

Can Third Wave Feminism Be Inclusive?

Intersectionality, Its Problems and
New Directions¹

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Introduction

If a crisis is a time of agitation requiring decision, there has been a crisis in feminism, or more specifically, Second Wave Feminism, since the late 1970s. The crisis revolves around anxieties concerning essentialism in the wake of the realization by United States establishment feminists (who include academic feminists and professionals, as well as those who run large feminist organizations) that their tradition was not inclusive of women of color or poor women. It came to be understood that beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft's 1789 *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, passing through Simone de Beauvoir's 1953 *The Second Sex*, and continuing into the Women's Liberation movement (officially marked by the inclusion of female gender in the anti-discrimination civil rights legislation), feminism was by, about, and for, white middle-class women. From a social science perspective this understanding was accompanied by the claim that particular women experienced differences in social status, material circumstances, and personal identity as a result of *intersections* of race and class in specific historical contexts, so that the *genders* or social identities of non-white and poor women were understood to be different from the genders of white middle class women. The mantra of "race, class, gender" quickly became the new expression of liberatory enlightenment, but the deeper scholarly implications of *intersectionality* are still working their way through the academy. They are evident in the splintering of what used to be thought of as feminism into many different feminisms, and in a highly theoretical postmodern turn within feminism. They are also evident in myriad combinations and permutations of both these sides. These days, everybody has "got a theory for you" (Lugones

and Spelman 1990), and it is increasingly likely to be a theory about how theory itself should be “done” given the now-accepted differences among women which in addition to race and class are also currently understood to include sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, ableness, and age.

The multiplication of feminist theories, based on women’s differences, has increased employment and career opportunities for women across disciplines in the academy, but unfortunately, this influential subgroup of women remains predominantly white and middle class (Wilson 2002), particularly in the field of philosophy (Zack 2000: 1–22). Except for specific studies within the social sciences, there are few bridges from theories to the real-world problems of actual women.

In this chapter, I sketch the exclusionary feminist history that has led to the idea of intersectionality (part I), describe existing attempts to solve the legacy of exclusion in feminism through the concept of intersectionality (part II), and consider the problems with intersectionality conceptually, and its employment within the field of philosophy (part III). Finally, because it is too soon to give up on the possibility of a coherent, universal, and perhaps even an essentialist theory of women for the “Third Wave,” I will propose what such a theory might look like and what its practical benefits would be (part IV).

Before beginning, a note on the meanings of “intersection” and “intersectionality” would be useful. This is easier to promise than to deliver because the feminist social scientists who use these terms often do so in three different senses. The first draws attention to the ways in which women of color have social experiences and identities different from those of white women. In this general sense, discussion of intersections of race with gender often does not go beyond emphases on racial discrimination and exclusion. However, even in this general sense, it is understood that women of color have different social experiences from *both* white women and men of color (Browne and Misra 2003: 488). The second meaning of intersection and the attendant study and methodology of intersectionality goes further, claiming that race and gender are not independent variables that can simply be added or subtracted from one another. Thus, in a recent review article about intersectionality as a methodology applied to studies of race and gender in the labor market, Irene Browne and Joya Misra claim,

Feminist sociologists call for an alternative theorizing that captures the combination of gender and race. Race is “gendered” and gender is “racialized,” so that race and gender fuse to create unique experiences and opportunities for all groups – not just women of color.

(Browne and Misra 2003: 488)

The third meaning of intersection and intersectionality concerns empirical methods used to determine whether in specific social situations, race and gender do fuse. Fusion is the view that race and gender combine to create a new category of race-gender from which neither race nor gender can be separated, not even for theoretical purposes. For example, Browne and Misra are concerned with whether

the pay and employment opportunities of women of color in different sectors of the work force can be explained by factors that also appear to affect white women, or by factors that appear to affect male members of their racial groups. That sociologists now test intersections in this way shows that whether or not race and gender do fuse to form uniquely disadvantaged social identities or “sites of multiple oppression” is an empirical question. The answer is that sometimes they do and sometimes they don’t. The empirical charge is to specify which social factors determine fused outcomes (Browne and Misra 2003: 504–5).

I The Exclusionary History of Feminism

American women of color have long political and literary traditions opposing both racism and sexism, and a history of activism against economic disadvantage (Hine 1993). However, their distinctive situations, as both objects of oppression and intellectual subjects, did not rivet the attention of white feminist scholars until the late 1970s, nor did women of color have much of a presence in the academy before then. The multifaceted protest of women of color to their exclusion resulted in the perspectives and methods of intersectionality. Some of the critiques that have issued from intersectionality, such as those developed by Native American women (Allen 1986; Jaimes 1995), have not yet been completely absorbed by other feminists. But enough was immediately absorbed to result in broad reexaminations of theoretical foundations. In this regard, the political protest implicit in the writings of bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw was most influential. Hooks pointed out that the nineteenth-century US women’s movement was a privileged white women’s movement, because its leaders, spokespersons, and writers were white middle-class women. Even on a grass-roots level, suffragettes, temperance advocates, social reformers, and the membership of “women’s clubs” were white and middle class. Although there were also women’s labor groups during the early twentieth century, white female workers insisted on segregation by race in the workplace. White activists ignored the efforts of women of color toward their own liberation, and it was rare for women of color to be given voice in any forum in which the subject was women’s emancipation (hooks 1981, chapters 4, 5).

This invisibility of women of color in practical matters was largely the result of widespread racial segregation in American society, but it became a theoretical flashpoint when advocates for Women’s Liberation began to compare themselves to blacks in the 1960s. They did not compare themselves to black women specifically, but to blacks as a generic androgynous group. Overall, such comparisons were insulting to both men and women who were black, because white women’s protests that *they* were treated as blacks, did not as such express outrage over how blacks as a whole were treated. Since black women did not participate in the discourse of white feminists (except as an occluded pole of comparison) this discourse symbolically erased their existence *as women*. Among themselves, black women

were not silent about the insult, or about their own aspirations, and very clear agendas based on black female identities were drawn up, for internal inspiration, as well as external critique (Combahee River Collective 1977).

Kimberlé Crenshaw explained how even public policy designed to further social justice could in practice erase black women as rights-bearing subjects in the workplace. Newly hired black women were not covered by anti-discrimination laws that protected black men, nor by seniority policies that provided job security for white women. Furthermore when there were cut-backs, black women were often the first to be fired (“last hired, first fired”). However, once unemployed, they could not get legal redress on the basis of a black identity, because blacks were presumed to be already protected by the racial anti-discrimination laws. And neither could they effectively complain as women because women were also presumed to be already protected by the gender component of the laws. The effect was that black women in such situations lost their jobs due to a kind of institutional sexism and racism that worked as though their specific identity *as black women* were the precisely intended target of discrimination (Crenshaw 1989). That kind of an identity, which resulted from more than one kind of oppression, came to be considered the paradigm instance of intersectionality.

Elizabeth Spelman in *Inessential Woman* provided a widely accepted conceptual analysis of how women of color had come to be excluded from what was increasingly acknowledged to be a feminism by, about, and for white women only. In their focus on patriarchal oppression or male domination in western society, feminists had assumed that what they took to be traditional women’s roles represented a form of female gender that could be discussed as though it were universally present in all women as a condition of their oppression, regardless of differences in race and class (Spelman 1988). However, this conception of gender, as a universal core of women’s identity, ignored the fact that not all women are oppressed through lives spent in traditional roles as wives and mothers within nuclear families with male breadwinners (Zinn and Dill 1994). It ignored the fact that women of color are sometimes oppressed by white women, and that when they are oppressed by men of color they may have good reason to view that oppression as the indirect result of white racism. It ignored the fact that women of color, as well as poor white women, have for centuries worked outside of their homes, in fields, factories, and the homes of other women, and in their own homes as “piece workers.” In addition, within their own homes, poor and often middle-class women provided the unpaid labor that reproduced the biological, domestic, and cultural labor of male family members who worked for wages (Hartmann 1997).

II Solutions to Feminist Exclusion

One widely received solution to the ignorance connected with what was increasingly recognized as an exclusively white feminism, was a conception that allowed for multi-

plicities of women's gender. This was a new conception of gender that was based on varieties of social class and racial categories. That is, there was no longer a universally acceptable notion of a universal women's gender. Women's gender was to be viewed not as a result of only one kind of social construction, but as multiple results of multiple kinds of social constructions. Women had different kinds of identities within their families, and as economic, political, and social subjects. Furthermore, lesbians had problems of oppression different from those experienced by heterosexual women, and the expression of women's sexuality was itself further shaped by race, ethnicity, and social class. This recognized multiplicity was compounded by the realization that even the apparently clear biological division between human males and females was a taxonomy influenced by culture. As a case in point, infants born with ambiguous genitalia come to be culturally identified as male or female (Kessler 1990). All of these multiplicities resulted in an extreme intellectual wariness about any form of essentialism, and in suspicion of any universal feminism, because it might be based on false common essences, either biological or cultural. Questions about what all women could circumstantially have in common or whether there was some attribute that could guarantee their sameness were assumed to be futile. The simple fact of differences among women itself became the leading subject of (proliferating) feminist theor(ies) (Christian 1989; 1994).

The skepticism resulting from intersectionality coincided with a related crisis that might have occurred without awareness of intersectionality among white feminists, a crisis concerning how to define the general term "women." This crisis was in principle present whenever the term "women" was accepted as meaningful within any given intersection. For example, even after it is acknowledged that the problems of white women may not be the same as the problems of black women, within a race-specific study of either white women or black women, it is still necessary to be able to say what is meant by "women." Several theoretical tensions began to make it seem impossible that "women" could be defined. Women's identities had been traditionally connected to their biology but there was growing skepticism about the biological determinism of women's social roles and psychology. However, if women's roles in society and psychology were culturally constructed, it was not clear how women's agency could be mobilized against those constructions. Thus, true ideas of cultural determinism could be as problematic as false ideas of biological determinism. Furthermore, the intuition that women had distinctive subjectivities that could ground liberatory agency was unsettled by deconstructions of many (or any) ideas of pre-formed subjectivity (Alcoff 1989).

The new anti-essentialist feminist polemics that combined awareness of intersectionality with more general problems of defining "woman" often reexpressed established discontents with masculinist intellectual methodologies, particularly in philosophy. Thus, Spelman presented an anti-racist argument that was also anti-essentialist. She claimed that ignored differences among women permitted white feminists to persist in their own practices of domination and she reapplied the older feminist criticism in a further claim that *any* universalist project had the effect of supporting domination:

For the most part, feminists have been eager to postulate a kind of sameness among women that Plato and Aristotle denied existed among humans. We have felt the need to speak of women as in crucial respects constituting a unitary group, sharing something very important in common . . . However, our views can function to assert or express domination without explicitly or consciously intending to justify it. Feminist theory does that whenever it implicitly holds that some women really are more complete examples of “woman” than others are.

(Spelman 1988: 12)

Spelman is speaking of the pitfalls of positing a woman’s essence as something that all women share. If overgeneralization from the experience or attributes of those who are dominant is another expression of dominance, it would seem to follow that one way to avoid such injustice is for those dominant to speak only about themselves. This entails that those women less privileged in relevant hierarchies have to speak for themselves as feminists. Although Spelman, a “white/Anglo feminist”, in collaboration with Maria Lugones later attempted to construct feminist theory with a “Hispana woman” (Lugones and Spelman 1998). That project suggested that with extreme care and painstaking collaboration, women from different “samples” might be able to generalize together, if each identified her own voice at relevant points of difference. Still, such a project falls short of producing a universal women’s voice, because it is impossible for all subgroups of women to construct generalizations, or theory, together, at the same time.

Another caveat against essentialism was expressed by Linda Nicholson when, taking a postmodern perspective, she compared Second Wave feminism to masculinist philosophy:

[M]odern philosophy has been marked not only by its universalizing mode but also by its strong belief in the independence of its pronouncements from the historical context of their genesis . . . Therefore the postmodern critique has come to focus on philosophy and the very idea of a possible theory of knowledge, justice or beauty. The claim is that the pursuit itself of such theories rests upon the modernist conception of a transcendent reason, a reason able to separate itself from the body and from historical time and place. Postmodernists describe modern ideals of science, justice, and art, as merely modern ideals carrying with them specific political agendas and ultimately unable to legitimize themselves as universals (Nicholson 1990: 4) . . . Feminists, too, have uncovered the political power of the academy and of knowledge claims. In general, they have argued against the supposed neutrality and objectivity of the academy, asserting that claims put forth as universally applicable have invariably been valid only for men of a particular culture, class, and race . . . [B]ecause feminist theorists have frequently exhibited a too casual concern toward history and have used categories which have inclined their theories toward essentialism, many feminist theories of the late 1960s to the mid-1980s have been susceptible to the same kinds of criticism as postmodernists make against philosophy.

(Nicholson 1990: 2, 4, 5)

Nicholson’s critique of universalism is more general than Spelman’s because its

subject is an intellectual ambition to discover universal ideals. Nicholson expresses a political skepticism about any human ideals posited by those, in this case academicians, who are in privileged epistemic positions. If the skepticism is well-placed, it would entail that those less privileged in terms of academic credentials, and perhaps even those women who have not been educated (however we are to understand that process), need to construct their own ideals.

The ways in which women of color have themselves gone on from problems of intersected identities to create particular feminisms that speak from their histories and situations are of great importance historically, as well as intellectually. Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) first called for black women to create their own knowledge based on their lived experience, and then showed how this could be accomplished in her revised account of sociological theory, *Fighting Words* (1998). Angela Davis has been involved in prison activist projects over the last twenty years or more (Davis 1983; Yancy 2000). Writers such as Gloria Anzúlua, Audre Lourde, Chandra Mohanty, Cherie Moraga, Hortense Spillers, and Gayatri Spivak created diverse and contested, inspired, and embittered, accounts of the intersected experience of women of color, both lesbian and heterosexual, Euro-American and postcolonial, historical and contemporary.

III Philosophy and Intersectionality

The exclusion of non-white and poor women from establishment feminism, and in this discussion, philosophy specifically, is partly a legacy and ongoing mechanism of broader social injustice, and within philosophy at this time, partly also an effect of traditional intellectual taxonomies. The idea of intersectionality is a difficult concept for a philosopher to accept, and its use as a principle guiding scholarship poses serious problems for the racial integration of feminist philosophers. Theoretical endorsements of intersectionality as an intellectual project can impose no limits on the numbers or kinds of possible intersected identities. It was noted in part I that black women have been considered a paradigm case of intersected identity, but there is no reason to stop at one dimension of oppression. To race can be added class, age, physical ability, sexual preference, for starters. The only way to limit possible intersected identities is by counting only those whose proponents have managed to give recognized voice to what they are. This requires that feminist theorists who are interested in intersected identities other than their own, maintain a constant solicitude about those who have not yet secured recognition for their voices, and also for those who have not yet been able to voice their intersections. Presumably such interest would not be a desire for information only, but a concern that feminist philosophy be inclusive.

Acceptance of intersectionality thus generates a research methodology which is based on moral principle. So, in addition to its ontological indeterminacy – that is, we cannot know how many relevant intersections there may be before the research

is undertaken – intersectionality requires a redirection of philosophy, in method as well as subject matter. This may not count as a problem for feminist philosophers, who are already generally committed to changing philosophy toward greater social relevance. But not all of us who are philosophers, feminists, and liberatory theorists would be prepared to revise and redirect our vocation in this way. Some may wish to hold onto a subject that can be determined in advance, and if they are to keep an open mind about additions to their subject, they may wish to do so on the basis of cognitive, rather than moral or affective criteria.

The practical tension between intersectionality and the field of philosophy plays out in career development. Despite the richness of the intersected counter-traditions within feminism, there has been very little philosophical work by feminist women of color, and indeed very few feminists in philosophy who identify as women of color or write about the intersected experiences of women of color in philosophical ways – less than ten, I would say. There are perhaps ten more women philosophers who identify as women of color and have written about issues of race and ethnicity in recent decades. Indeed, when I began to compile an anthology during the late 1990s, with the confident title, *Women of Color and Philosophy*, I realized that out of about 15,000 professional academic philosophers, less than thirty (30!) were women of color, counting all racial and ethnic groups (Zack 2000: 1–22).

The theoretical caution about universalism in feminism has occurred during the same time in which employment prospects for women entering and moving up in the field have been good, because previously all-male philosophy departments have recognized a need to hire women. But the profession of philosophy, and particularly feminist philosophy, has neither on its own attracted very many women of color as practitioners, nor made the kinds of changes which would attract them. It is usually assumed that such changes would involve philosophy becoming less abstract, universalist, masculinist. However, the abandonment of universal theory in feminism erases women of color as a demographic component of philosophy as the discipline has been traditionally developed, because it encourages women of color to pursue their scholarship in academic disciplines that allow focus on minority groups as subject matter: Africana studies, Asian studies, Hispanic studies, ethnic studies, and so forth. Traditional, which is to say, mainstream and hegemonic, academic philosophy in the United States has thus far included within its canon “foreigners” from only Britain, France, Germany, and ancient Greece (Zack 2003). While philosophy as an American academic field needs to relax an immigration policy that is reminiscent of the United States as a whole before 1965, it is not likely to make such a momentous change during the lifetimes of writers and readers of this volume, and in that meantime, inclusive philosophical feminism is on a collision course with intersectionality. When intersection theory intersects with academic philosophy, it keeps feminist women of color out of the field, as a matter of academic taxonomy, because the thinkers of interest to them who can be studied in disciplines that allow focus on minority and globally subaltern groups, such as Africans and African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans,

are not, because of their national foreignness to philosophy in the US, accepted as philosophers.

Writing as a philosopher and a woman of color, it appears to me that whatever the fate of theories of universal human nature, declaring the death of theories of a universal women's situation is premature. (All that we do know is that some feminists have identified some generalizations as inherently problematic.) While Spelman's caveat that dominant groups may falsely overgeneralize from their own experience should be taken seriously, it is a greater overgeneralization to assert that this must always be the case. We don't yet know that generalization, per se, is inherently unjust. Similarly, Nicholson's postmodern anxiety about "objective" projects is not sufficient to establish that all attempts at neutrality are doomed to bias. If they were, it is not clear how one could then understand the experience of another without having the identical experience oneself. While it is true that many male philosophers have abused notions of objectivity and neutrality by using them to both advance and justify their own interests and social privilege, this does not entail that feminists are incapable of objectivity and neutrality concerning differences among women. Indeed, one would have to be an essentialist about both white and non-white feminist identities to believe that white feminists were incapable of addressing the concerns of non-white women, or that non-white women could not sometimes speak for white women.

Because many men and some women have abused the method of offering definitions of subjects of discourse and politics, it does not follow that the problem lies with the method itself, rather than with the specific distortions inherent in the specific abuses. No definition of women, or of any other group of existent particulars, can capture the diversity within the group, but that is not the purpose of a definition. Definitions are constructed and deployed to emphasize what members of a group have in common. Does anyone think that there is nothing that the referents of the word "women" have in common? The confidence with which individuals are identified as "women" and the continued use of the word in immediately intelligible ways, across cultures and throughout scholarly disciplines, including the multi-discipline of feminism, itself suggests that there must be something that all women have in common. What they do not have in common is an old fashioned physical, cultural, or psychological essence, because there is no evidence that anything like that exists or ever has existed, neither as a necessary and sufficient condition, nor shared same experience. To abandon a search for commonality because essences in this sense are impossible, or because female biology can no longer be viewed as a cause of female social roles or psychology, is to abandon a search before developing a clear understanding of what is being sought.

Feminists still have reason to seek a theoretical commonality among women that will both refer to something real in the world and provide an intellectual basis for political cohesion among women. However, neither nominalism nor idealism can satisfy this search. As a doctrine of meaning, nominalism hales from John Locke in the seventeenth century and it entails that anything posited as an essence comes from the side of social custom and language, rather than from reality or things in

themselves. Locke insisted that we do not have the ability to know *real essences*, or what it is in nature that causes distinctive kinds of things, and that our systems of categories and the rules we use to sort things into categories are human inventions. What we can know are thereby *nominal essences* only (Locke 1975, book III, chapter V, §§13–22, pp. 436–51). The problem with applying Lockean nominalism to definitions of women is that it can at best yield a sociological method for studying the identities of different kinds of women, as they have been constructed and practiced under different social conditions. Nominalism cannot by itself connect feminist theory to real women in all their multiplicities in any general or coherent way; nominalism is always on the side of language, and its practices. Thus, Teresa de Lauretis has drawn on Locke’s notion of nominal essences to distinguish feminism from other kinds of theories or viewpoints, but with a consistent awareness that a theory of how feminism is to be defined is not a theory about how women are to be defined (de Lauretis 1987: 9–10; Pierce 1999: 246). In a related vein, Cressida Heyes advocates a Wittgensteinian approach to the theoretical fragmentation of intersectionality, with a focus on the interconnected and overlapping ways in which women identify themselves and live out their varied identities. But again – and here, the result is clearly anticipated – hope for a coherent universal theory about women has been abandoned (Heyes 2000).

More extreme than any nominalist proposal is the idealist turn within some post-modern texts, which results in deliberately ignoring the extra-linguistic realness of existing individuals, in favor of concentration on their *signifiers*, the symbols for them in language. For example, Judith Butler advocates an explicit disconnection between the word “women” and existing women (Butler 1993: 67–72). Of course, if everything that previously occupied the attention of feminists now exists and occurs within or through discourse alone, the problem of how any version of feminist discourse serves the needs of those who stubbornly continue to exist outside of discourse is no longer a legitimate subject. It would seem that no matter how free the play of *signifiers*, any system in which signifiers are understood to be free of their otherwise referents, is not a system that can generate one course of action rather than any other, assuming that action occurs outside of discourse. Even if there were a preferred course of action in symbolic terms, we would still need to figure out how to reconnect the signifiers with the women, a problem that could be solved by avoiding the “liberation” or disconnection of signifiers, in the first place.

IV New Directions for Inclusive Feminism

Throughout feminist discussions of difference, as a problem of exclusion and within applications of intersectionality, as well as in consideration of the more abstract question of how “women” can be defined (either across or within intersections), theorists continue to talk about women as existing individuals. Perhaps it is still possible to return to the starting point of a coherent feminist theory and

consider what would be required for a feminist definition of “women” to be truly universal, which is to say, inclusive of all the differences that can be disjunctively listed as sites of intersection. First, the definition must apply to all women as we know or can imagine them. Second, the definition should be connected to the goal of feminism as critical theory, which as Toril Moi and others have repeatedly insisted, is theory with the purpose of improving the lives of women (Moi 1999: 9–11; Young 1990c: 7–8, 2000: 10–11; Zack 2005, chapter 4). And third, the definition of women has to be able to link language and theory to the real world and practical problems of existent women. Although feminist theorists do not have sole responsibility for connecting language to the world, it is important that existing women be able to recognize themselves in a feminist definition of them, and that feminist theorists work with an idea of women that keeps them in touch with their subject. This means that we need a *realist* definition of women.

The problems of providing a realist definition of women articulated by anti-essentialists, which include the difficulty of encompassing the multiplicities of intersections (of race, class, sexuality, and so forth), lack of a biological foundation of gender, the dangers to agency of social construction accounts, and the shakiness of the postmodern subject, prove neither that there can be no universal definition of women nor that it is futile to posit one thing shared by all women. What the anti-essentialists have importantly succeeded in establishing, however, is that the thing shared by all women cannot be a substance or a literal thing present in all women. Even if it were agreed that such a substance or essence existed and were biological, it could not be determining of gender, because human female gender is too varied. The variations in gender as cultural construct also preclude a universal cultural condition for all women. However, there is no such biological substance. Some women are born intersexed, and some women, male-to-female transsexuals, were first assigned male sexual identity at birth (or shortly thereafter). The problem with the old essentialisms and the factor that made them so vulnerable to the facts of social differences among women was *substantialism*, an idea there was a thing in women that could constitute them as women. But what if women shared a relation instead, and what if that relation connected them to the very historical realities which have made feminism psychologically, morally, and politically, which is to say, *ideologically*, necessary?

I propose that what all women have in common is a relation to the category of human beings who are: designated female from birth, or biological mothers, or primary sexual choices of (heterosexual) men. Call this the FMP (Females, Mothers, Primary sexual choices) category, which is an historical cultural construction that holds universally across cultures and extends back through all recorded history. It is not necessary that any or all women be any or all of the disjuncts of the FMP category. Even if they are any or all of the disjuncts of FMP, it is not that identity that makes them women from a feminist perspective, but the fact that they have a relation to the FMP category as a whole. This relation of being a woman consists of self-identification with the FMP category and/or assignment to it by others in a dual sex-gender system.

The advantage of defining women relationally is that it avoids all of the problems of substantialism, as well as the old essentialisms, and it also captures the basic structure of how individual women acquire their genders in society. The justification for defining women in terms of their relation to the FMP category is that it captures the historical reality of women in precisely those ways that make feminism necessary. It is because of the ways in which women have been devalued, objectified, obstructed, and exploited as a result of their assignment to and identification with category FMP, that feminism, as advocacy for improving the lives of women, is necessary. However, the FMP category does not exhaust what any existent woman may be or become. To state this is to fulfill a fundamental feminist possibility that particular women may transcend the historical basis of what they are, doing so either as individuals or groups.

The group of women is in reality constituted by individual women who have, do, and will exist. Each individual woman has a date of birth and either has had or will have a time of death. Each individual woman has a proper name and exists in a society that has expectations of her as a member of the FMP category. The relationship of being assigned to and/or identifying with category FMP, but not having an individual (or subgroup) pre-determined subjectivity stemming from that identity and/or identification is what permits women to change their circumstances and improve their lives. Being a woman is thus a relation external to individuals and any individual woman is external to the category that through assignment and identification, defines her as a woman. Any woman shares her relation to category FMP with all other women, although she need be neither designated female from birth, nor a biological mother, nor a primary sexual choice of men (see Zack 2005, chapters 1, 2, 3).

Some further clarifications of the logic of the definition I am proposing might be helpful. The relation to category FMP, once apprehended from the perspective of any individual, may itself enable what we have come to call “women’s identities.” But it is a mistake to attempt a universal definition of women based on any one or more of such identities. The identities are different, they are constantly changing as history changes (at least, because they also change for individuals over their life times), and future identities of women are, a feminist should hope, undetermined. That is, a feminist theorist does not have to know what all women are, because what women are is a disjunctive set of identities that no one can know in its entirety, any more than all the planets that there are (or ever will be) can be listed. Thus, although women cannot be completely described, they can be defined as those with the relation of identification and/or assignment to category FMP. Even those women who resist assignment to or identification with one or more of the disjuncts of FMP, such as lesbians, women who are not biological mothers, transsexuals, and in the United States, aging and aged women, live out their resistance on the basis of their relation of assignment to or identification with FMP.

As a cultural construction, category FMP is assigned as a whole beginning with female sex assignment at birth, which is when being a woman usually begins. Thus, female sex assignment is the beginning of a lifelong process of fulfilling or not

fulfilling external gender expectations, and in varying ways making compliance or resistance one's own as a unique individual. There is an active component in this process of women's gender development and enactment, because individuals invariably affirm their versions of the important ways in which others divide the human world. If this results in inward identities, or selves that are distinctively women's selves, then Judith Butler is correct in her Foucauldian insistence that external structures of power preexist the selves or psyches that become gendered persons (Butler 1990). The selves and identities are contingent and even optional collections of energy or dispositions to act in certain ways. Descriptions and theories of how women form their identities or selves are of great interest as shared narratives and psychological accounts. Selves or identities also need to be addressed through rhetoric capable of motivating them toward change. However, the forces of male domination that have formed the historical group of women, as well as the structures that need to be changed in order to improve the lives of particular women, are not identities or selves, but institutions and customs. As Iris Young points out in an analysis of Nancy Chodorow's *object relations* account of female gender formation, a theory of gender formation is not a theory of male dominance in society (Young 1990b: 36–61). To change the world, feminists have to change the world, legally, socially, politically, and economically. That is a different kind of project than changing individual women's identities in a subjective and psychological sense (Zack 2005, chapter 4). Thus, the relational, nonsubstantive, and external definition of women I am calling for is the starting point for a feminist social theory and activism that is capable of addressing oppressive social structures and circumstances. It is also the starting point for feminist psychological theory, phenomenologically understood (Zack 2005, chapter 5).

From this perspective, intersectionality is not wrong (although it may not always result in unique sites of oppression, as noted) but incomplete. It would be a tragedy for feminist aims if the ongoing segregation by race in the American academy were to continue on feminist grounds because no one was able to think coherently about women without positing quaint essences or exclusionary universalisms. But regardless of the contingencies of multiple oppressions and their diverse social consequences, there is a rich and troubled history that all women can in fact relate to, even after their differences have been emphasized. The possibility of such commonality is important in social and institutional contexts where disadvantaged women need the assistance of those less or differently oppressed.

Note

- 1 This essay is partly an overview of the early chapters of my book, *Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005) and I wrote it while working on the book. The essay also addresses concerns raised by themes in earlier versions of the book and I thank: the audience at a Symposium on Gender

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