to the intersection of identities. In response to critiques of gender essentialism, Young shifts the focus of gender from questions of identity to questions of social structures that foster inequality. She suggests confining the use of the category of gender to “analysis of social structures for the purposes of understanding certain specific relations of power, opportunity, and resource distribution.” (2005, 25). I have also

relied on Young's approach of focusing on structures of disadvantage in the present article because I have been convinced by the work Young, Mohanty (1993) and Butler (1990) that it is impossible to describe a unified concept of identity that does not falsely universalize the experience of some agents. (Cf. Young, 1995; for a spirited defense and application of Young's approach, see Htun 2005. For other useful explorations of the meaning of intersectionality, see Yuval-Davis, 2006; Davis, 2008; Bailey, 2009; Hancock, 2007).<sup>3</sup>

To these statements, I would add an earlier formulation by Charlotte Bunch. Bunch formulates the problem in an evocative way – one that has influenced the development of my thinking in the present article:

Female oppression is not one universal block experienced the same way by all women, to which other forms of exploitation are then added as separate pieces. Rather, various oppressions interact to shape the particulars of each woman's life. For example, an aging black lesbian who is poor does not experience sexism as separate packages – one sexism, one poverty, one homophobia, one racism, and one ageism. She experiences these as interacting and shaping each other. Seeing this interaction is vital for coalitions around these issues. (1987, reprinted 1993, 52).

Bunch usefully considers forms of oppression of homophobia and ageism in her analysis. Moreover, her metaphor of blocks is vivid and her critique of female oppression as a block to which separate blocks of other oppressions are added is thought-provoking. Feminist writers are currently debating these questions. There is a discussion about whether oppression involves only intersecting structures or whether it can also sometimes involve separable structures. The premise that structures of disadvantage are separable also underlies the “additive” model of oppression, whereby it is thought that separable structures oppression can be added to one another.

#### The Debate about Separate Axes of Disadvantage and the Additive Model

Elizabeth Spelman criticizes “an additive analysis which treats the oppression of a black woman in a society that is racist as well as sexist as if it were a further burden, when it is in fact a different burden.” (1988, 123). Several writers reject the additive model and its premise of separate axes and believe only an intersectional model should be used. Rose M. Brewer, Cecilia A. Conrad and Mary C. King critique a tendency to “compartmentalize” forms of oppression and argue that the approach of adding race to gender obscures the experience of women of colour. ( 2002, cf. Harris, 1990, and Ferber, 1998, p. 50).<sup>4</sup> Brewer et al. argue that with regard to the “Western analytic categories of gender, race and class” the following question must be asked: “do scholars understand that treating these categories separately, rather than as deeply related, is untenable in theory and practice?” Bailey (2009) uses the term “[white] gender” as a shorthand to explain how some uses of the category of gender are implicitly imbued with ideas stemming from the experience of white people. Focus on the intersections of oppressions

can help to forestall such implicit exclusions; a key worry is that conceiving axes separately fosters exclusions or allows them to continue. (Cf. Yuval-Davis, 2006, 197)

Laurel Weldon has recently argued that both intersectional effects and separate effects of structures are possible. “Affirming the importance of intersectional dimensions of gender, race and class,” she writes, “need not imply that these axes of inequality have no independent effects.” (2006, 246) Weldon rejects what she calls an “intersectionality-only” model. Using a combination of metaphor, reasoning and illustrations from quantitative analysis, she argues in favour of a model that would enable claims that structures of disadvantage sometimes have autonomous or separate effects which, in turn, allows claims about the existence of additive as well as what she calls multiplicative effects. (Multiplicative effects are mutually reinforcing or undermining effects but Weldon argues they are different from intersectional effects because they are derivable in principle from an independent analysis of each structure, whereas “intersectional effects are by definition effects that cannot be derived as any function of gender, race and class considered independently.” (2006, 243) Not all writers make this distinction and use intersectionality in this way).<sup>5</sup> Weldon calls her alternative model an “intersectionality-plus” model of conceptualizing oppression.

Weldon maintains that writers who take an intersectionality-only approach assume that gender has no significant independent effects apart from other axes of oppression and neither do the other axes. This leads her to formulate an interesting objection:

One group of scholars seems to understand the idea of intersectionality as implying that systems of gender, race and class have *no autonomous* effects. (e.g. Brewer, 1999, Ferber 1998; Harris, 1990). In other words, we really have one social structure called gender-race-class-ability-ethnicity-sexuality and people occupy one social position defined by these categories. On this view, it would seem nonsensical to suggest that capitalism sometimes reinforces and sometimes undermines gender or race hierarchies (Lipton 1988), that race is a more salient division than class in the United States while the reverse is true in Europe (Wacquant 1995), or that gender is more important than class in explaining some features of women’s work (Hartmann, 1994, Wright 1997). Making such claims requires the existence of identifiably separate dynamics for each of these axes. (2006, 240-241, emphasis in original).

Weldon’s suggestion is that if these research conclusions describe significant effects and if they require making claims that the axes are separate in the sense that they result in independent effects, then wholly intersectional models alone cannot provide a complete explanation of the workings of oppression.

This debate recalls an earlier discussion between Elizabeth Spelman and Susan Moller Okin about whether women’s oppression is “isolatable.” Spelman claimed in her book, *Inessential Woman*, that “If gender were isolatable from other aspects of identity, if sexism were isolatable from other forms of oppression, then what would be true about the relation between any man and any woman would be true about the relation between any other man and any other woman.” (1988, 81). “But this,” Okin responded, “does not follow at all. One can argue that sexism is an identifiable form

of oppression, many of whose effects are felt by women regardless of race or class, without at all subscribing to the view that race and class are insignificant. One can still insist, for example, on the significant difference between the relation of a poor black woman to a wealthy white man and that of a wealthy white woman to a poor black man.” (1994, 7)

Since the discussion between Okin and Spelman, the debate has advanced in the sense that many writers now distinguish more carefully between the structures of sexism and the fraught question of identity. Moreover, there is now wide agreement, that intersectionality is a necessary approach to understanding oppression. But is it sufficient? And are structures of oppression separable or inseparable? Can Okin’s description of sexism as an “identifiable form of oppression many of whose effects are felt by women regardless of race or class” be sustained?

### Perspectives of Privilege and Conceptions of Oppression

In one sense, conceiving of utterly separate causes is insufficiently precise. Obviously, categories such as class, race, sexual orientation, as well as a gender impact the lives of individuals. We are all raced and gendered; variables of sexual orientation, class, religion, ethnicity, ability and age shape our lives. Our experience is conditioned and inflected by these factors. It stands to reason they often contribute something to the way any structural disadvantage we experience is expressed. If this is the case, it does not make sense to simply exclude these variables from the analysis.<sup>6</sup>

But to separate something does not necessarily mean to exclude it, it can mean to distinguish it. Moreover, although sexist oppression always obviously exists in relation to these other forms of power (and often it is melded with them), it sometimes appears separable or relatively autonomous in its workings. Consider two hypothetical examples. Imagine that a young middle-class white straight able-bodied woman is sexually harassed by a young middle-class white straight able-bodied man. Imagine, too, that both experience privilege rather than disadvantage because of their ethnicity and religion and ability within their given society. From the point of view of such a woman, gender oppression may appear to work relatively autonomously from other factors. Under analogous circumstances, racism can also appear to work relatively autonomously. Imagine a young middle-class white straight able-bodied Asian man who is denied an apartment by a racist landlord solely on the basis of his race. Here, one factor, race, is most active in conferring the oppression, just as in the other example, sexism was the factor that most directly caused the oppressive experience. What is interesting is that a form of oppression appears separable or isolatable when the agent who is being oppressed is not simultaneously experiencing other types of oppression but is in the presence of his or her own privileges. I think these examples help to explain how oppression may appear more separable or isolatable to some women than others. To the extent that they focus on their own position,<sup>7</sup> oppression appears more separable to women habitually in situations of social group privilege, except as regards their gender. At the same time, that description may appear clearly inadequate to women who suffer multiple forms of oppression simultaneously.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to say that it is unimportant to fight against oppression of women who have several social group privileges; a wealthy white straight woman might be beaten or killed by her wealthy white straight husband. So, extreme oppression along one vector or axis of oppression/privilege can co-exist with other sorts of privilege or over-privilege. To return to Bunch's formulation, oppression is not a block experienced the same way by all women, but the examples seem to indicate that gender is sometimes an identifiable structure that can act as a relatively autonomous cause of oppression.

In order to understand such questions better, feminists may need to distinguish more precisely among types of causes. For instance, is the sexism involved in the sexual harassment of a woman with privileges across the board except for her gender an efficient cause of her oppression? An efficient cause is a cause that initiates an action or development. It is one of the four types of causality (material, formal, efficient and final) used in traditional philosophy and originally proposed by Aristotle. (1997, 334-338).<sup>9</sup> Now, Aristotle was certainly not a feminist and feminists have criticized the implications of his natural law language for women (Pierce, 2001). But other feminists have used the categories of his thought as the basis of feminist critique of gender injustice. (Nussbaum, 2000). Feminists should be wary and skeptical in their adoption of concepts from the Aristotelian tradition; nonetheless, we should consider the applicability of this conception of the four sorts of causality to the problem of how structures of oppression lead to oppression. We should test our thinking about causes against other views. Is intersectionality the intersection of two or more efficient causes?

There are, however, some important counter-arguments to the idea that oppressions are separable in any sense. Are forms of oppression ever pure? Adrienne Rich, for example, argued early that sexism is 'already' informed by heterosexual privilege. The institution of heterosexuality, she wrote, is a "beachhead of male dominance." (1982) And Young's conception of gender as a structure in her final work rests on the premise that it is shaped by three forces: the sexual division of labour, gendered hierarchies of power *and* normative heterosexuality (2006).<sup>10</sup> A full defense of separable axes would have to address these objections. I do not provide such a proof in this essay and I do not know if one is possible or desirable. My examples help explain why some people think the idea of separate axes is possible; unfortunately some also think it is simply adequate.

Some feminists will want to affirm an idea structure of gender as the main (and relatively autonomous) cause of sexist oppression while conceding it is conditioned by other axes of oppression in order to build resistance to sexism. But efforts to identify and challenge a main effective cause of sexism can lead to an unfortunately exclusive focus on sexism as *the* relevant cause to be addressed, as the only relevant cause of disadvantage. The problems inherent in such an approach can be exacerbated by the fact that the workings of privilege are often invisible to the privileged. (Rich, 1979) The problems of not discriminating amongst types of causes and of not seeing privilege as a type of cause also require attention here. Finally, when agents who have social group privileges take one experience of one form of oppression (sometimes the one they themselves experience) as a model, the universalizations they generate can be dangerously false.

But a mere strategic focus on one sort of oppression at the expense of other sorts can be a source of new injustices. Consider the story recounted by Maxine McKenzie about discussion with white feminists from a local organization. The discussion was about a poster chosen to represent the organization; some women of the community thought the poster “perpetuated racist and classist stereotypes.” Here is her account:

Toward the end of the meeting one of the white women explained that although she recognized that the poster did reinforce racist stereotypes of Women of Colour, she was still reluctant to remove the offensive poster from circulation. Why? Because this poster was the only way the organization could get its message to women. My question here is, what message? And to which women? By implication the pain and discomfort of Women of Colour who are oppressed by their sisters should not be a deterrent to the goal of reaching real women (read white women). Also implied by this blatant insult is that it is white women for whom they will be supplying their services. (1993, 240)

The account above is particularly valuable because it shows the harm that unconscious prejudices can produce. Cynthia Ozack wrote that “Strategies become institutions.” (quoted in Harris, 1990, 605). Considering McKenzie’s account of the poster discussion, I would add to Ozack’s formulation that strategies can foster harmful approaches. And these can become institutions.

McKenzie tells the story to challenge the grounds of exclusionary practices within feminism. She notes a tendency of white feminists “to see their own reality as norm and everything else as a deviation.” (1993, 240). In working to build feminist knowledge that is more accurate and less exclusionary, I think it is useful to keep in mind a distinction Alison Bailey has made between privilege-cognizant and privilege-evasive approaches (2000). Making privileges visible can help to make apparent the distortions and limitations of interpretations of the workings of oppression.

### Conclusion

I would like to conclude by considering these arguments in the light of some recent feminist work on future directions for research on intersectionality. In a thorough overview of much of the work on intersectionality, Kathy Davis argues that it is the very ambiguity and vagueness of the concept of intersectionality that allows it to be a productive and successful feminist theory. (Davis, 2008). I am unconvinced by this argument; I would suggest instead that it is through its power to clarify debates that intersectionality has gained a justifiable influence. But there is still much work to do. In a very thoughtful article, Nira Yuval-Davis suggests that feminists should more carefully distinguish “different levels of analysis” when analyzing social divisions such as class, sexual orientation, race and gender. She proposes that we take four different levels of analysis into account: “Social divisions have organizational, intersubjective, experiential and representational forms and this affects the ways we theorize the connections between the different levels.” (2006, 198). Yuval-Davis argues that at the heart of the debate about the viability of the additive model “is a conflation or separation of the different analytic levels in which intersectionality is

located, rather than just a debate on the relations of the divisions themselves.” (195).<sup>11</sup>

This is a very helpful observation. The present essay suggests that in subsequent theorizing about intersectionality, we also need to keep epistemologies of privilege and types of causes of oppression in mind. Such reflections are needed to help make feminist discourse truly liberatory.

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### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In some passages, Wollstonecraft clearly and astutely acknowledges the impact of class on the experience of working class-women. However, at other times, she simply assumes “women” will have servants to aid them in their responsibilities, effectively limiting the category of women to those wealthy enough to have servants.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of Sojourner Truth’s remarks before a meeting of abolitionists in 1851 in Davis 2008, 80, note 10. For pioneering statements in the Second Wave about intersections of identity, see Lorde, 1979, and the Combahee River Collective’s 1979 “Black Feminist Statement,” reprinted in Nicholson, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Kathy Davis writes that the term intersectionality “refers to the interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these in terms of power.” (2008, 68).

Hancock argues that intersectionality is a normative and empirical paradigm for research. (2007) This is not unlike Bailey’s view. Bailey argues that “intersectionality is really a strategy for making plurality visible in academic conversations and policy discussions. In this sense, it works more like a tool (e.g. a spell check program) for making inquirers mindful of complexity, than like a fully developed theory (e.g. socialist feminism, psychoanalytic feminism).” (2009, 4)

<sup>4</sup> Ferber writes that “Because race and gender are social constructs, they are not constructed in isolation, but often intertwine with other categories of identity.” (50).

<sup>5</sup> This issue is important and it has not been resolved. Weldon cites Crenshaw (1991) and Harris (1990) as examples of thinkers who hold this view. But Jordan–Zachery points out that Crenshaw (1991) uses the term “interlocking” to show how forms of oppression “converge” and rightly notes that this term “interlocking” implies the forms “can eventually be separated.” (2007, 260).

Hancock takes a different view about the meaning of intersectionality from Weldon when she suggests that intersectional research begins from the assumption that “More than one category of difference (e.g., race, gender, class) plays a role in examinations of complex political problems and processes such as persistent poverty, civil war, human rights abuses and democratic transitions.” (2007, 251). This is arguably overly broad because the additive model also features different categories playing a role in oppression.

<sup>6</sup> The important questions of the relation between identities to structures and between individual experience and structures arise here. (For interesting attempts to wrestle with these, See Young, 2005, 25-26 and Yuval-Davis, 2006). Cf. Hancock who calls for an “integrative analysis of individual and institutional levels of the research question.” (2007b, 251).

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<sup>7</sup> I use the phrase “to the extent they focus on their own position” because some agents who have been given forms of unasked for and unjustifiable social privilege act in ways that undermine or counteract their positionality. For example, white aid workers in the Global South who have been born with race and class privilege nonetheless have experience in the world that exposes them daily to the perspective of the disadvantaged.

<sup>8</sup> There also may be a distinction to be made between privileges which are implicated in shaping the form and character of the sexual harassment of a woman with multiple social group privileges, versus privileges which are merely present.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, Physics, Book 2, section 1, 192b9-193b21.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting, in this respect, to consider Young’s early work that critiques the idea of capitalism and patriarchy as dual systems. (1980). Cf. Bailey on the relation between intersectionality and the dual systems debate (2009).

In “Gender as Seriality,” Young had posited that gender is structured by two forces, enforced heterosexuality and the sexual division of labour (1995). She added “gendered hierarchies of power” to this list in “Lived Body versus Gender” (2005).

<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that many critiques of the separating of structures of inequality predate Young’s work on gender as a structure as opposed to an identity.

It would also be worthwhile to compare the levels of analysis Yuval-Davis proposes with Young’s distinction between the “lived body” and gender as a structure of oppression.

Another concern is that questions of environmentalism and imperialism may be side-lined in intersectional analyses because neither fit readily into current conceptualizations of intersectionality.