

Jaywalking Through Intersectionalities

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Abstract

Social workers, especially those who call for anti-oppressive practice, have embraced and promoted an analysis of intersectionality or the interlocking of oppression. These proponents view their work as critical, postmodern, self-reflective, reflexive, and progressive. Their focal concern is with the interaction of identity categories. This paper sets out an alternative way of working and making sense. I am not interested in the noisy traffic of categories or even identities. Intersectionality is a signal light on an imaginary street. Instead, I insist social workers must be pedestrians and pedestrian. We need to recognize and navigate the ground and pathways of ordinary and daily life. Our focus needs to be on just how, in and through an unbroken flow of movement, we produce and reproduce recognizably and putatively iterative forms of action and the knowledge linked to action. We ask: How do our every-day/every-night activities give rise to, contradict, fulfill, or fail an unfolding landscape of idealities and recognitions of identities. Social workers need a return to the social as practically accomplished and as realized day in, day out. Through an ethnomethodology of practice we return to social interactions and social relations, presence and absence, local and extra-local through which we collectively produce, not once and for all, but as emerging, developing, changing, transforming, the signals and signs of our identities.

Keywords: intersectionality, identity, politics, Marxist, ethnography

Intersectional analysis and theories of intersectionality are promoted as providing both a sophisticated approach for understanding complex identities and for informing and redirecting social work practice and social activism. Intersectionality is identified by proponents as critical, postmodern, self-reflective, reflexive, and progressive. For some it is an idea, concept, theory, and even a new paradigm for considering and analyzing multiple identities in interaction. This paper examines these claims, and suggests alternative ways of working and making sense rooted in a redirection to people's everyday interactions and accomplishments of social orders and accounts. This is a redirection informed by an ethnomethodological respecification that shifts our attention from the traffic of categories and concepts addressing identities to the mundane and pedestrian movements of people in interaction. It is a shift of projects, redirecting us from specifying the logical orders and taxonomies of categories, toward the accomplishment as a practical matter of such orders and taxonomies. Identities do not interact or even intersect. Rather, people interact and in so doing produce multiple

accounts of identity; and accordingly to understand identities demands beginning with an abiding attention to social interactions.

Introductory Note on Intersectionality and Nominalization

How should we approach intersectionality? Do we begin with a study of the word itself?¹ Or should we proceed, as do most scholars, by defining what we mean by the word, elaborate theoretical applications and contributions, and develop logically ordered taxonomies? Or should we explicate the “meaning” of the word by studying those real-world referents that we intend the word to disclose or reveal? Or, alternatively, to take an ethnomethodological turn (Garfinkel, 2002), should we shift our attention from the word as an idea, or a bundle of representations, to consider the indexicality of its use, and thus attend to the mundane analytic practices of those who speak and write about intersectionality?

Thus should we see the word as an articulation of these people’s actual work and practices in the places where they live? Smith (2016), although not an ethnomethodologist, set out a project that explores “words as people’s actual practices” and advised “learning from and about actual people’s actual doings (including in language) as they coordinate with one another,” calling for “study into how words engage us, as practices” (p. 2). If we take Smith’s direction as a guide, we ask who is using the word *intersectionality*, what are they intending or pointing to through intersectionality, to whom are they speaking about intersectionality, and what work are they doing through this speaking and writing about intersectionality. Further, as used in interaction and in writing, what effects do those who speak about intersectionality seek to enliven or create among listeners? Finally, as used, what work, what projects, and what achievements do people use intersectionality to accomplish?

I want to begin by noting that whenever the word *intersectionality* is used, whether spoken, written, or heard and read, the word and what speakers, writers, hearers, and readers intend is always, everywhere, and incorrigibly someone’s practical work. The idea, concept, theory, or paradigm, intended through the word *intersectionality* is the effect of people making their work accountably such. However, I am not a firsthand witness to this work of thinking and writing texts to make their work accountably so (Paré, 1992).² Yet, simply stated, it is necessary to

¹ Quite apart from being an impressive word, *in-ter-sec-tion-al-i-ty* comprises seven syllables, bringing together multiple elements into a complex compound. At its heart is the identification of the noun *inter-section*, which itself is a combination of *section* (both a noun, e.g., *a section of land*, and a verb, e.g., *they sectioned the land*) with the prefix *inter* (between, among). Next, *inter-section* is transformed into an adjective through the addition of the suffix *al*, hence *inter-section-al*, thereby designating a quality of a thing. Finally, by adding the suffix, *ity*, the adjective is transformed back into a noun and a nominalization, *inter-section-al-ity*. While the above might be fascinating and might warrant deeper linguistic exploration resulting in a paper in itself, the implications of such etymological study is not the focus of this paper.

² Paré examined the ways that writers anticipate and orient their writing to readers (1992) who belong to specific discourse communities. In his work he focused on social workers’ work of preparing predisposition reports, that is, the situated organization of writing in

observe that while my attention in this paper is on intersectionality, intersectionality itself is not the subject. While the proponents of intersectionality might claim that “intersectionality is transforming gender studies” (Hankivsky, Cormier, & de Merich, 2009, p. 2), I want to avoid such attributive nominalization (Kress & Hodge, 1979). Whatever “intersectionality” might be, is as people participate in a lived world and point to the phenomenal forms of life inside that world as “intersectional” and as reflexive manifestations of intersectionality. People such as Crenshaw, Hankivsky, and Cormier write about, argue for, and use *intersectionality* as a word through which they seek to disclose and to enliven ways of making sense, that align with their projects, politics, and beliefs, just as I am in this moment of writing.

Approaching Writing Intersectionality

Against the search for an epistemological epiphany, resulting in enlightenment or conscientization, I propose a more pedestrian enterprise, which jaywalks across the promised orders of intersectional analysis. This is a move that parallels Garfinkel’s distinction between ethnomethodology and what he called “formal analysis,” or what might best be understood as “normal” social science. Garfinkel (2002) pointed to the sophisticated practices of “general representational theorizing,” which are part of social science. He explained:

Formal analytic (FA) technology and its results are understood worldwide. Almost unanimously for the armies of social analysts, in endless analytic arts and sciences of practical action, formal analytic procedures assure good work and are accorded the status of good work. It is well known that the countless analytic arts and sciences of practical action and practical reason, with the use of their technology of formal analysis and generic representational theorizing, and with the corpus status of their technical bibliographies, specify and make intractably observable an enormous domain of orderly workings of immortal ordinary society. (p. 91)

Garfinkel proposed ethnomethodology as an alternative to formal analysis; and he wanted to shift attention from analytic orders to focus instead on just how, just when, and just where actual people in interaction go about producing as a recognizable, accountable, and practical accomplishment mundane, everyday, local or autochthonous lived orders as well as the analytic and accountable sense they make of those orders. By redirecting attention to social orders as interactively achieved and as reflexively accountable, we turn to consider what people are actually doing in their everyday lives which gives rise to recognitions such as intersectionality. A focus on the pedestrian is simply a turn to people in interaction, who every day and every night go about creating an accountable world, produce the orders of the world, and produce putatively replicative and shared structures of the world which they hold to be accountably in common. Although intersectionality, just as in this sentence, may inevitably be addressed as the grammatical subject, it is not

anticipation of review by judges, lawyers, etc. Similarly, when we consider journal articles about intersectionality, who are the imagined readers? For whom is the work supposed to be relevant and worthwhile?

itself a subject with agency, it is not an actor, it is not a person. Instead, people are actors, they are active, and they in the embodied moments of their being intersect and interact with each other to produce the accountable orders of their lives.

Although we cannot recover the spaces where scholars of intersectionality were thinking, talking, and writing about intersectionality, we can turn to the artifacts of their work, that is to their writing, with a view to asking just what they were trying to do interactively in the moments of theorizing and writing about intersectionality.

Intersectionality as Work

Olena Hankivsky, the Director of the Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy at Simon Fraser University and the author of *Intersectionality 101* (Hankivsky, 2014), promoted intersectionality as follows:

Interest in and applications of intersectionality have grown exponentially in popularity over the last 15 years. Scholars across the globe from a variety of disciplines, including sociology, political science, health sciences, geography, philosophy and anthropology, as well as in feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies and legal studies, have drawn on intersectionality to challenge inequities and promote social justice. (p. 1)

Hankivsky (2014) also referred to intersectionality as “an innovative framework” to argue that “it is distinct from other approaches to equity,” and promised that it “can fundamentally alter how social problems are experienced, identified and grasped to include the breadth of lived experiences” (p. 1). She noted that it is interpreted and discussed as “a theory, methodology, paradigm, lens or framework” (p. 2). What we learn from Hankivsky is that by using the concept—and, I assume, by accepting, incorporating, and adopting frameworks that articulate intersectionality—social workers will be able to see the world not just differently, but more functionally.

Crenshaw (1991), the mother intersectionality, promoted an “intersectional sensibility” as a “central theoretical and political objective of both antiracism and feminism” (p. 1243). Similarly McCall (2005) confidently asserted, “Intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (p. 1771); while Shields (2008) affirmed that “intersectionality, the mutually constitutive relations among social identities, has become a central tenet of feminist thinking” (p. 301). Davis (2008) noted “intersectionality’s spectacular success within contemporary feminist scholarship” (p. 67).

Now if we take an ethnomethodological turn, our attention is redirected from claims that the concept *intersectionality* is successful to a focus on what people are intending and doing with the concept *intersectionality* in their work. Next, we ask, what are they counting as success? What sort of work are they doing in which the concept *intersectionality* can sensibly stand as a mark of success? Simply, what are their projects? Phoenix and Pattynama, the editors in 2006 of a special edition on intersectionality in the *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, observed that they

“learned of four international conferences on intersectionality”; adding, “While it would be far fetched to suggest that everyone is talking about intersectionality, it is certainly an idea in the process of burgeoning” (p. 187). They also noted that intersectionality “foregrounds a richer and more complex ontology than approaches that attempt to reduce people to one category at a time” (p. 187). Phoenix and Pattynama’s assertion that intersectionality discloses “more complex ontology” implicitly ties to the claim that intersectionality is a new paradigm. McCall (2005) referred to intersectionality “as a major paradigm of research in women’s studies and elsewhere” (p. 1771). Similarly Hulko (2009) stated, “I prefer to use the term paradigm, as in a cohesive set of theoretical concepts, method of analysis and belief system, when discussing both intersectionality and interlocking oppressions” (p. 44). Does it represent, as Hancock (2007) argued, a paradigm to animate work in “anthropology, critical race theory, critical legal studies, economics, ethnic studies, feminist philosophy, literary criticism, history, political science, sociology, women’s studies, and many other disciplines”? (p. 64).

How are we to approach the powerful assertions and claimed contributions advanced to promote intersectionality? Should intersectionality be described as a new paradigm? What phenomena do we point to as warranting description as a paradigm? What are the thresholds before we count a “theory or concept” as warranting classification as a “paradigm”? The identification of paradigms, which grew out of studies of the history of science, tended to focus on a novel world view or theory which emerged as incompatible or disjunctive to an existing foundational world view, e.g., a Copernican cosmology against a Ptolemaic or heliocentric universe; Darwin’s evolutionary theory against Biblical creationism; or Lavoisier’s “discovery” of oxygen against phlogiston theory. So when we turn to the problematic of identity and identities in their various forms, and then turn to the contribution of intersectional theories, we must admit that there is no disjunctive effect. Identities whether multiplied or not, remain identities. Identities in interaction are not incompatible with identities in their putative singularities. To consider whether intersectional analysis constitutes a new paradigm, we ask: Does an intersectional analysis profoundly shift our understanding of identities? Does a focus on intersectionality actually allow for a transcendence of the essentialism of identity politics (Crenshaw, 1991; Grillo, 1995; Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006, p. 187)?

With this in mind, we return to writings about intersectionality to ask: Does using this word allow us to avoid “essentializing a single analytical category of identity by attending to other interlocking categories” (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008, p. 5)? Does intersectionality make visible “interlocking oppressions and privileges”? Is the multiplication of identities in intersection a remedy for the problem of essentialism? Does intersectionality allow us to recognize that which is otherwise ignored or reduced to single categories, “race, class, culture, income, education, age, ability, sexual orientation, immigration status, ethnicity, Indigeneity, geography, and so on” (Hankivsky et al., 2009, p. 1)?

Interestingly, Crenshaw (1991) tried to differentiate her approach and her use of intersectionality from a postmodern and admittedly postmodernist non-essentialist critique of identity. She acknowledged that a postmodern non-essentialist approach

to identity categories, such as *woman*, recognizes the changing meanings of being a woman over time and across cultures. Crenshaw agreed that to avoid essentialism demands addressing the construction of identities; however, she added that postmodernism “misreads the meaning of social construction and distorts its political relevance” (p. 1296). She balked at accepting a postmodern claim that there is “no such thing as Blacks or women,” which she understood would mean not seeing that “race” can be used as a basis for coalition of men and women of colour (p. 1299). Crenshaw clearly valued identity, and especially race identity, as a political tool for building solidarities and organizing communities. But in response to Crenshaw we ask: How do people actually go about accomplishing themselves and others as being “black” and as “woman”? For instance, what does it look like to do oneself as female or woman, and how do others do you as female or woman (Stokoe, 2006)?

Crenshaw (1991) argued that, importantly, intersectionality allows for identity to be re-conceptualized in a way that allows for and highlights intra-group divisions and conflicts. She added,

Recognizing that identity politics takes place at the site where categories intersect thus seems more fruitful than challenging the possibility of talking about categories at all. Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics. (p. 1299)

Crenshaw believed that intersectionality creates spaces for recognition and discussion of difference that allows for building stronger and more realistic solidarities.

What is Intersecting?

Variously it is claimed that intersectionality addresses the intersection of identities, the intersection of oppressions, and the experiences of people as they emerge within intersectional locations. In her foundational article Crenshaw (1991) made a great many different things, relations, and dynamics intersect. Obviously, she was concerned with “intersectional identities” (p. 1243), e.g., race and gender, though she was also concerned with “intersecting patterns of racism and sexism”³ (p. 1243). She was also interested in the intersection of women of colour in “dominant resistance discourses”⁴ (p. 1243), and, in “intersectional experiences of black women.” Later still, she noted “the particular intersectional needs of women of color” (p. 1262). It would seem that for Crenshaw the focus on intersection included structures of domination (race, gender, class, etc.), the personal and collective

³ Also addressed as “patterns of subordination” (p. 1249), and as “intersectional effects of racism and sexism” (p. 1256), as well as the ways in which racism and patriarchy have shaped conceptualizations of rape” (p. 1265).

⁴ It should be noted that later in the paper Crenshaw (1991) seems to hint at a more ethnographic sense of location, devoid of reference to dominant discourses. She spoke of “the intersectional location of women of color” (p. 1250), and elaborated by addressing cultural identity and class, and economic marginality. She also spoke about the “situation” of women of colour in subordinated groups—women and racialized minorities (p. 1252).

identities that get formed to resist those structures (Black, woman, worker), the knowledge or discourses both of oppression and resistance, and the forms of lived experience, including the identification of needs that arise as a result of intersections.

In later work Crenshaw, with Cho and McCall, returned to intersectionality as a field of study. They noted that intersectionality can be used as a framework for “a wide range of research and teaching projects” (2013, p. 785). These include examining how race and gender interact with class in the labour market, and how states produce “regimes of identity” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 785). Next, they identified “discursive investigations of intersectionality as theory and methodology” that is “what intersectionality includes, excludes, or enables” (p. 785). Finally, they identified using intersectionality to address praxis or struggles for justice and social change (p. 786). They also took a reflective turn, when they indicated that they wanted to examine “sites of intersectional production” (p. 786), recognizing that there are “a variety of projects and claims made under the broad umbrella of intersectionality” (p. 786).

Hankivsky (2009) took up intersectionality more dispassionately as a new paradigm (a tool) for feminist scholarship and research. She claimed that intersectionality addresses “the complexity of social locations and experiences for understanding differences in health needs and outcomes” (p. 1). For Hankivsky intersectionality moved past single categories of analysis,

to consider simultaneous interactions between different aspects of social identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, ability, immigration status, religion) as well as the impact of systems and processes of oppression and domination (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia). (p. 3)

So it seems that, paraphrasing Jerry Lee Lewis, there is a “whole lotta intersecting going on.” Identities intersect. Oppression intersects. Identity politics and acts of resistance intersect. Yet, what is not intersecting in these accounts are people in interaction.

Essentialism Revisited?

Popper (1945) in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* wrote:

I use the name methodological essentialism to characterize the view, held by Plato and many of his followers, that it is the task of pure knowledge or science to discover and to describe the true nature of things, i.e. their hidden reality or essence. (p. 25)

If essentialism is about discovering a hidden reality or essence, can one speak about identity, even multiple and intersecting identities of a person, without being essentialist? Clearly, those who are concerned with intersectionality believe that addressing the multiplicity of identities exempts them from the charge of being essentialist. The claim that the concept *intersectionality* allows for the recognition of identities as constructed is deployed to forestall being labelled essentialist. However, there is a two-fold problem with this tactic. First, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000)

observed, constructivist methods allow identities to proliferate, and in so doing “the term loses its analytical purchase. If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere” (p. 1). Second, and to my mind more compellingly, as Lynch (1993) pointed out, if one accounts for social reality as constructed, it must also be recognized that there is “no time out” from such constructive work.

The recognition that there is no time out is vitally important, as it redirects enquiry from the *what*⁵ to the *how*. Indeed, what is missing in the *what*, is most often attention to the actual situated practices, the local interactions, the play between participants, which give rise to forms of understanding that are accountably identity. While one can claim that all social categories and reality are “constructed,” this in itself tell us little unless we follow with the question: “Just how is this phenomenon constructed?” The recognition that “there is no time out” (Garfinkel, 2002) applies just as surely to clients as it does to social workers, and to research subjects as well as to researchers. Garfinkel recognized this through his abiding attention to *lebenswelt* pairs, that is, the components of lived work as unfolding, uncertain, ambiguous, ineffable, and the components of formal accounts about those lived worlds. The problem is that the two components are “asymmetrical alternates” (Lynch, 1993), as watching and observing a video of people in interaction, e.g., an interview, can lead one to understand how a written report came to be made; but reading the written report cannot lead you back to understand, other than inferentially, the forms of practice that unfolded. The prosaic import of this formulation of *lebenswelt* pairs is first, a recognition of the asymmetry between located practices and formal and professional accounts, and second, a recognition of the erasure that accompanies authoritative accounts.

When we return to the matter of identity, we recognize that professional accounts of identity have an authority, a formalism, and a certainty, which is unlike the moments when people engage in those activities and interactions that come to be constitutive of identity. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) pointed out, one of the many uses of identity, especially among helping professionals, is psychological. Erikson’s identification of the adolescent developmental stage of “identity versus role confusion” provides a framework for recognizing one’s self-identification as this or that as a necessary stage of psychosocial development. At the risk of being dismissive, it must be recognized that a preoccupation with identity is quintessentially adolescent. In the expanding cognitive capacity of adolescence young people begin to imagine themselves as a member of a social world, and accordingly begin to ask, “What sort of person am I?” and “Who am I?” Yet, it must be recognized that the struggle for identity is transformed, if not transcended, as we grow older.

So just what work are people doing when declaring and marking off their identity? What are the locations of their work of identifying themselves? How are they located? What is it in their social location that makes naming this or that

⁵ Garfinkel referred to “the missing what” to address the ways that sociological studies and, we might add, social work studies neglect or fail to address the performance of those scholarly, research, analytic practices whereby embers of these fields and professions go about constituting their academic and professional domains (Lynch, 2012; Garfinkel, 2002)

identity consequential and meaningful? To borrow from Heap (1980, 1977) and to modify his question, “What counts as reading when reading counts?” we ask, “What counts as identity when identity counts?” and add, “Who gets to count this or that as identity? What work are people engaged in when constituting identity?” Sundar (2008) examined identity work in a population of young minority youth and found:

This research showed that 1) youths’ identities are multi-dimensional; these dimensions are related in complex and meaningful ways which go beyond simply placing youth at risk or acting as a protective factor; 2) youths’ identities are flexible constructs that shift over time and across circumstances; and 3) youth actively use their identities (i.e., in the words of participant Shafreen, by “browning it up” or by “bringing down the brown”) to achieve particular psychological/emotional and material/economic goals. (p. 258)

Sundar recognized the ways in which identity is a result or product of *in vivo* work. Identity is an effect of different sorts of work people perform in social relationships with others. Despite the multiplication of identity categories, what slips away from social workers, even those who adopt intersectionality, are the reflexive activities through which people here-and-now, then-and-there, with no time out, go about the work of accounting for the forms of their life as shaped by identity.

Therefore to claim that all identities are constructed tells us very little, if anything at all, as what we need to understand is just how, when identities are made to count, where they are made to count, and by whom they are made to count, that they are actually counted, or made accountable, and for what practical purposes. The effect of an ethnomethodological respecification is that we begin with an abiding focus on actual people’s utterly mundane and everyday activities and practices. As grounded in the ordinary interactions of people in situ we also are obliged to recognize the plenitude of ambiguous, ineffable, provisional, uncertain, forms of indexical understandings. It is from such interactive accomplishments that multiform, competing, and intersecting identities are synthesized into variable forms of indexical accounts.

It matters not whether identity categories are treated singularly or multiply, a sustained focus on categories and on how categories interact, intersect, or interlock is both essentialist and ideological. Notwithstanding the multiplication of identity categories, the focus on the determinative nature of identity as such continues to postulate an inherent and consequential essence of a person. Hull (1965), who was interested in biological taxonomies, noted:

Presented with the welter of diverse forms to be classified, a taxonomist can greatly simplify his task if he pretends that certain properties are ‘essential’ for definition. But he would have to do just that—pretend—since the names of taxa cannot be defined in terms of essential characters without falsification. (p. 316)

The consistent failure to examine just how people’s lives are actually performed and organized within extended social relations that in turn give rise to their forms of consciousness results in the treatment of their thoughts and ideas as

determinative. In this turn oppression and privilege come to be “over-valorized” as the sine qua non of social interaction, dropping out of the picture accounts of nuance, ambiguity, play, irony, paradox, resistance, resilience, dissimulation, dissembling, lying, deceiving, and the like. Instead, what remains is simply oppression and privilege. If this isn’t a moment of essentialism, then the term has little meaning and sway. These ways of accounting for social life and social realities remain thoroughly ideological, thoroughly borrowing from Smith (1990), “on the side of the concept.”

Finally, when we turn from things toward ourselves and others, it is a matter of ethics and humanity that we recognize a fundamental and inescapable ambiguity (de Beauvoir, 1949), that is, when we turn to identify people, the problems with identity become manifold and disturbing. What does it mean to classify another person? What violence is enacted in the work of classification, no matter how well intentioned? Whether we begin with de Beauvoir’s (1948) *Ethics of Ambiguity* or Levinas’ (1969) *Totality and Infinity*, it is of primary importance that we recognize the overflowing of “Others” from any practice of categorization. To be human, to be other than a thing, defies reduction to totalizing categories, even when compounded in a multiplicity. To recognize the Other, as beyond negation or absorption into a category, or any number of categories, does indeed constitute, as Levinas (1969) so boldly asserted, a pathway to infinity. This affirmation is not mere philosophy, nor mere romanticism, but a vital and essential moment for affirming humanity. This affirmation is a first step beyond the fundamental forms of life in our society wherein we continually and perhaps without interruption, treat others as “things,” treat ourselves as things, though glimpsing through the disjunctive presence of another the alienation at the root of our relationships. At the centre of progressive social workers’ practice is a refusal to reduce people to things, whether through multiplicative categorization, or as commodities and goods to be bought and sold.

An Alternative

So what sort of “old male” fool would seek to question the value of intersectionality for social work? Doesn’t he realize that the bus has left the station? He has missed the ride. History has left him in the dust. Won’t he simply walk into oblivion? What could “he” possibly add to the discussion? What I have to add is nothing more elaborate than an entreaty to return to and to abide by a focus on pedestrian, ordinary and taken-for-granted, every-day and every-night practice. What I propose is that as social workers we must attune ourselves and our clients to the ways that our practices and accomplishments, in interaction with others, set into place the everyday, and often taken-for-granted, familiar orders, structures, and institutions of our lives. As social workers we need a way to move beyond words, identities, and discourses to unfold the actual forms of life that give rise to our cognition, identifications, categories, and theories. What I propose is a materialist method conjoined to ethnomethodological and phenomenological attentions to interactive practice between people in the everyday places of their lives. I propose a way of working that remembers, though is not obedient to, Marx and Engels (1975), who asserted:

Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of their life-process. The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. (p. 36)

Now it must be conceded that this way of accounting for the world is not compatible with postmodernism or postmodernist attentions to the circulation of ideas, concepts and discourses. This is a way of working that treats ideas, concepts, and discourses as the refractive effects of definite forms of life. Simply, as we live our lives in interaction with others, in a nexus of everyday production, and in the modern era, in extended relations of production and reproduction extending globally, we come to recognize, imagine, and order the conceptual terrains to express our lives. If in our world, discourses appear as the subject, or that intersectionality is agentic, these forms of thought need to be explicated in turn, by examining the forms of social activities and social relations that allow for such “fetishizations” to emerge and to be treated as cogent. Of course the question is, what would allow anyone who is embedded in these forms of life to think and to work otherwise? Is working otherwise possible? Clearly, a central element of a modern social formation is the differential and disjunctive social locations of members, which of necessity gives rise to variable and different forms of life and ways of being.

Smith, who turned to Marx and Engels, argued that we can work otherwise. She outlined, “We are called on to explore the ground of a concept in the actual ordering of what living people do. The conditions of our thinking, our conceptual strategies are made problematic” (1990, p. 41). To think ideologically is to be tied to the taken-for-granted boundaries of named experiences, as seemingly original, unique, and subjective, rather than to recognize that experiences comprise a foundational beginning out of which we can begin to unfold, phenomenologically social forms of life.

But just how do we set out from real and active men and women and their life-process? What I propose is that as social workers we help them and ourselves to understand just how they and we actually go about producing the regularities, contours, and orders of our daily lives inside and through extended courses of action through which we link the networks of relations we know and call *institutions*. If we pay abiding attention to the forms of social relations through which we make our lives, we can recognize the ways that we contribute, necessarily, and at times unavoidably, to treat others, despite our best intentions, as things to be used and manipulated.

The central thesis developed in the remainder of this paper is that as social workers we must abandon a way of working, accounting, and thinking that directs us to examine the ways in which categories “intersect.” Rather, categories don’t intersect at all. We intersect. We interact. We make social work. We generate accounts of our world in and through the everyday and taken-for-granted forms of our life. Furthermore, the ineffable dynamics of human interaction (and here I am thinking of Levinas) are such that to pretend that any interaction, no matter how seemingly black and white, can simply be accounted for as oppressive or as sensible through the categories of domination and subordination, is patently inadequate and reductionist.

As social workers we must be committed to unfolding the complexity of people’s lives not through the intersection of multiple categories but as enacted and effected in the sites of ambiguity, ineffability, uncertainty, and indeterminacy. In this way of proceeding inscription of self into any category, whether gendered, raced, abled, coloured, cultured, classed, nationed, etc., must be troubled in a dialogue that seeks to unfold multiplicity, change, and transition. Our experiences—that is our thinking, thoughts, narratives, and stories about our lives—are not final or authoritative. Our attention is always to unfold just how our own, or a client’s, participation in the orders of daily life are shaped, emerge, and arise as inside of lived courses of action and extended social relations.⁶ Indeed, the attention to a lived course of action compels us to examine the real rather than the imagined forms of our everyday lives.

It is in and through the everyday orders of lives inside of the extended courses of action, that we move from home to work (if we are fortunate enough to have a job) or from the cell to the exercise yard, if we are fortunate enough to not be in solitary confinement. It is in the courses of action that we, along with millions of others, knit our here-and-now with then-and-there. It is in courses of action that we live through our bodies, organizing just how it is that we do our lives. It is in the differential exercise of forms of life that we come to manage sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, having sex and masturbating, urinating and defecating, working and playing, thinking and talking, experiencing and reflecting, and so on. Just how it is that we “act” is always as embedded in the moments and flows of our life-processes.

The focus on socially organized practice as constituting a life-process, or work from which there is no time out has the function of troubling the moments of differentiation and synthesis, thesis and antithesis, totality and infinity (Levinas, 1969). The problem with identity-based politics is that the difference is postulated as derived from identity, that is, from the category, rather than from the reality of one’s life situation. The additional problem is that while identity is postulated as a putative ground organizing as relevant certain forms of different experiences—e.g., as a woman, a man, a person of colour, a black woman, a lesbian woman, a gay man, etc.—just how difference is made accountably relevant as that which is generative of experience, is elided.

⁶ A materialist method repudiates a slide into the relativism of accounts, such as unfortunately arises with some forms of narrative therapy, e.g., Parry and Doan (1994).

Intersecting Practices and Accounts

Consider the following segment from an interview between a research assistant (J) and a female youth in care (A).⁷

J Does tha'.. has being in care affected friendships at all er?

A Uhm, .well, I, I basically started gettin into crowds when I hit high school, b'cause before that barely anyone would talk to me. Whenn, ah ah, I was always alone. It's just like I was singled out or something. There was one other First Nations girl in our class an, she was quiet, an everything, she kept to herself, an she kept to her little group of friends, but when I came back I went, I left [city name], and I went to [town name]. I was fine. I was flying high with friends in [city name]

J [city name]

A Yah, in [town name], when I left, everyone's like, "bye-bye, I'll see you when you get back. If you ever come back I'll be your friend still an forever." When I came back it's like everyone had formed their own little groups an I was the odd one out. I'd always be the last one picked an everything. All the way up till grade n::n n:nine.

J So how did that affect you?

A I just went along with it basically.

J How did it feel?

A It felt tiring. It was hard, caus::se, I don' know, I just felt like, so s:stupid, so dumb. It's like why doesn't anyone want to be around me. How different am I. What's wrong with me?

In the above A observes "barely anyone would talk to me...I was always alone," and then proposes, "It's just like I was singled out or something." Her postulation of "or something" displays an uncertainty about the causes of her feeling that people refused to talk to her and her belief that she might even be singled out. As she narrates her experience of being alone, shunned, or singled out, she moves to consider whether it was an effect of being First Nations, though she does not formulate it so clearly. Instead, she notes that there was "one other First Nations girl."

⁷ The transcript included in this text was taken from an interview with a youth in care about her experiences of coming into care and living in care. It employs rudimentary rather than rigorous transcription conventions from conversation analysis. Notably some attention is given to sound stretches through the use of colons (with multiple colons representing longer stretches), to silence or pauses through use of periods (in which each period within a sentence represents one second), and to some phonetic formation of words. Although transcription in conversation analysis can be indifferent to proper spelling of words, preferring instead to represent phonetically the character of word and sound production, in this transcript I have in the main used recognized spellings, although I have represented some of A's clipped words, e.g., *an* instead of *and*, *gettin* instead of *getting*, and *b'cause* instead of *because*. All identifying details have been deleted.

It is important to examine just how and just what A did “see” that allowed her to make the identification “First Nations”? What does seeing herself and others as First Nations involve? What does it describe, whether pigment, morphology, physiognomy, accent, demeanour, etc.? It is also important to ask just how A has come or learned to see herself and others as First Nations or not First Nations. What are A’s lived experiences of learning to see, to produce, and account for being First Nations? What are the reflective and reflexive interactive dynamics of her life that inform the production of this identification?

Whatever identifiers she has adopted are not mere descriptions, but also have an explanatory function. As she considers her emotions and feelings of being lonely and excluded, the identifier “First Nations” functions implicitly as an explanatory resource. Simply, the identifier operates as a practical, situated, albeit rudimentary theory to account for an experience of loneliness and a sense of being excluded, ignored, and rejected by peers. Though it is not made explicit, we can detect in the unsaid that A wonders or speculates whether she was excluded and friendless because she was “First Nations.” A recognizes that this is one possibility or hypothesis explaining her experience. However, she also recognizes that her experience is answerable and woven into the fabric of her lived memories, which include the dislocations of coming into care, moving from one city to a different town, loss of friendships, integrating into new peer groups, and so on.

Additionally, it is vital that we also recognize the enormous pain and suffering that being isolated, alone, and singled out might have caused A. This segment ended with A lamenting, “I don’ know, I just felt like, so s:stupid, so dumb. It’s like why doesn’t anyone want to be around me. How different am I. What’s wrong with me?” Multiple elements combined in A’s experience to constitute and comprise her identity. That which we call *racism* is alive in A’s account, as its reverberations are the harms to “self” that result. A feels stupid and dumb, and that there is something “wrong” with herself. As social workers we encounter and must address the effects of harmful social interaction for the formations of self. To help clients demands moving past the circle of representations, discourses, and ideas, to examine the fabric of life in interaction in its details. By enriching or thickening accounts of life in interaction, we can help clients to explicate or unfold the genesis of identities as artifacts of forms of social interaction, and forms of life.

In the preceding we recognize that what is at issue are the interactions between A and her peers. A struggles to make sense of her experiences, speculates about the factors that might have produced her sense of being alone. Although we could say that being First Nations (race and culture) intersects with gender, age, etc., what we would gloss in so doing, is that their intersection is within A’s cognitive reflections and problem solving. A deploys multiple interpretive devices or tools for accounting for, and making sense of interpersonal interaction. Insults, conflict, hurt, as well as affinities, identifications, and group loyalties come to be accountably organized as articulating such identities.

We also recognize that the sense of all identity categories emerges from and is woven in the fabric of our lives. We can begin with any category, whether based on

gender, race, class, age, ability, etc. Next, we can add one category onto another, thus race is added to gender, and then class, age, ability, health, intelligence, style, and so forth can be added. Indeed, the taxonomies and divisions between various identities can be multiplied to the point where we arrive at a particular individual. Yet, even that individual identification would in turn have to be specified and limited by the time of day, mood, and the *indexicality* of self-identification.⁸ The multiplication of identities, even with the addition of intersectionality, can only result in an endless multiplication of taxonomies and divisions. Beyond the putative affirmation of identity, there are the every-day and every-night practices whereby people come together with others, naming their alliances, affiliations, energies, attractions, conflicts, work and play matters of identity.

The *Where* and the *Why* and *Beyond* of Identity Politics?

Yet as social workers, especially those who are committed to feminist, structural, anti-oppressive, anti-racist, Queer social work, there is a recognition of social progress and advancement of the interests, rights, and conditions of life for women, minorities, people of colour, lesbian, gay, and transsexual peoples, and so forth. Identity comes to signify or mean much more than the local here-and-now recourse to categories. As people organize under the banners of various identities, an identity politics is created that is critically important for the transformation of social life, the state, and contemporary consciousness. Piven and Cloward (1982), writing on the cusp of the rise of the new monetarism and what we now call neo-liberalism, observed that the movements of the 1960s “left in their wake a profound transformation,” adding:

The political action of ordinary men and women had won economic victories; plain people had stayed the awesome movement of the “invisible hand.” And they had engraved these victories on the legal structure of the polity through an array of laws and regulations that articulated and formalized economic rights. Social movements changed state and organizational realities. (p. 118)

People who organized as “black” led the civil rights movement in the United States. Similarly, people who identified as “women” led second-wave feminism to identify violence, sexual abuse, segregation, and sexism. People who “came out” and identified as gay, lesbian, and more recently as trans and queer, worked to ensure same sex benefits, health care, and pensions for partners, and to organize against violence and harassment. Simply, as people organized and came together on the basis of identities, as women, black, lesbian and gay, or Aboriginal, etc., they have managed to change laws, to raise awareness of the injustices they have suffered, and to move the members of a society generally toward greater recognition and respect for identities and differences.

⁸ *Indexicality* references the relationship between the meaning of utterance and the context-specific, or context-contingent relationship between utterance and meaning. What we mean is as we mean it where and when we are producing the sense of the utterance (Garfinkel, 1967).

So might identity prove to be the most effective basis on which to organize for social change? Or might, as critics claim, identity only serve to divide, fragment, and thereby undermine broader solidarities and more profound social change? Might, as Mitchell (2013) argued, identity be a symptom of the rupturing of labour (as broadly conceived, including work, play, sex, production, reproduction) from our lives. Are our identities as this or that, straight, gay, lesbian, an expression of a form of life as lived in which our labour—e.g., sexual acts—become alienated moments in a fractured and fragmented life form? Mitchell argued:

We could say that homosexual behaviors are an expression of labor, or self-activity, and homosexual identity is a one-sided, alienated form of labor unique to capitalism. It distinguishes the difference between a person who consciously engages in homosexual acts and one is who is defined by one form of labor: a homosexual. Women and people of color experience something similar in the development of capital; a shift from engaging in certain types of labor to engaging in feminized, or racialized forms of labor. To put it another way, under capitalism we are forced into a box: we are a bus driver, or a hair stylist, or a woman. These different forms of labor, or different expressions of our life-activity (the way in which we interact with the world around us) limit our ability to be multi-sided human beings. (p. 7)

Mitchell (2013) identified four core components of intersectionality theory. These are:

(1) a politics of difference, (2) a critique of women's organizations and people of color organizations, (3) the need to develop the most oppressed as leaders and take the leadership from them, and (4) the need for a politics that takes all oppressions into account. (p. 10)

What seems worthwhile in Mitchell's account is the attempt, albeit expressed at a very general level, to articulate identities to more general, or we might say patterned, forms of social life that remembers rather than forgets that a fundamental characteristic of this patterning is what we call "capitalist social relations."

In the West for the last two centuries progressives pinned their hope for social change on organizing in working class, social democratic, socialist, and communist parties. Progressive politics were most often expressed in the forms of Marxist and socialist debates and struggles. Until the 1960s, the central question for progressives was that of class and class struggle, especially as informed by communist revolutions in Russia and China, and by anti-colonialist struggles in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. Although socialist and communist movements were founded on a critique of "capitalist" production, organization for struggle was most often postulated as rooted in working class identity.

Class identity and class struggle were intertwined and were expressed in the identification of a vanguard of the proletariat, thus those who recognized their class identity, recognized the evils of capitalism, and would struggle in solidarity for socialist revolution. However, the hopes of working class activists were shaken early on. First, the simple fact was that many fellow workers did not support either socialism or communism. Indeed, many workers were prepared to take up arms

against their working class brothers as soldiers for the state. In World War I “the workers of world” took up arms not to overthrow capitalism, but to kill millions of other workers in trench warfare. In the interregnum between the wars, the “worker’s state,” the Soviet Union under Stalin, engaged in a deliberate campaign of starvation in the Ukraine, the Holodomor or Holocaust (Synder, 2012), as well as massive shootings and deportations in 1937–1938 known as the “Great Terror” (p. 389). Anti-fascists were buffeted by the opportunism of the Soviet Union, which shifted from encouraging the fight against fascism in Spain, to entering into a pact with Nazi Germany through the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1940. After WWII the crimes of the Stalin era (Khrushchev, 1955; Medvedev, 1973) were disclosed. The Soviet State then engaged in a bloody repression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956, invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, and built a wall to keep people in and capitalism out. Across the globe were the obvious embarrassments of the Chinese Communist Party and the cult of Mao, combined with repression of individual liberty and freedom in Cuba. An imagined progressive and liberating socialist project led by proletarian vanguard (Lenin, 1961) failed to create either freedom or liberation for most people. In the recognition of the failure of a working class vanguard, those who hungered for social change organized around alternative identities. During the 1960s black Americans, women, hippies, anti-war activists, radicals, anarchists, and members of gay communities criticized the simple identity of class, and the working class, as racist, sexist, militaristic, and homophobic.

In the nexus of identity politics division, competition, and conflict emerged against putative solidarity. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argued that the conflation between essentialist and constructivist approaches to identity, which occurs in most work on identity, arises precisely because authors are “identitarians,” hence they work both as analysts and protagonists of identity politics (p. 6). Against this way of working Brubaker and Cooper redirected attention “the agents that do the identifying” (p. 14). Importantly they argued for the distinction between relational and categorical modes of identification. While the former articulates a web of social relations through which identities emerge, (i.e., kin, friendships, political, social), the latter emerges from self-categorization, English speaking, Canadian, male, straight. Further, such self categorization arises both through “self identification and the identification and categorization of oneself by others” (p. 15). Of course those others also include actors fulfilling the categorically defined mandates of state organizations, i.e., to provide services to women, children, “Indians,” immigrants, refugees, cultural minorities, and so on.

An Ethnography of Life

I suggest that we need to redirect our attention to what people actually do, that is to an ethnography, where we pay special attention to just how people go about, mundanely in the everyday courses of their lives, working and playing with others, and to produce and reproduce as recognizable and knowable, to themselves and others, the forms of life we call a capitalist society. Now I appreciate that the first reaction to this entreaty may likely be your tired recognition of that once again we are hearing from another aged white male Marxist, socialist, leftist, who

nostalgically harkens back to a male-dominated left that ignored or subjugated women, people of colour, gays and lesbians, etc.⁹

Yet, against a structural Marxism, I want to propose a humanist Marxism that returns us to examining in its ethnographic detail the ways that people actually go about producing the everyday and taken-for-granted orders and ordering of their lives. Indeed as social workers we need to move away from theorizing, taxonomizing, or describing structures, to instead focus on people's everyday coordinated activities in relation with others. I want to propose that all that is real, all that we call *structure*, all that surplus theorizing that academics and scholars do—filling stacks in libraries with books, journals, reports, and so on, about this or that structure, this or that thing, whether the profession of social work, or ethics, or theory—are the artifacts of actual people's rather mundane daily work.

In short what I propose is a phenomenological and ethnomethodological enterprise in which we return to observing and reflecting on what people actually do, from morning to night as they go about making their lives with others. It is in the mundane forms of lived human activities that a world gets made day in and day out. It is as people use the span of their lives to make breakfast, drive, bus, walk, or bicycle to work, pick up tools, or pick up books, hammer or read, fabricate or write, that we collectively go about producing the taken-for-granted forms of that which we call “society.”

When I insist that capitalism is not a structure but rather an effect of actual people's every-day, every-night practices (Smith, 1999), we return to people incarnate. Our ethical imperative as social workers is to affirm and celebrate the diversity of human expression and experience. We are all too familiar with those ways of talking and writing that treat capitalism, domination, colonialism, racism, sexism, ageism as “agents” or as the subject of analysis. The problem with this way of working, with such attention, with such production of intellectual output, is that what is lost is a deep and abiding attention to the people, and to the forms of life which results in these forms of scholarship.

Powers, Identities, and Struggle?

Brown (1997) insightfully noted, in a paper that reflected on colleagues' and her own work of conducting a curriculum review of their women's studies program, that “various marked subjects are created through very different kinds of powers—not just different powers” (p. 86). Commenting on the plurality of different kinds, or forms, of powers, she observed,

These powers neither constitute links in a chain nor overlapping spheres of oppression: they are not “intersectional” in their formation (Crenshaw); they are not simply degrees of privilege (Hurtado); and they cannot be

⁹ Burbank and Cooper (2000) noted the “specious forms of universalism—the Marxist category of “worker” who always appears in the guise of a male, the liberal category of “citizen” who turns out to be white—have been powerfully exposed (p. 29).

reduced to begin “inside or outside, or more or less proximate to, dominant power formations” (Hill Collins). (p. 86)

Unfortunately, despite the promise of the insight that there are different types of powers, Brown reverted to a postmodern, rather than a sociological attention, as she noted that “subjects are brought into being through subjectifying discourses” and adding, “We are not simply oppressed but produced through these discourses.” Against Brown, once again I insist that whatever emerges as people’s talk, and as its systematized and recognizable forms as discourse, emerges through the complexities of everyday mundane social interaction from which “there is no time out” (Garfinkel, 2002).

However, Brown’s recognition that there might be “very different kinds of powers” is vitally important, as it has the potential to address our attention to the myriad, multiple, and grounded forms of practice, social interactions, social and institutional (Smith, 1990) relations through which we accomplish the sensibilities of self and others. The recognition that we are not dealing with power as a singularity, but rather as multiple expressions of power in relationships, is vitally important, as it redirects us to examine the manifold, multiple intersecting of relationships through which we and others craft ourselves and our identities. Our powers might only be to rise from the bed, to drool, to open our mouth, and swallow as an attendant spoons food into our mouth. It might be the powers to pick up a mascara wand in hand, and to shape our eyelashes into exquisite half-moons. It might be the powers to clutch our Louis Vuitton satchel as we leap into our BMW RX350, grab the steering wheel, and press the accelerator to speed off down the road. Whatever the forms of power are that we exercise, whether cognitive or physical, we create our lives, moment by moment, in a river of changing realities and relationships.

As we move in communion with others, we are raced and in turn race ourselves, we are gendered and in turn gender ourselves, we are classed and in turn class ourselves. The categories and identities we deploy appear as fixed. Yet their fixity is an illusion. Our categories are the reflexive accomplishment of our actions and interactions. They are the effluvia of our forms of life and our life activities. They express our work, and the exercise of our powers. Behind the hypostatization of being and ontology, behind the taxonomies and systematics of categories, is our active embodied being in the world, emerging and interacting with others, to collectively discover, talk, identify, formulate, and create the iterative patterns of things. Yet behind the identities of things, as we learn from phenomenology, are the complex intersubjective relations, practices, and interactions through which we collectively come to bring a world, and ourselves, into existence.

Conclusion

The problems pointed to through intersectionality are manifold. To risk the prejudicial adoption of an old Marxist vernacular, they are “epiphenomena” emerging into consciousness out of the interactive forms of life and their refractions and reflections. As I have argued in this paper, identities do not intersect, rather people in the flux of experience and reflection on experience bring

different forms of identification of being into consideration. The spaces of intersection are cognitive effluvia from the intersections of our bodies in the interactive forms of our lives. Thus I recognize those moments of my life when I was “working class,” those moments currently as “middle class,” those moments of being exploited, and those moments of “managing” the exploitation of others, those moments of being a boy, those moments of being a “man,” moments of doubting my proficiency as a “real man,” those moments when anti-racist activists insisted I was “white,” and those moments when I repudiated and refused seeing myself as others insisted.

That which we call *identity*, particularly in its racist, sexist, homophobic, ageist, and oppressive forms, are the effects of an accomplished isomorphism whereby people and their lives are systematically reduced through a grammar and a lexicon to an ontology of things. People learn to treat themselves and others, to interact with others as commodities. Others become things for us and we become things for ourselves. Some of us are white things, others are brown things; some old things and others young things; some are intelligent things, and others are stupid things; and some are homely things while others are beautiful things.

As things we structure and shape our entry into relations with other things. We sell ourselves to others, in exchange for a wage or salary. We expect to be bought, to be valued more or less than other things and other people. These ways of being in relation with others seem natural; the naturalness of the relations is what shapes our daily activities and our mundane consciousness. The nature of the relations we have between ourselves and others is founded on an irremediable alienation, in which we become other for ourselves, as our self as expressed, as labour, as activity over time, as transformative of the world, is a power over ourselves. We recognize ourselves through the relationships of being objects and things.

As social workers our task and ethical imperative is to begin to develop ways, freely, creatively, imaginatively, and ambiguously, which construct new forms of relations and ways of being. So-called consciousness raising is not about helping people to articulate themselves as belonging to this or that category, nor to name the relationships between themselves and others as oppressive, but rather to explicate, unfold, and understand the dynamics of their relationships, to recognize their freedom or agency, to grapple with their obligation to be human in its ineffable complexity, and to develop relations in solidarity that move them away from destructive relations with self and others, toward creativity and play.

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