Agency in intersectionality

Towards a method for studying the situatedness of action

Paola REBUGHINI

The aim of this article is to offer a reflection on intersectionality as an analytical tool to investigate agency. Agency is certainly a complex and contentious issue in sociology, but the aim of this article is not to engage explicitly in the history of this debate. For the purpose of the discussion to be developed here, it suffices to define agency as a situated form of subjective action characterized by the encounter, on the one hand, between individual intentionality, value orientations, aspirations and resistances, capacity to give meaning to action and definitions of reality, and on the other hand, the constraints of the social and material environment. In this article, the reference to intersectionality will be considered a useful epistemological and methodological tool to investigate a double specific characteristic of agency: the capability of the subject to deal with relevant social categorizations, such as gender or ethnicity; and situated agency, as a temporary subjective synthesis of the social reality, in contrast to the continuous flux of social life experienced as it changes over time.

Intersectionality is usually debated in more specific areas of study related to gender issues, and its ethical vocation is devoted to the denunciation of power relations and social inequalities (Bilge, Denis, 2010; Dorlin, 2009). Yet, without forgetting its original aim, nowadays an important amount of reflection can be seen on intersectionality as a wider epistemological and methodological resource. One of the more promising applications includes the use of intersectionality to study the way in which social actors construct their agency in a given situation, to deal with forms of domination—such as essentialized social categories—and to develop a creative and autonomous use of the social categorizations themselves. This can expand the application of intersectionality from its traditional research settings, including the study of subjective agency as a whole, and show the potential, but also the limits, of intersectionality as a heuristic tool of sociological investigation. This article analyses the extent of this potential.

Where the action is: an intersectional perspective

Where and when human action is performed, the place and the time of action are important to grasp the margins of manoeuvre of the social actor, and of her/his autonomy. Usually, this is expressed using the idea of context and situatedness. Attention towards the context of action is traditionally more present in American pragmatism, as well as in sociological approaches such as interactionism and Goffman's idea of frame as situation, the place *where action is* (Goffman, 1969). Of course, attention towards the environment of action is also present in European sociology, and has been right from the start, ever since the founding fathers: Weber—for whom sociology itself is a comprehensive science of social action—explains the notion of *Erlebnis* as a situated subjective interpretation in a given socio-historical context; Durkheim focuses on contextuality when he discusses the social and material conditions of solidarity, or when he refers to our encounter with "social facts". For them, living beings were fated to struggle in the face of circumstances.

However, it is American pragmatism that has most emphasized its interest in situatedness, never deeming an action to be pure intentionality, but always intertwined with the conditions of its environment (Dewey, 1973 [1922]; West, 1989). This is a phenomenological conceptualization of action as an alternative to an idealist approach. Action is the product of

human interactions in an ongoing situation, and in dynamic processes. James, Dewey and Mead consider a situation to be a "problem-solving" site: actions and practices are a subjective answer to a problematic situation. The epistemological base of this attitude is that all situations are potentially unpredictable, and always involved in contingent changes (Bernstein, 2010). Agency does not have a purely cognitive dimension, and the subject is not opposed to a world of objects that have to be represented. Rather, the subject is part of the environment where s/he acts and develops practices. At the core of this position is the notion of "experience". Certainly, the pragmatist approach of Dewey or Mead is vague and generalist when discussing the "environment". Only with Goffman and interactionism is the environment localized in specific settings and situations, even though they are mainly conceptualized in intersubjective linguistic encounters (Goffman, 1974). Language is a medium between the subject and the environment, where events can become the object of interpretations (Habermas, 1984).

The history of sociology is characterized by investigation into the way in which individuals are constantly involved in different contexts, different configurations of relationships and different frames of action. More recently, a rich discussion on the local positioning of agency has grown up inside the wide debate on *intersectionality*, in which the spatial and temporal elements of agency are identified in the situated encounter of categories that qualify the limits and potential of action. It is in this encounter that the interplay of agency and structural constraints can be analysed from a new light. Intersectionality does not start from a generic reference to the social and material environment or from an idea of situation framed by a communicative encounter, rather it focuses on the notion of *category* as a mediating concept between social structures and subjective identifications. A category is a social dimension including naming and linguistic elements, social and institutional structures and rules, individual and collective appropriations, adaptations, subjections or resistance to such processes of categorization. In this respect, intersectionality frames the reference to a situation where agency can be grasped in a new way. It paves the way for an analysis where situatedness is emphasized as both an epistemic and ontological reference, and where local practices and interpretative tactics are considered useful instruments with which the individual has to cope with the constraints of the situation.

Indeed, in its original conceptualization, intersectionality was not especially interested in situatedness. Its origins are rooted in the crisis of the Eurocentric notion of modernity and in the rise of claims to difference. The metaphor of intersectionality is related to the feminist debates of the 1970s and 1980s, when the discussions on patriarchy and capitalism intercepted black women's movements and postcolonial approaches, introducing the issue of colour difference and racial discrimination as specific multi-level forms of oppression. The term "intersectionality" was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to critique the single-issue agendas of feminist and anti-racist social movements, as well as additive approaches to discrimination and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991).

The possibility of analysing the articulation of class, gender and race/ethnicity, instead of considering them as independent and separate forms of power relations, is at the basis of the notion of intersectionality as an epistemological approach to domination. This emphasizes that oppression is not a singular process, but is constituted by multiple and interwoven elements whose particular combinations, despite growing out of different logics, produce specific forms of inclusion and exclusion. This specific sensitivity towards the multidimensionality of power fits into the growing globalization processes. Yet, because intersectionality explores how categories are intertwined and mutually constitutive—for example, how gender is racialized, and how gendering processes can also be racializing processes—it expresses the ambition to deconstruct the binary modern opposition between agent and structure, supporting the idea that structure and subjectivities produce each other, and contextualizing an historicized approach to agency.

Since its early formulations in the 1990s, intersectionality has become a contended analytical device, with different approaches in the USA and Europe—as well as within the two continental areas—following different epistemological and methodological points of view, different histories of feminist debate and different analyses of social stratification. And yet, the whole potential of the metaphor of intersection, one of the most successful "travelling theories" of recent decades, has not been fully deployed with respect to the notion of agency. Rather, intersectionality has been appropriated by existing sociological theories, from sociology of law to ontological and materialist approaches, with their own ways of looking at agency.

Moreover, although intersectionality is a key concern for gender studies, it has rapidly become a widespread analytical and heuristic device, as well as a key topic for sociologists not specifically involved in gender issues. The success of this metaphor was instantaneous and it was rapidly appropriated and adapted for other categories of people in addition to black women. Indeed, as a general reference, the idea of intersecting social categories to evaluate their reciprocal effect in a specific situation seems applicable to any sector of social research, and it was present long before the term was coined by Crenshaw; no social category or social dimension works in isolation (Anthias, 2013; Collins, 1991). ~~Of course~~, the use of intersectionality as a generalist *buzzword* (Davis, 2008) has been criticized for its open-endedness. In its original intent, the intersectional perspective aimed to investigate the qualitative differences of oppression (Choo, Ferree, 2010), but naïve use of the term produces a depoliticized version of intersectionality that erodes its potentiality to promote the enhancement of marginal subjects who are suffering a multiple matrix of oppression (Collins 1996).

Hence, the popularity of intersectionality has been characterized by growing theoretical confusion and by a series of denunciations about the lack of a valuable method to study its empirical basis (Winker, Degele, 2011). The interrelatedness of categories works on various levels—subjective, structural, symbolic and representational—and the methodologies need to correspond to this multi-level nature of intersectionality. Nevertheless, the widespread interest in intersectionality and its growing presence in theoretical debates beyond gender studies remains associated with its analytical potential: to analyse multidimensionality, simultaneity, pluralism and situatedness of the social construction of categorizations, as well as the way in which single subjects deal with them.

Agency in multi-level intersections

While on the one hand, intersectionality came about to denounce the accumulation of disadvantages and inequalities, on the other hand it is a tool to situate agency in its making, its location, and as a specific moment of action. Intersectionality suggests where and how to look to grasp the multi-analytical dimension of agency, according to which social positions are always relational, not simply due to structural constraints or to the will

of single subjects (Phoenix, Pattynama, 2006). In this respect, agency is the outcome of a plurality of interrelated dimensions that produce different, sometimes contradictory and always changing social locations (Anthias, 2013). Investigating what happens in the intersection can highlight the ongoing process of mediation, conflict, resistance and adaptation which characterizes subjective agency as an interface between the individual and the surrounding environment (Colombo, Rebughini, 2016).

Intersectionality "emphasizes how all subjective experiences of selfhood are continually transformed, re-enacted, and re-negotiated as a function of shifting landscapes of social context" (Diamond, Butterworth, 2008: 375). It underscores that the social categories where we are situated are not interchangeable, but historically and contingently constructed. Consequently, every subject can challenge reality as a given, such as stereotypes and negative categorizations (Yuval-Davis, 2006). In an intersectional perspective, there is always "some degree of agency that people can and do exert" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1297), and "intersectionality provides a critical lens to analyse articulations of power and subjectivity in different instances of social formations" (Bilge, 2010: 23).

The criticism against the blurred and uninformed use of intersectionality is mainly related to the need to maintain its original meaning as an instrument to give a voice to the "oppressed", to intercept forms of domination and categorizations of inclusion and exclusion. In the intersectional perspective, categorizations are never neutral, they are always associated with power relations and inequalities, and their aim is to investigate the qualitative differences of oppression, such as in the case of black women (Choo, Ferree, 2010). Still, in spite of recognizing the possibility of agency, the traditional approach to intersectionality, born in black feminism, remains focalized on unilateral forms of power and negative social representations and categorization, without highlighting the empowerment potential of possible intersections (Lutz, 2014).

~~Indeed~~, the main potential of intersectionality, with its investigation of "what happens in the intersection", lies in its attempt to work on both sides of agency and structure at the same time, while focalizing on the issues of time and space, such as the situatedness of action. Because agency is temporally and locally embedded, work on situatedness, as the specific location of the dynamic interplay of time and space, is the main

contribution that intersectionality and its combination of methods can give to grasping what happens in a specific intersection of categories as the interplay between the agent's creativity and capacity of choice with the structural constraints of social inequalities produced by categorizations.

The tensions between agency and structure have been at the centre of sociological debates, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, when many leading scholars tackled the classic challenge to overcome the modern dualism between subjectivity and objectivity, intentional will and determinism (Touraine, 1984). It is at that time that in the USA Crenshaw (1989) elaborated her idea of intersectionality as the crossroads of stigmatizing categories, while denouncing inequalities, and focusing more on structural constraints rather than on subjective capacities of reaction. However, an analytical novelty was intrinsic to this idea. The locus of investigation was no longer practice, habitus or routine, but the situated crossroads of categories as temporal and spatial vectors of social meanings. Subjective agency emerged as the result of the intersection of enabling—or hindering—categories in a specific situatedness: such as being a black, Muslim girl in a secular school mainly attended by white pupils. In this respect, categorizations do not simply intersect in a deterministic way, or as an overwhelming "matrix of domination" (Collins 1991). It is the plurality of convergent categories, with their different logics and languages, that makes space for adaptation, translation, subjective resistance and change. As Leslie McCall claims in a seminal article, intersectionality is first of all a methodology with which to study the "relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations" (2005: 1171).

The situatedness highlighted by intersectionality focuses on the "here and now" of action, interpretation and processes of categorization. Situatedness focuses on a specific location as a specific environment whose characteristics in terms of social relations, subjective interpretation and the local force of categorizations can be seized with different, both qualitative and quantitative methodologies capable of investigating situated decisions and practices. This practical evaluative dimension is inevitably related to the contextualization of the actors' experience. This means that there is not just opposition between the reproductive pattern related to social categories, or a pure creative action arising from free intentionality,

but a variable interpretation of the settled material that constitutes the social structure in which actors are involved. Intersectionality highlights how, in the situatedness of a context, actors are able to make judgments and evaluations, to raise conflict and dissent, to scrutinize the characteristics of the situation and adapt to them, to justify their choices and their claims. The differences among contexts and combinations of the relevant categorizations involved in each local situation make way for different orientations of agency. As Goffman claims in his idea of *frame* (1974), every day actors are involved in the plural embedding of different frameworks that elicit different attitudes and different experiences of reality; the further away from each other or more contradictory such experiences are, the more actors will be pushed to develop a creative capacity of practical evaluation, mediation and judgment.

One of the main epistemological premises of intersectionality—although this is not shared by all the varieties of this approach—is the claim that there are not finite and definitive categories—such as ethnicity or gender. Instead, it focuses its attention on the process of categorization itself. The categories we use to order reality have no foundation in a stable and material reality or representation of reality. Because they are constructed in language and situated contexts, categories cannot be claimed to be "true"—in the sense of a stable and overwhelming social consensus—even though they can become "real" in their practical consequences (hooks, 2000). Intersectionality highlights how the social context for acting is continuously produced and sustained in situated interactions that regulate the degree of negotiability of social categories (Levine-Rasky, 2011). Categories are socially constructed but, once produced, they also have a structural effect; they become capable of defining the context and promoting some courses of action while hindering others (McDowell, 2008).

Intersectionality invites us to think about agency as situated in a temporary intersection where subjects give meaning to their action in a specific social location and in the immanence of a specific section of time. The intersectional perspective investigates the way in which categories that help us to make reality intelligible are constructed, and it highlights the consequences of their boundaries and distinct meanings. Thus, intersectionality is an analytical tool to focus on the agency of people who are at the temporary crossroads of plural and fluid categories.

Potentials and limits of intersectionality as a methodology to study agency

What agency is, in a space that we can easily imagine as an intersection of analytical and sociological dimensions, depends on the epistemic premises of the scholar investigating this space and the methodological tools s/he chooses. From a methodological point of view, intersectionality is designed to investigate intersections both on a more generalist macro level—for example, as the intersection of statistic variables—and on a micro level, for example, for a limited number of categories, chosen by the researcher as more relevant in that context, or arising from the narratives of interviews and ethnographies with a local group of social actors (McCall, 2005; Lutz, 2014). In the first case, the impact of categorization processes can be grasped in their consequences on the social stratification and as a collective phenomenon, as in the typical case of the "matrix of domination". In the second case, it is possible to focalize on individual agency as well as the personal and unique interpretation of the situation, and to investigate the specific set of limits and resources created by the particular intersection of different social forms of categorization. In both cases, intersectionality may allow for a more complex framework for social action in which both rigid structural determinism and a naïve emphasis on individual creativity or resistance are replaced by a process-centred perspective (Choo, Ferree, 2010). Heterogeneous categories such as gender, class, age or ethnicity, as well as other forms of cultural difference, are neither unitary nor universal and fixed; they may change, and people may change them, in relation to their personal capacities and external conditions.

In three decades of studies on intersectionality, categorization as a dynamic process, or categorization as a structural given, has arisen as the main epistemic difference at the basis of the two main ways of approaching intersectionality; the former being more widely discussed in Europe, the latter traditionally more in tune with the American history of this approach. For example, in its original formulation in black feminism, the interest in denouncing inequalities, stereotypes arising from categorizations such as colour or gender, and their legal and institutional consequences, tends to give little room to the subjects' capacities to deal with such constraints. Intersectionality is the *crossroads* of the force

of categorization, and it is related to the idea of separate, existing categories meeting at one point. Such sites of intersection logically come before empirical analysis, and interpretation of the subject; they exist and people can find themselves entrapped where they intersect. Thus, it was almost inevitable for the analytical formulation of the metaphor of intersection to have a normative penchant: categorization is a form of domination that has to be revealed in order to denounce inequalities. In this case, the risk of taking hegemonic representation for granted, and forgetting the subject's capacities to deal with it, is real.

This risk is even more concrete if the methodology chosen to analyse the intersection is a standard empirical examination of categories operationalized as variables (Hancock, 2013). Usually these are "unitary" examinations (for example, the researcher considers the most important category to be "race" or gender), which, when developed with *additional* mutually exclusive categories, overlap in multiple formulations (for example, how race plus gender as independent variables have an effect on the dependent variable of unemployment). In this case, intersectionality meets standard quantitative methods, such as regression, in large-N studies with few chosen variables, where it is more difficult to analyse the processes of *interaction* among categorizations. Indeed, in quantitative methodologies, the interaction among categories is better investigated by the multiplicative approach, whose aim is to demonstrate that categories do not have separate effects but act simultaneously. In this way, it is possible to analyse the different ways in which the position of an individual is affected by different intertwinements of categories. However, multiplicative interactions may be very difficult to interpret, especially when they involve three or more variables. But the main criticism is that the multiplicative approach requires predetermined categorical relationships: the researcher has to decide *a priori* which categories and which interaction effects should be analysed, thus reproducing a static conceptualization of categories. Consequently, individual or collective agency disappears in this case too. All individuals occupying the same location are equivalent, and their actions are considered dependent on their social location (Hancock, 2013).

From a methodological point of view, qualitative approaches are more open to the unpredictability of the relevant categories at a local level.

The number and the relationship between the categories are more clearly identified as an open empirical question that has to be organized in the research design. When we use qualitative methodologies—such as interviews or observation practices in ethnographical investigation—categories and their intersections tend to emerge as a result of the narratives, and at the same time these narratives are related to representations, identifications and feelings of belonging (for example, identifying oneself as a black, working-class woman). We may say that quantitative methodology highlights sameness and homogeneity better, for example, what poor, black women have in common, while qualitative methodology highlights variation, heterogeneity, contingency and the complex texture of everyday life within the same group of people. With a qualitative methodology, comparing different case studies could resolve the issue of the exemplarity of the single cases. A comparative intersectional analysis can show how different categories may give an individual either a wide or tiny space for action, and it can show how agency is deployed. Qualitative intersectionality provides an insight on identifications, by attempting to methodologically capture the way in which individuals identify themselves in the dynamics of the situation (Nash, 2008).

Today, one of the main challenges in intersectionality research in the social sciences is to select the combination of methods to investigate agency emerging in a situation operationalized as an intersection. Intersectionality challenges all traditional methods that cannot simply be imported into the logic supported by the metaphor of intersection and by the epistemic issues it raises: how categories work, and how individuals deal with them in a flux of identifications. Still, the connections between epistemological and methodological approaches to intersectionality can produce different analyses of agency, such as the multidimensional social location of subjects' phenomenological experiences. As Hancock (2013) puts it, intersectionality is methodologically agnostic and the questions it raises are unresolved. Singular quantitative or qualitative methods are unable to answer the challenge brought about by intersectionality, because the intersection is not a frozen moment, and subjective identifications are not a stable outcome, even though they are also the result of historicized forms of categorization. The critical value of intersectionality is given by the potential of this in-depth, complex analysis.

The epistemic challenges of intersectionality

Among the epistemic challenges stemming from intersectionality as a method to investigate agency is the issue of *how* we—both as researchers and social actors—know and construct the social categories, such as gender or ethnicity, in which agency is deployed. This concerns the nature, consistency and use of categories that have different analytical dimensions: they are connected to identifications, and to changing social and historical representations; they may be translated by the institutions (into laws and policies); they are experienced in a subjective way in terms of emotions and feelings, practices, meanings and decisions. An intersection includes different analytical levels, which can be better framed in a specific situation.

On the one hand, the perspective of intersectionality can shed light on agency by avoiding the essentialization of social categories, and by paying attention to the processes through which categories are produced. Blackness or womanhood are not naturalized, homogeneous or stable statuses, but social constructions with a changing political status according to time and space (history and social location). The process of signification involving categories is unstable and always located in a context, with different forms of power relations. Nevertheless, at a given historical time, and at a given situation, there is often conflation between some vectors, such as gender and ethnicity, in terms of advantage or disadvantage. On the other hand, intersectionality helps to highlight the subjects' capability to manage categories, transforming and translating them to construct an autonomous action. Intersectionality helps to shed light on the subjective situated uses of categories, and on the room for manoeuvre that the various structural dimensions have left open for the individual in that specific social location.

Certainly, the list of salient categories to be taken into account is potentially endless, and the researcher has to decide which, when, where and why specific categories are more relevant than others in that historical and local context. Consequently, categories are constructed both by society and research, and this is related to the method chosen to capture them. Theoretical and methodological criticisms of intersectionality often point out that it fails to distinguish which categories are important in defining

how subjects interpret a potentially unlimited process of signification. Nonetheless, it is evident how some social divisions—especially the classic trilogy of gender, ethnicity and class—tend to shape many people's experiences in most social locations, while assuming different meanings and relevance in different situations (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Approaching the situatedness of agency through the lens of intersectionality allows us to look at how social categories assume political relevance in specific contexts for different people who define themselves, and are socially defined, by a combination of categorizations. In analysing agency, the question of how the categories are produced, used or contested, and the meanings that people attribute to these categories in their interactions count more than the list of allegedly relevant social divisions. The different dimensions from the classic gender, race/ethnicity and class included in research should not simply be a list of powerful categorizations, but rather a mirror of the current experience of fluid and multiple subjective forms of living in a social context, underscoring the complexity of contemporary forms of domination and discrimination (Staunæs, 2003). The analysis can focus on the dynamic processes of the construction of agency in a social context described by a set of temporary categorizations. Agency is not mere opposition to the effect of pre-existing, fixed categories, but interplay with the situated functioning of categorization processes.

Moreover, categories such as gender, ethnicity, class or education are different ontological elements, whose interpretation, construction, essentialization and manipulability by the subject have different degrees and consequences, which cannot simply be added together. These categories do not function with the same logic. For example, the body is the main reference in the case of gender-sex or age categorization, while material resources, income and welfare policies are the main reference in the case of class. They are autonomous in their genesis but related in their effects: for example, class depends on economic processes of production and consumption, but these can have an impact on the way in which gender and sexual differences are represented and institutionalized (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Differences in gender, class, ethnic/racial, age or sexual preference may follow different logics and pave the way for different strategies of agency. The different impact of a categorization should be taken into account when investigating agency. Paying attention to the social processes of categorization is a good way to avoid the risk of both

collapsing all categories into a single logic, and transforming categories into essences that are independent from any contextual interpretation.

Intersectionality can highlight the dynamics of agency (such as self-definition of the categories) and structural constraints (categories as given, reified and stereotyped definitions) in a series of situated interplays in which categories can have different roles, weights and consequences. From an epistemic point of view, an intersectional gaze on agency aspires to open the black box of a given situation, in which categories are not totally pre-defined, and a subject produces agency as both situated knowledge and the situated management of social constraints. This means that it is not only categories that affect individual and collective lives with positive or negative consequences, but also that categories are constructed by the subject, and also by those who are subjected to them. The challenge is how to produce knowledge about these processes where all the possible categories are mutually constituted in everyday life, while "gender", "class" or "ethnicity" are also a research construction and the result of academic specializations.

To conclude, what can we see with intersectionality that we would otherwise not be able to see?

In social theory the situatedness of action has been explored mainly by pragmatism and the variants of interactionism, that is from the point of view of the subjective experience and frames of communicative social relations. Such approaches—including the theoretical alternative of Habermas communicative action, or Garfinkel ethnomethodology—are usually less attentive to the issues of power and inequalities. Working on the situatedness of categorizations, intersectionality highlights power relations and the subjective resistance in the flux of everyday life. At the same time, as epistemological perspective, intersectionality highlights the multidimensionality, simultaneity, and pluralism of the social construction of categorizations, avoiding essentialism and determinism. Hence, intersectionality can be an instrument to denounce the reification of categorizations, and its consequences in terms of domination, and by this it is also a heuristic device to understand agency, and the classical interplay of agency and structure.

Such analytical potential has not been fully recognized, and this article has tried to outline it in methodological and epistemological terms.

Although there was not room to illustrate this with empirical examples, we have discussed some of the methodological bias in intersectionality research and sketched possible directions for further empirical explorations. An extension of the application of intersectionality beyond its original field of analysis could foster an efficacious approach to new forms of domination, and it could highlight the dynamicity of the situated contexts where subjective agency arises.

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