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### **Come citare / How to cite**

Bernacchi, E. (2022). Intersectionality as critical inquiry and praxis. *Culture e Studi del Sociale*, vol. 7(2), 145-151.

Disponibile / Retrieved <http://www.cussoc.it/index.php/journal/issue/archive>

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**Articolo pubblicato online / Article first published online:** December 2022



- Peer Reviewed Journal

INDEXED IN  
DOAJ

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[Culture e Studi del Sociale](#)



# *Intersectionality as critical inquiry and praxis*

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## **Introduction**

The notion of intersectionality is embedded in a long tradition of activism especially by Black and minority women and was spearheaded by Black feminists. Crenshaw (1989) was credited for coining the term; however, the origin of the concept can be traced in the history of Black women activism (Brah e Phoenix, 2004, Perilli and Ellena, 2012). Thus, it can be argued that the concept of intersectionality represents one of the most significant contributions that gender studies and feminist elaboration have made to sociological studies, in particular through the contribution of African American feminists, minority women, LGBT and queer people (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016).

Nowadays, intersectionality has become a widely used tool of analysis both at the theoretical level, within the framework of sociological theories, and at the political level, in international organisations and human rights movements. It could be argued that the success of this heuristic tool is due to the fact that race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, nationality, ethnicity and similar categories are better understood in relational terms rather than in isolation from one another and that those mutually constituting categories create intersecting systems of power. (Hill Collins, 2015) The considerable development that this notion has undergone in the academic context starting from the Anglo-Saxon area has, however, highlighted certain critical elements, including the proliferation of categories of analysis (Yuval Davis 2006), the risk of becoming a simple 'catch-all' label and consequently losing its critical function with regard to social inequalities, which was a pre-eminent objective at the origin of its formation. For example, Hill Collins (2015) distinguishes three domains through which the concept of intersectionality can be analysed: as a field of study, as a strategy of analysis and as a critical praxis. She argues that while the first two areas have undergone extensive development, what is in danger of being lost is precisely the connection to a critical praxis of social engagement. This is what Bilge (2013) referred to as the “whitening” of this critical approach.

To this aim, it is useful to consider the contribution stemming from other feminist theories such as standpoint theory (Harding 1993) and the theory of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) which, contrary to the idea of objective knowledge in relation to which the researcher has a neutral position, support the importance to recognise his or her own positionality and how this influences the research process. According to this epistemological approach knowledge must be regarded as situated, subjective, relational and linked to the position of power. As Lynn Weber (2004) argues, it is necessary to ask the implications for social justice of the questions we pose, how we pose them and the answers we obtain. (Bernacchi, 2018) Reflexive social research needs also to investigate and question the power position of the

privileged group. Furthermore, in an intersectional approach promoting a critical praxis, social categories are not seen as fixed but as “historically specific, socially constructed hierarchies of domination - they are systems of power relations” (Weber, 2004: 127).

### **Cussoc’s special issue on intersectionality**

This issue of the Cussoc journal presents a number of selected contributions stemming also from the Conference on “Intersectionality and Sociology: Theories and Methodologies Applied to Gender and Sexuality Studies” organised by the Gender Studies Section of the Italian Sociological Association in Naples on 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> December 2021. Those articles use the tool of intersectionality to highlight how the intersection of different social categories such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, migration status, education, ability and so on can give rise to complex forms of inequality. At the same time, they show how this analytical tool can be used to critically reveal how the interplay of sexism, heterosexism, racism, class oppression determines forms of exclusion and marginalisation of groups of the population and which strategies can be pursued to counter them. The first part of the journal "Essays" is dedicated to the topic of migration with a particular focus on migrant women and transnational families. The use of an intersectional approach is particularly relevant in this area as it allows us to identify how intersections of forms of oppression based primarily on sexism and racism configure complex forms of inequality. At the same, it is functional to identify interventions and policies to combat those inequalities. The articles presented are characterised by the use of the intersectional framework not only in the field of research but also in that of the analysis of interventions at the social and political level.

Another characteristic shared by some of the articles presented is the use of intersectionality in combination with decolonial studies. This strand of study identifies the centrality of the colonial experience in the construction of contemporary mechanisms of racialisation and subordination of previously colonised people. It critiques the perceived universality of Western knowledge along with the perceived superiority of Western culture by referring to the concept of the “coloniality of power”. This term was used by Anibal Quijano (2000) to indicate the racial, political and social hierarchical orders imposed by European colonialism in Latin America. The decolonial perspective is used here in a general sense specially to analyse the unequal relationships between migrants and Italian-born populations. Reference is also made to decolonial and postcolonial feminism, which warn against the idea of a common condition of oppression shared by all women and against patronizing mechanisms enacted by Western women towards women from different geographical and cultural backgrounds (Mohanty, 2003, Vergès, 2000). These critiques are innovative and relatively recent frameworks in the Italian academic landscape, which should therefore be welcomed with attention and further developed in research.

**Sara Rossetti's** contribution sheds light on the phenomenon of female migration through the case study of women originating from the Indian Subcontinent living in Italy with the aim of drawing attention, through a qualitative analysis, to the various aspects and strategies that women implement in order to enhance their social, individual and collective capital. The article analyses how they respond to family-type needs, requests and habits, how they position themselves within the diasporic

ethnic community and in relation to the host and residence society. The analysis combines the tool of intersectionality with the perspective of decolonial studies. Starting from this awareness, Rossetti points out how fundamental it is for researchers to become aware of their own positionality. This gives rise to a number of questions posed by the author such as: "how does a white, Italian-born, educated, precarious researcher, very close to the Indian Subcontinent for personal reasons, position herself in relation to research? How does she influence it? How can she truly be an "ally" for social change?" She also emphasises how decolonial studies and decolonial feminism (Vèrges, 2000) invite Western people to avoid any patronizing attitude towards migrant people, contesting the idea of the superiority of Western civilization.

"Transnational Families and Intersectionality: Research Perspectives and Social Intervention" is the focus of **Arianna Santero's** article, which highlights the contribution of the intersectional approach to both research (in defining research questions and in conducting qualitative research) and implications for social interventions, i.e. how to improve social interventions to support transnational families. Here again, the importance of decolonising research (particularly on migration, minorities, vulnerable population) is emphasised, while at the same time acknowledging the need to recognise one's own positionality and to promote a participatory type of research. The author recalls how Bernard (2021) pointed out that intersectionality aligns well with the values of social work because it is about power, oppression, social justice and emancipatory practices. Thus, the intersectional perspective contributes to questioning the structural causes of the problems faced by transnational families seeking services.

**Chiara Carbone's** contribution analysing the issue of the reception of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women in anti-violence centres also refers to the decolonial perspective in order not to crystallise the profile of migrant women and to develop a more inclusive methodology tailored to women's experiences and situated knowledge (Haraway 1988). The article examines the issue of migrant, asylum seeker and refugee women's access to anti-violence centres from an intersectional perspective by analysing both the additional difficulties faced by these women and the solutions that can be adopted to improve access. Here again, the author emphasises the importance of declaring her own insider position in relation to the research process as a volunteer at anti-violence centres. The research highlights a particularly important aspect related to the intersection of sexism and racism, namely the challenge of holding feminist and anti-racist goals together in working with migrant women (Anthias 2002, Benhabib 2002). This process involves questioning whiteness and the privileges associated with it.

The last article of the 'Essays' section by **Rosa Gatti, Salvatore Strozza, and Alessio Buonomo** examines - through a quantitative intersectional analysis - the issue of political participation of immigrant women in Italy, thus inviting reflection on intersectionality as a methodology of applied social research, which can also include quantitative methods for understanding and critically interrogate social phenomena. The article highlights how it is the inequalities produced by multiple systems of oppression that reduce the level of political participation for minority women (Brown 2014). The authors specifically consider the theory of intersectional social capital (Farris & Holmas, 2014) based on the hypothesis that social capital plays a significant and positive role in the political participation of migrant women but that its relevance varies at the intersection of gender with different categories.

The analysis jointly employs the intracategorical and inter-categorical approaches (McCall, 2005) in order to analyse the complex processes operating within and between individual migrant women's groups, allowing more attention to be paid to how different axes dynamically overlap in people's lives (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Finally, the authors highlight how an intersectional approach to quantitative research not only contributes to expanding the field of academic study but also to stimulating political reflection in an attempt to identify the actions needed to reduce inequalities and build a more equitable and inclusive society.

The second part of this Special Issue includes articles - in the section "Experiences and comparisons" and "Notes and comments" - that analyse different social phenomena that entail various forms of complex inequalities such as LGBT parenting and women's participation to the labour market, as well as, different forms of activism, such as feminist collectives in European countries and feminist activism through women's strike in Latin America. All of these scenarios are analysed through the tool of intersectionality and can dovetail with other participatory methods of research.

**Giada Bonu's** article proposes an original reflection on the intertwining of the intersectional approach and that of Participatory Action Research (PAR), both through a theoretical reflection and one based on empirical research on feminist urban spaces in two European cities (Rome and Madrid). This is an innovative and particularly relevant theme in the field of intersectionality studies and feminist theories of social research. The author first traces the genealogy of PAR and its links with feminist epistemology and then explains how PAR, informed by an intersectional approach, giving voice to the expression of a range of subjects and going beyond the realm of possibility than certain social power structures preclude. The participatory approach breaks the monopoly of the academy's production of knowledge, which is often male, white, western, heterosexual, cis, and ableist, opening up counter-narratives acted out by the subjects themselves embodying subaltern positions.

The research also addresses the issue of the positionality of the researcher, how this affects the way in which research is conducted and the risk that the issue is only taken into consideration in a declarative and not truly self-reflective manner, thus losing its critical function or even benefiting those already in a privileged position. The author recalls a quote by Fuster Morell: "It could be argued that research is always action research and that there is no such thing as apolitical and / or neutral research" (2009: 21). The article also reflects on the challenges that a practical application of the Participatory Action Research method entails through an analysis of empirical research processes. It emphasises the challenge of the unintentional reproduction of certain exclusionary structures even in participatory methodologies that aim to contrast those same structures.

The article by **Salvatore Monaco** proposes an intersectional reading of the issue of LGBT parenting, emphasising how such parenting can take place in very different forms, conditioned by people's sexual identity, but also by other socio-demographic factors, such as gender, socio-economic conditions, ethnicity, or territorial location (Goldberg and Allen, 2020). Such an intersectional approach permits identifying some of the identity traits that interviewees identified as additive to the general stressors already experienced by all LGBT parents living in contemporary Italy. Those are: being in a male couple, having limited economic possibilities, facing a transition from female to male gender, or having a different ethnic background. The

author also points out how an intersectional reading of instances of difficulties encountered by LGBT families is fundamental to improve the work of social services or professionals that are often unaware of the real difficulties experienced by LGBT families and therefore fail to provide adequate responses to their specific needs.

**Claudia Santoni's** article deals with the issue of women's unequal access to the labour market, again proposing an intersectional reading that goes beyond gender. The adoption of an intersectional perspective in the analysis of labour inequality makes it possible to outline explanations and hypotheses for change that take into account the idea of social complexity, to explain those phenomena that originate from the intersection between several social categories and that are characteristic of post-modern societies. Women are assumed to be a non-homogeneous, but socially constructed social group, whose experiences represent different subjectivities at the centre of power asymmetries generating diversified forms of oppression that cannot be ascribed to gender affiliation alone (Mohanty, 2003, Lorde, 1984). Here again, the relevance of an intersectional approach is highlighted in order to promote adequate policies that take into account the intersections of different axes of oppression.

Finally, the article by **Dariana María Alcaraz Alonso, Diana Valeria Mendez Ortiz, Emanuela Buscemi** investigates, through an intersectional and decolonial perspective, the 2020 women's strike against gender-based violence in Mexico. The authors claim that it is important to recontextualise intersectionality within a decolonial framework and in the context of the Global South, by posing the following questions: "Is intersectionality equally applicable as an ontological concept in different geographical and cultural contexts? Does the colonial experience impinge on the very same concept? Also, how can we make sure that the intersectional framework works to "make sense" of gender-based violence and femicide?" To this aim, they refer to the theory of *border thinking* by the Chicana and queer scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and to the concept of the "coloniality of gender" as "the analysis of racialised, capitalist, gender oppression" by María Lugones (2010). They also refer to the concept of "gore capitalism" devised by Sayak Valencia (2010), based on the claim that violence itself has become a product within hyper-consumerist neoliberal capitalism. The authors conclude that the Mexican women's strike proposed innovative and creative actions and performance that revealed the complex interplay between intersectional oppression, decolonial instances, neoliberal economy and Latin American feminisms. The question remains open as to whether the experience of the women's strike be considered part of a new creative feminist toolbox, devised predominantly by millennials to propose unexplored ways to dissent and confront the institutions and the patriarchal oppressive structures not only in the Mexican context but also at regional level.

### Conclusions

The articles presented in this Special Issue of the *CuSSoc* journal adopted intersectionality as a tool of analysis, as well as, a critical praxis to foster social change. Many of the texts presented speak to each other by referring to the "mothers" of intersectionality (starting from Crenshaw to more recent feminist scholars) and point to the need to use intersectionality within the framework of decolonial studies and/or to conjugate it with participatory methods of research. They also emphasise the need for the researcher to acknowledge one's own positionality and to adopt a

reflexive stance as to how this influences research processes beyond declaratory affirmations. While agreeing on the importance of using intersectionality, not only as an academic research tool, but also as an instrument to challenge inequalities and promote social change, the articles presented raise questions as to how intersectionality can actually inform social policies and interventions. This is certainly an area which deserves more future research. Another area which needs more attention especially in the Italian context, is related to the adoption of a decolonial approach in relation to the application of intersectionality, especially in relation to research about migrant and marginalised population. As the contributing authors have shown, this entails asking difficult questions about the positionality of the researcher and the methodology of research itself. Such an approach has only just started to be taken into consideration in the Italian academia and is thus worth further development.

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