



Intersectionality as emergence

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Abstract

Intersectionality is the notion that concerns the complexity of the experiences of individuals in virtue of their belonging to multiple socially significant categories. One of its main insights is that the way society is structured around categories such as gender, race, sexuality, class, etc., produces distinctive and specific forms of discrimination and privilege for groups in the intersections. In this paper, we suggest conceiving intersectionality as a general metaphysical framework wherein specific claims to the effect that the experiences of discrimination of Black women, among others, can be fruitfully formulated and examined. The main claim is that intersectional experiences *emerge* from the conjunction of social categories when social structures make them relevant vis-à-vis discrimination and privilege. We then argue that our view has three main virtues: metaphysical neutrality, explanatory flexibility and methodological openness. Explaining these virtues will allow us to contrast our proposal with alternatives from the recent literature.

Keywords Intersectionality · Emergence · Social philosophy · Social metaphysics · Feminism · Social category

1 Introducing intersectionality

Intersectionality is the notion that concerns the complexity of the experiences of individuals in virtue of their belonging to multiple socially significant categories. One of its main insights is that the way society is structured around categories such as gender, race, sexuality, class, etc., produces distinctive specific forms of discrimination and privilege for groups in the intersections. Intersectionality is considered one of the most important theoretical contributions that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far (McCall, 2005). The notion originated within Black feminist scholarship and activism in the US (see Alexander-Floyd,

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2012; Hancock, 2016; and Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016 for a development). It currently operates in many different theoretical and empirical disciplines, as well as many social movements and institutions. It is also a crucial and elusive notion in contemporary feminist philosophy. In recent years, moreover, there has been an increasing number of contributions attempting to provide at least partial articulations of what the insight may consist in (see Garry, 2011; Bright et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2019, Jorba & Rodó-Zárate, 2019, Bernstein, 2020, Gasdaglis & Madva, 2020, Jenkins, 2020, Dembroff 2023). We contribute to this literature, also arguing that our proposal is to be preferred in certain crucial respects.

More in particular, in this paper we suggest conceiving intersectionality as a *general metaphysical framework* wherein specific claims regarding the experiences of discrimination of Black women, among others, can be fruitfully formulated and examined. This approach follows previous work in intersectionality that regards it as a framework or paradigm (Hancock, 2007) and differs from other views that reserve the label 'intersectionality' for specific empirical hypotheses (Bright et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2019). Within this general framework, we submit the view that intersectional experiences *emerge* from the interrelation of different axes of discrimination and privilege that are determined by the relevant social structures and dynamics (elaborating on Jorba & Rodó-Zárate, 2019).

Although intersectionality-like thought (Hancock, 2016) was already present in Black feminist activism, the term 'intersectionality' was introduced by the legal scholar and Black feminist Kimberlé W. Crenshaw in her foundational work "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine" (1989). In this work Crenshaw examines the famous case of General Motors in which five Black women were legally unprotected by anti-discrimination laws in relation to employment and other discriminations, due to the fact that sex-related discrimination wasn't considered a race dimension and race-related discrimination wasn't considered a gender dimension. She concludes:

[P]roblems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the *intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism*, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address *the particular manner* in which Black women are subordinated. (Crenshaw, 1989: 58, our emphasis)

We do not aim to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive account of all the different yet related thoughts that have been explored in connection with intersectionality. Rather, our objective is to present a specific proposal that captures part of the common core, with the hope that our proposal turns out to be fruitful and useful for articulating part of the intersectional insight. The main issues that lie at the core of intersectionality theory are nicely summarized by Sumi Cho, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw and Leslie McCall—three leading intersectionality scholars—in the introduction to their recent edited volume *Towards the Field of Intersectionality Studies*:

As intersectionality has traveled, questions have been raised regarding a number of issues: the utility and limitations of its various metaphors, including the road intersection, the matrix, and the interlocked vision of oppression; the additive and autonomous versus interactive and mutually constituting nature of the race/gender/class/sexuality/nation nexus; the eponymous “*etcetera*” *problem*—that is, the *number of categories* and kinds of subjects (e.g., privileged or subordinate?) stipulated or implied by an intersectional approach; and the static and fixed versus the *dynamic* and *contextual* orientation of intersectional research. Intersectional work has also reflected different orientations toward the relative importance and centrality of various layers of society, ranging from the individual to the institutional, and has also revealed different sensibilities regarding the *ontological* and *epistemological* premises of the intersectional approach and its disciplinary limits and potential. (Cho et al., 2013: 787, our emphasis)

In this paper we address “the eponymous “*etcetera*” problem”, “the static and fixed versus the dynamic and contextual” character of intersectionality, and “the ontological and epistemological premises” related to intersectionality.¹

The plan of the article is the following. In Sect. 1 we discuss the main intersectional insights that we aim to articulate. In Sect. 2 we present the ingredients of our view: the general metaphysical framework, and our articulations of the notions of *emergence* and *experience in context*. Using these ingredients, we introduce and elaborate our view in Sect. 3. In Sect. 4 we present the three main virtues of the account—metaphysical neutrality, explanatory flexibility and methodological openness—which will allow us to contrast our proposal with alternatives from the recent literature. We conclude with some final remarks in Sect. 5.

2 The ingredients of the view

2.1 The general framework

We suggest conceiving intersectionality as a *general metaphysical framework* wherein specific claims concerning the distinctive experiences of discrimination against Black women, among others, can be fruitfully formulated and examined. This conception of the intersectional insight that we advocate contrasts with another one, also present in the literature, which reserves the label ‘intersectionality’ for some of these specific claims—to the effect that the intersecting features interrelate in certain *non-additive* ways. Let us explain that features in experiences of discrimination interrelate *additively* when their joint effects are precisely the result of combining those that they would have, or are thought to have, independently from each other, in a determined and predictable way. By contrast, they interrelate

¹ For an examination of the utility and limitations of metaphors of intersectionality, see Rodó-Zárate & Jorba (2022).

non-additively (some say, *intersectionally*) when they give rise to *novel distinctive* effects, in a contrasting sense, such that finding out about them, and providing specific policies for them, requires considering and addressing the specific intersections as such, over and above its constituents (see, for related discussion, O'Connor et al., 2019).

There are certainly issues as to how to articulate the notion of (non-)additivity in place satisfactorily, and relatedly, the contrasting notion of novel distinctive effects. This is one of the aspects in which our proposal here is only partial: conceiving of intersectionality as a general metaphysical framework wherein specific claims concerning the distinctive experiences of discrimination can be fruitfully formulated and examined, compatible with different accounts of what is the best articulation of features interacting in (non-)additive ways. But more importantly, the account is furthermore partial given its relatively aprioristic character: whether or not the features in question turn out to interact *in fact* additively or not is something that cannot be decided a priori. Rather a posteriori investigation is required. Thus, there is an important sense in which intersectionality, as we are suggesting to conceive of it, does not provide itself a way to understand the specific content of the particular experiences of Black women and other socially significant groups: it rather provides the framework where such questions can be fruitfully formulated. In order to seek and eventually obtain answers to such questions we have to address and engage with the particular groups directly, and empirically analyze in context the experiences of Black women and other socially significant groups. Rather than a limitation of our approach, this is indeed very congenial to a point frequently raised in the context of intersectional studies,² and related to the normative attitude of *openness* that we will be elaborating on at the end of the paper.

Something important to stress is that the framework is one where non-additive relations are *possible*, but *not required*, thus permitting the investigation of other possible forms of interaction. The suggested way of understanding intersectionality is in this sense *general*: it denounces any traditional yet inappropriate *restriction* to additivity, but it doesn't impose what would also be an inappropriate restriction to *non-additivity*.

As we said, our understanding of intersectionality contrasts with some alternatives also present in the literature, which interpret intersectionality as a set of specific empirical claims, to the effect that the features interrelate *in fact* non-additively (see e.g. Bright et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2019). The issue is partly terminological: we use 'intersectional' and cognates for the *general framework* which allows us to formulate and check specific hypotheses about (possible) non-additivity, whereas some in the literature reserve 'intersectional' and cognates for such (a posteriori) non-additive interactions. But the issue may be not *merely* terminological, in that

² This has been pointed out in the literature: Hancock remarks on the "open empirical character" of intersectional relations (2013: 268), which is also acknowledged by Haslanger (2014): "How does social categorization work and, more relevant for our purposes here, how do social categories interact? How does power work and, more specifically, how do multiple axes of power interact to create structures of subordination? I don't think we can answer these questions a priori." (Haslanger 2014: 117–18).

we think that there are reasons to prefer our more general usage. On the one hand, it is important to be in a position to refer to the general framework, which has certainly been discussed within intersectionality studies.³ Denouncing the inappropriately restrictive character of generally additive accounts does not imply any specific empirical hypothesis regarding how the features in intersectional experiences in fact interact, and should be compatible with the relevant features interacting, on certain occasions, additively. On the other hand, our suggestion to conceive of intersectionality as a general framework may help to mitigate or deflate some possible concerns, which would arise from interpreting intersectionality with a correspondingly misplaced *general* restriction to the effect that the relevant features *always* interact non-additively.⁴

Our understanding is in line with Crenshaw's original approach:

I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience *double-discrimination*—the combined effects of practices that discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (Crenshaw, 1989: 149, our emphasis)

According to Crenshaw, when Black women experience double-discrimination, they suffer the combined effects of discriminations based on race and on gender. This contrasts with their experiencing discrimination *as Black women*: “not the sum of race and sex discrimination”. Thus, according to her, additivity (double-discrimination) is not excluded by (and is thus compatible with) intersectionality.

³ Admittedly, this is not the only possible terminological choice. Mutua (2013), for instance, contends that, although intersectionality can be understood in the broad and flexible way we employ here, the original focus on particularly marginalized groups like Black women may be regarded as somehow limited to exploring partly privileged groups, like Black men, and to accounting for the importance of context in issues like how racial profiling in the US is arguably gendered. For this reason, some theorists favor *multidimensionality* for this alternative framework, claiming that “multidimensionality is to masculinities theory, what intersectionality is to feminism” (Mutua 2013: 342).

⁴ Our proposal is thus congenial to Else-Quest and Hyde's (2016: 162) distinction between additive approaches and additive effects: intersectionality challenges additive approaches, but allows some of the effects to be additive. Similarly, they emphasize that intersectionality, so understood, is not a specific or “falsifiable” empirical claim. They contend that it is instead a “critical theory”, i.e. a research enterprise that is essentially practically oriented by its aim to fight social injustice and contribute to social amelioration. We agree that intersectionality is *also* a “critical theory” in this sense. But this is for us a methodological upshot of our conception of intersectionality (Sect. 4.3). The reason why, on our conception, intersectionality is not a particular empirical claim concerns rather its general character as an epistemic framework wherein empirical claims can be formulated and assessed making it akin to scientific paradigms.

2.2 Emergence

We submit that the notion of *emergence* provides a useful articulation of the framework within which intersecting experiences of discrimination may interact non-additively.

The idea of emergence has a long-standing tradition in philosophy, within attempts to capture how, under certain conditions, *novel* aspects of reality occur; in a way that is both *dependent* but *autonomous* from the world's more basic aspects. Traditionally, the British emergentists, in the second half of the nineteenth century, and at the beginning of the twentieth century, held that key organizing and structuring features of organisms, including life itself, emerge from complex interacting chemical processes. More recently, starting with research into non-linear complex systems of both natural and artifactual varieties in the 1970s, this notion has been discussed in the context of contemporary philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, and social philosophy.⁵ With some qualification to come, we contend that emergence provides a suitable articulation of how emergent entities are, in a sense, *new* existents, over and above the more basic things from which they emerge. In this sense, the view of intersectionality as emergence provides a way to vindicate Crenshaw's (1989: 58) claim that the "intersectional experience is *greater* than the sum of sexism and racism", where "greater" is understood in terms of the emergence of new existents. Emergence is a straightforwardly metaphysical relation, but has certain essential epistemic consequences, to the effect that the emergent entities are explanatorily autonomous and, at least to some extent, unpredictable from the basis from which they emerge. Our view, incorporating this explanatory autonomy, will allow for the flexibility required by intersectional dynamics, thus yielding an advantage over a recent proposal made by Bernstein (2020) (see Sect. 4.2).

The notion of emergence is regarded with suspicion in some contexts, so it is important to make some remarks right away. We contend that philosophical controversies about emergence in general do not affect the very specific and limited use we will make here of the notion: we will appeal to a *weak* version of emergence (as opposed to *strong* emergence) and to the emergence *of properties* (as opposed to the emergence *of particulars*). Let us elaborate.

First, the emergence we invoke is *weak* emergence, as opposed to strong emergence. The notion of weak emergence, as introduced by David Chalmers (2008: 244) is the following:

WEAK EMERGENCE: a high-level phenomenon is *weakly emergent* with respect to a low-level domain when the high-level phenomenon arises from the low-level domain, but truths concerning that phenomenon are *unexpected* given the principles governing the low-level domain.

Weak emergence in this sense is contrasted with strong emergence:

⁵ See the recent general overview of the topic of emergent properties in O'Connor (2020) and references therein.

STRONG EMERGENCE: a high-level phenomenon is *strongly emergent* with respect to a low-level domain when the high-level phenomenon arises from the low-level domain, but truths concerning that phenomenon are not *deducible* even in principle from truths in the low-level domain.

There are, to be sure, complexities that a fuller account of weak emergence should finesse—including further elaborating on the aspect of unexpectedness vs deducible in principle. Fortunately for our purposes, for the specific application concerning social categories and the related everyday and scientific contexts, we can avoid entering these difficulties in full—or indeed commit to any very specific understanding of the notion. It suffices to say that it is the relation that holds between the phenomena in the higher-level sciences like biology, psychology, or indeed the social sciences and lower-level sciences like biochemistry, chemistry, and ultimately fundamental physics (if physicalism is correct)—for which there may be competing detailed articulations. Regardless of the specific details, the common core that is relevant for us is that weak emergence is a straightforwardly metaphysical relation, with certain essential epistemic consequences, to the effect that the emergent entities are explanatorily autonomous and, at least to some extent, unpredictable from the basis from which they emerge. It is in this sense that we understand the ‘unexpected’ notion in the definition above, which contributes to the novelty and richness that higher levels of explanation might provide while remaining compatible with physicalism (Chalmers, 2008: 246). Similarly, the entry of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* considers weak emergence as affirming the reality of entities and features posited by the special sciences (O’Connor, 2020). The kind of phenomena (allegedly) motivating strong versions of emergence are very specific and basic: mainly connected with phenomenal consciousness, fundamental physics, and the like, whereas the aspects of social reality that concerns us here lie far beyond these, like the emergence of the experience of discrimination of Black women. Some critics contend that the strong version of emergence—which in some contexts is the only notion of emergence under consideration—is ultimately *incoherent*, or incompatible with generally plausible naturalist worldviews, which in turn often leads to outright dismissal of this notion. Our weak emergence is not, in any case, the target of this kind of concern. So, from this point onwards, by ‘emergence’ we just mean *weak* emergence.

Second, we are concerned with the emergence of certain intersectional *properties*, say, the experiential properties of Black women. The fact that such emergence applies to *properties* rather than *particulars* may alleviate some further worries about this notion, as the question of the existence of “novel” emergent properties may be less challenging than that of “novel” emergent particulars.

Putting these together clarifies the weak and limited sense of emergence crucial for our project. Our model of weakly emergent properties is thus provided by the (multiply realizable) properties posited by the current special sciences, notably including *biological*, *psychological*, and indeed *social* sciences (Sawyer, 2005). These emergent properties combine the traditional traits of being *dependent* on the components that give rise to them (metaphysically speaking), and of being explanatorily *autonomous* (epistemically speaking). It is this weak and limited notion of emergence that vindicates the idea that the emergent entities are *novel*—new

exists “over and above” the more basic ones. Admittedly, *reducibility* is a complex and contested philosophical concept, particularly in connection with such non-basic properties, and we do not want to take any stance in the debate regarding (ir)reducibility of emergent properties (see Kim, 2006; Sawyer, 2005; and Wilson, 2019 for contrasting views). Because of this, we also admit that there may turn out to be stronger and more demanding senses of “over and above” that our account does not ultimately vindicate.

To summarize, we have claimed that the notion of emergence provides a useful articulation of intersectionality as a general metaphysical framework, within which intersecting experiences of discrimination may interact non-additively. We invoke a *weak* notion of emergence, concerning the emergence of *properties* (rather than particulars), which is compatible with physicalism, and which bypasses complicated issues concerning (ir)reducibility—endorsing as paradigmatic the relation between the properties posited by the mature special (social and natural) sciences and more basic properties. On our account, as we will see, whenever social structures make certain intersections of categories relevant to discrimination and privilege, the corresponding intersectional experience emerges, making non-additive interactions possible.

2.3 Experience (in context)

Besides emergence, the second main element of our view is *experience (in context)*. Our focus is on *experiences* of discrimination (and privilege).

Although intersectionality studies arose as a result of focusing on *Black women's* experiences of discrimination, Crenshaw and many other intersectionality theorists have emphasized how this insight is more general in character, applying also to intersectional experiences of discrimination along other axes as well—those of *poor women*, *Black lesbians*, and so on: recall the reference to the “race/gender/class/sexuality/nation nexus” (Cho et al., 2013: 787).⁶ Furthermore, we regard intersectionality as concerning experiences not only of discrimination, but also of *privilege* along some of these dimensions (in specific contexts), and how these all interact with each other, as in the case of *white rich straight cis women* (see Garry, 2011; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). As a result, *everyone* is arguably positioned in a social network, giving rise to intersectionally interacting dimensions of experiences of discrimination and privilege (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Acknowledging this does not imply that all social groups deserve similar consideration, let alone motivate the same kinds of political priorities and actions. The fact that intersectionality, so understood, is a general framework applying to everyone is compatible with our being sensitive to how some groups may be (in context) especially and distinctively discriminated against—without implying

⁶ This approach thus contrasts with views that reserve the label ‘intersectionality’ for the study of the experiences of Black women (e.g., Alexander-Floyd 2012). Although we acknowledge the origin of the term within Black feminist thought and movement, and also recognize the danger of “white-washing” the notion (Hancock 2016; Jordan-Zachery 2007; Salem 2018), we think it is fruitful to conceive of this approach as applicable to other relevant experiences in context (see Crenshaw 1991: 1245, fn. 9).

the general ranking of discriminations often labeled as the “Oppression Olympics” in connection with non-intersectional additive approaches.

Our sense of experience is broad and refers to *social* experience, involving the effects that one’s position in society has on individuals and groups regarding their experiences of discrimination and privilege, where “effects” need not be understood as causal. Experiences of discrimination and privilege include experiences that involve objective aspects like obligations and entitlements, access to resources, employment, education, the health system, and many other aspects—independently of whether the people affected by them are *aware* of them or not. This essentially social understanding of experience may also include the specifically phenomenological and psychological aspects that may arise in connection with these situations, i.e. aspects of what it feels like to undergo or to live through certain experiences, which may include, for instance, emotions such as fear, discomfort, anger, etc. Although experience in the sense employed here can encompass these phenomenal aspects, it crucially doesn’t reduce to them, or even require them. Our broad social notion of experience is in fact the one that is usually employed in everyday life, outside academic contexts. And indeed, it is also the one that is invoked in the literature on intersectionality—see Crenshaw on women of color’s *experiences* of discriminatory employment practices (1989), and their *experiences* of discriminatory violence (1991) (see also The Combahee River Collective (1978 [1977]: 213); Valentine, 2007: 13; Carastathis, 2014: 307).

This broad sense of experience allows for a *contextual* flexibility that will be crucial for our proposal later on.⁷ Consider, for illustration, the case of *being an artist* (not obviously connected with social discrimination/privilege). Being an artist is relative *to context* in numerous ways. It is relative to various different historical and cultural circumstances: being an artist in ancient Egypt is not the same as being one in the contemporary US; nor is being an artist in the contemporary US the same as being one in contemporary Russia. Furthermore—and with this we can start to appreciate better how this will be relevant for the intersectional proposal to come—on occasions, this relativity to context should be individuated in a more fine-grained way. For, arguably, there is no such relevant context as “the contemporary US”—for most purposes in connection with being an artist, at least. The *experience* of “being an artist” that is undergone by a rich young white bourgeois man in the US is not the same as that of an elderly Black activist woman. And so on and so forth. (More on the “and so on and so forth” below.) But not only that. Even the same feature of the same relevant intersections may make different contributions in different contexts. Going back to cases that are more relevant for us, a woman’s being lesbian may intensify her discriminatory experiences in many situations at work, while mitigating others in relation to domestic violence. Here we use ‘context’ flexibly to cover all those aspects to which the relevant experiences can be relative. Thus, we will claim that experiences of discrimination, like those undergone by Black women,

⁷ On the importance of context in intersectional dynamics, see Yuval-Davis (2006); Valentine (2007); Hill Collins & Bilge (2016); Rodó de Zárate & Baylina (2018); Jorba & Rodó-Zárate (2019).

emerge in certain contexts, allowing for non-additive interaction in various contexts, which in turn allows for different sorts of contributions in different contexts.

3 The view

3.1 The emergence of intersectional experiences

In the previous section we explained the main ingredients of our view: our conception of intersectionality as a general framework that allows for non-additive relations, the notion of the weak emergence of properties, and the idea that what emerges are experiences of discrimination and privilege in context. Our proposal of intersectionality as emergence can accordingly be stated thus: whenever social structures make some intersection of categories relevant to discrimination or privilege, the corresponding intersectional experience emerges. In this section, we will present our proposal in more detail, emphasizing how it connects the perennial question of “the *number of categories* and kinds of subjects (e.g., privileged or subordinate?) stipulated or implied by an intersectional approach” (Crenshaw, Cho & McCall 2013: 787) to the power dynamics of society.

Which intersectional experiences have emerged or will emerge depends on the power dynamics of society, and on which categories have been deemed relevant to discrimination and privilege by how society is structured around them in various circumstances. The experiences of Black women have played a foundational role in the development of intersectionality theory—but, as we said, we understand the insight to be much more general in character: other intersections may be socially significant in similar ways, like the experiences of poor women and of Black lesbians, for instance. Our proposal contends that intersectional experiences generally emerge when social structures make the corresponding categories relevant to discrimination (or privilege). Intersectional experiences then emerge from the intersection of social categories when there are discriminative and privileging dynamics around such categories.⁸

One way to illustrate this is by considering a category that started existing at a clear point in history, like in vitro fertilization procedures. Women undergoing them face stigmatization and discrimination not present before, due to how society is structured around the intersection. In our terms, the experience of women undergoing in vitro fertilization procedures will emerge from the envisaged social arrangement, namely, from the conjunction of there being a group of people who are members of the category “woman” and of the category “undergoing in vitro fertilization”.

⁸ Notice that by ‘intersection of categories’ we just mean the *conjunction* of categories. As we will see, we reserve talk of ‘*intersectional categories*’ for specific views about the metaphysics of such categories—like the view that they are in some sense “constitutive” of each other (as in Jenkins 2020). To advance, the virtue in metaphysical neutrality we claim for our position concerns the fact that the emergence of intersectional experiences is compatible *but does not require* that the underlying intersection of categories be itself intersectional.

The fact that experiences emerge when the relevant social arrangement is in place appropriately captures the dynamic way in which intersectional experiences of discrimination (and privilege) depend on power relations, and on how society evolves and changes. Some intersections of categories that are not socially significant at some point may turn out to be so later on. In general, it is an open question which are the relevant intersections at each point in time, and whether or not the relevant features interact non-additively in each context. This will be crucial for responding to the “etcetera problem” later on, as well as for stressing the practical methodological attitude of *openness* that we will discuss in Sect. 4.3. To illustrate this further, let us consider what is very plausibly now a socially *irrelevant* category: “lefties”, women who sleep on their left side. Given that lefties, as such, experience no discrimination or privilege, there is no experience of *being lefty* for intersectional analysis to consider. But things could have been different, and might be different in the future. If society were to make that intersection relevant, as in our example of in vitro fertilization, then the experience of *being lefty women* would emerge. What, then, distinguishes socially relevant intersections, like *Black women*, *lesbian Black woman*, and *elderly lesbian Black women*, from mere candidates, like *lefty women*? For each candidate intersection, society could structurally arrange itself in a way that makes it emerge, but this mere possibility does not imply that it *has* emerged. For it to actually emerge, society must *in fact* arrange itself in that way, that is, arrange itself in ways that discriminate and/or privilege around that category.

3.2 The “etcetera problem”

The dynamic character of emergent intersectional experiences also offers a response to the well-known “etcetera problem” mentioned by Cho et al. (2013) in the passage quoted at the end of our introduction. This problem, inspired by Judith Butler’s remark on the “embarrassed”, “exasperated”, and “illimitable” “etc.” that follows attempts to define identity (Butler, 1999 [1990]: 183), refers to the question of which are the relevant categories to be considered within an intersectional approach, and why. We have already encountered this issue several times, in two different ways.

First of all, there is the already discussed issue of which intersectional experiences have emerged at all, independently of whether the features involved in fact interact non-additively at various contexts. As explained before, which intersectional experiences exist depends on which categories are deemed relevant to discrimination and privilege, given how society is structured at the time.

But second, there is indeed the further issue of whether the features involved in intersectional experiences interact in fact non-additively in specific contexts. As we have seen, there is no general recipe for determining how the relevant features will interact beforehand, thus there is a degree of unpredictability. Although previous knowledge of how they behave in other contexts may of course be relevant, how the features in fact interact in a particular context may depend on aspects of the social dynamics of that context, which are to be determined a posteriori. In our example, the specific question now becomes the a posteriori issue of how *being in vitro fertilized* interacts—additively or non-additively—with, for instance, gender,

age, sexuality, and class, in various contexts. The fact that we just had to say “for instance” shows why the “etcetera problem”, so interpreted, has important methodological consequences: what about race and (dis)ability? This is reminiscent of Butler’s “embarrassed” and “exasperated” “etc.”. But on our account, the “etcetera problem” can be seen in a somehow more positive light: it is a symptom of intersectionality’s open character and sensitivity to whichever groups turn out to be required by social dynamics. Thus, we contend that the openness that constitutes the “etcetera problem” is just part of social reality, and therefore should be part of the analysis, instead of being treated as an undesired consequence of intersectionality. We will elaborate on this important methodological upshot later on in Sect. 4.3.

4 Virtues of the account

In this section we will present three of the main virtues of our proposal: metaphysical neutrality, explanatory flexibility, and methodological openness. Explaining these virtues will show how our proposal improves on some recent extant alternatives, such as those of Bernstein (2020), and Gasdaglis and Madva (2020) in particular.

4.1 Metaphysical neutrality

According to our proposal, whenever social structure makes an intersection of categories relevant to discrimination and privilege, the corresponding intersectional experience emerges, making it possible for the features to interact non-additively in specific contexts.

By focusing on *experiences*, rather than the underlying *categories*—that is, the *experiences* of Black women, rather than the *category* of Black women itself—our framework is immune to controversies regarding the metaphysical nature of such categories. This aspect of our account stands in contrast with what many other intersectional theorists claim, particularly in connection with the idea of the mutual constitution of categories like race and gender. As Katharine Jenkins says, some authors require that the intersection of categories be itself *intersectional*, with the involved categories constituting each other, so that “gender could not be what it is if race did not exist, and race could not be what it is if gender did not exist” (Jenkins, 2020: 265; see also Lugones, 2007; Garry, 2011; Bernstein, 2020).⁹ We need not deny that the categories themselves—and perhaps gender and race in particular—may “constitute each other” in some suitable sense. But it is important to highlight that intersectionality, as we conceive of it, does not require this to be the case. The intersectional insight, we contend, concerns the *effects* that the relevant social categories have on

⁹ Ann Garry (2011), for instance, has proposed that categories *change each other’s natures*, and María Lugones (2007) goes even further by arguing that categories *fuse* when they relate to each other. See Jorba & Rodó-Zarate (2019) for an analysis of ‘mutual constitution’, and for the distinction between how one is *positioned* in society and the *effects* this has on one’s experiences of discrimination and privilege.

experiences of discrimination and privilege in context, *independently* of how the categories themselves are metaphysically construed. Our view is thus neutral on the underlying metaphysical nature of categories and on whether they constitute or not each other or not, thus making it compatible with various accounts at such level. The weak emergence of intersectional experiences just requires there being a conjunction of categories, i.e., one is woman and one is poor, which social structures have made relevant regarding discrimination and privilege, as we explained above.

The metaphysical neutrality aspect of our view is potentially a very fruitful development, we think, as it allows the intersectional insight to be vindicated in a way that does not depend, as noted, on entering and let alone resolving controversies concerning specific metaphysical views about the nature of the underlying categories—and thus dispelling further sources of concern and skepticism. To emphasize: what intersectionality has to say regarding the experiences of Black women will be in just as good standing regardless of one's views about the metaphysics of race and gender. Likewise for intersectional insights into sexual orientation, class, (dis)ability, and other categories. And to illustrate even further, the intersectional insight involving *age* does not require the *category of having a certain age* itself to be metaphysically constituted by other categories. Although the category of having a certain age may be biological in character, society may have arranged itself so as to make *elderly women* relevant to discrimination and privilege, so that having a certain age may interact with gender in non-additive ways in various contexts. In general, regardless of whether one or more categories are biological in character, social structures may have made intersections relevant, and hence the associated intersectional *experience* would have emerged, making it possible for the features to interact non-additively in specific contexts. As just mentioned, this in turn may help to alleviate some skepticism about intersectionality, in particular by dissociating it from specific social constructionist views about the nature of some of these categories, plausible as we think such views may be in many specific cases.¹⁰

4.2 Explanatory flexibility

As we said before, the model of weakly emergent properties in the social domain is provided by the (multiply realizable) properties posited by the current special sciences, notably including biological, psychological, and indeed social sciences. These sciences are dependent on more basic ones, yet enjoy explanatory *autonomy*. In particular, this allows the intersectional experience to be the most explanatory

¹⁰ The assumption that intersectionality views social categories as socially constructed is found, for instance, in the working characterization of the notion given by Else-Quest and Hyde (2016: 156–8), and in the anticategorical approach to intersectionality described by McCall (2005), and more recently Jenkins (2023). Notice that we are presenting metaphysical neutrality as a virtue of our account focusing in the experiences rather than the underlying categories. More opinionated views about the nature of the categories can *adopt* the current approach, which may indeed provide a model for relations among categories *corresponding* to the relations we posit among experiences. Our account might be not fully general as it abstracts from complex and significant issues about *identities*, and the role experiences may play in them.

one *given the purposes at hand* in the relevant contexts, but it does not require this to *always* be the case, thus promoting an *explanatory flexibility* that stands in contrast with a recent account by Sara Bernstein (2020).

In “The Metaphysics of Intersectionality”, Bernstein offers an articulation of intersectionality in terms of the “metaphysical and explanatory priority of the intersectional category over its constituents” (2020: 321), akin, she claims, to the metaphysical priority of the whole over its parts:

The intuitive idea is that in understanding black womanhood, we thereby understand blackness and womanhood. Being a black woman explains being black and being a woman; features of blackness and womanhood are at least partially explained by black womanhood. Intersectional explanations are more informative than explanations exclusively involving the individual identity constituents. (2020: 331)

Bernstein explicitly mentions that her proposal contrasts with an account in terms of emergence, but swiftly dismisses the latter as resorting to “the metaphysical unclarity and internal instability of other sorts of ‘something over and above’ ontologies” (2020: 330–1), in alleged contrast with her appeal to the ontological priority of (integrated) wholes over their parts. In response, we would like to offer two related considerations. On the one hand, as we emphasized in Sect. 3, the *weak* emergence of *properties* (in contrast with *strong* emergence and the emergence of *particulars*) seems well placed to avoid many of the usual sources of skepticism about the notion of emergence. By contrast, Bernstein’s appeal to the ontological priority of (integrated) wholes over their parts is more controversial than it might first appear. First of all, some philosophers may worry about the general notion of ontological priority itself (see e.g. Hofweber, 2009; Daly, 2012; Wilson, 2014; Koslicki, 2015). But more importantly, even if the good standing of that general metaphysical notion is granted, Bernstein’s specific analogy with the claim that wholes are ontologically prior to their parts is arguably particularly controversial, in that many philosophers would hold that it is the other way around: parts are prior to the whole (see Lewis, 1991, *inter alia*). To emphasize: for the purpose of this paper we need not *object* to metaphysical notions of ontological priority, grounding, (relative) fundamentality, or related ones—nor we need to object to attempts to bring some of these notions to explicate and articulate further the notion of emergence itself (see for instance Barnes, 2012). Furthermore, and as we mention in the conclusion, it is not part of our view that no *alternative* account to ours is possible, or even preferable, involving perhaps some of these notions instead of emergence. The account of intersectionality as emergence is offered as a proof of concept of how certain virtues can be achieved—thus improving on extant accounts. The current point is merely that if any view is to be eschewed as metaphysically suspicious, our appeal to the weak emergence of properties looks as safe, if not indeed safer, than an appeal to the ontological priority of wholes over their parts.

Besides, Bernstein’s account has two components: one about metaphysical priority and a second one about explanatory priority. This may make her overall account somewhat disunified. A more unified version of the proposal could have alternatively appealed to distinctive sort of *metaphysical* explanation in the second

component, given that many hold that metaphysical priority is explanatory in nature. But such “metaphysical explanation” is not immediately and obviously connected with the real-life ordinary and scientific explanations at stake in connection with intersectionality, with which Bernstein’s account aims to engage. In fact, it is presumably for this reason that this component about (real-life) explanation is listed by Bernstein as a second one, independent from the one about metaphysical priority. By contrast, things again seem different with our account. The real-life explanatory dimension of our kind of emergence is integral to its metaphysical kind, because emergence is a metaphysical relation with epistemological consequences, so that our proposal is much more unified.

These points are relatively minor, we take it. But our more serious criticism precisely concerns *explanation*. According to Bernstein, intersectionality is to be articulated in terms of the metaphysical and explanatory priority of the intersectional category over its constituents. Thus, in particular, intersectional categories are *generally* explanatorily prior to their constituents. According to her,

[i]ntersectional explanations are more informative than explanations exclusively involving the individual identity constituent (2020: 331)

and

the best explanation is provided by the unified category rather than its constituents (2020: 334).

We believe this to be too strong, however. It is one thing to contend that *in some contexts* (and for some specific purposes) intersectional explanations are better than explanations exclusively involving the constituents, but it is quite another to claim that this is *generally* the case. This would be implausible in itself: as we have seen, there are arguably contexts where explanations involving (the experiences of) women may be better than explanations in terms of (the experiences of) Black women, say, and still other contexts in which explanations in terms of (the experiences of) lesbian Black women may be better than explanations in terms of (the experiences of) Black women. But importantly, given our present concerns, such explanatory flexibility is perfectly compatible with the main intersectional insight being existential in character: allowing the distinctiveness of Black women experiences doesn’t require imposing contrasting restrictions to explanations in terms of what Black and white women, for instance, share (see Crenshaw, 1989: 149, cited above). Thus, our explanatory flexibility virtue *allows* explanatory autonomy for intersectional features, without implausibly *requiring* that they generally be explanatorily prior.

Bernstein seems sensitive to this kind of difficulty.¹¹ Although, as officially stated, her account has the general form that we have quoted, she anticipates that

¹¹ Commenting on the relevant cases, Bernstein asserts something that, we take it, vindicates our weaker and more reasonable claim: “A central tenet of intersectional theorizing is that blackness and womanhood mix and interact in such a way that one or the other or both separately *do not exhaust* the explanatory space of black womanhood” (2020: 332, our emphasis).

it may give rise to a particularly acute version of what tradition labels the “etcetera problem”:

[A]re the most specific categories always the most explanatory ones? For example, is the social category *disabled lesbian black woman* necessarily more explanatory than a coarser grained social category? (2020: 332, fn. 21)

As we have noted, this would be both implausible in itself, and in no way a consequence of intersectionality. However, what she offers as an alternative is less than fully satisfactory, we think:

As I see it, certain “social category magnets”—joint-carving social categories akin to reference magnets—are the most explanatory, whether or not they are the most fine-grained. Intersectional categories often, but do not always, carve at the joints. (*Ibid.*)

This appeal to such “joints” again seems to be both implausible in itself, and in no way a consequence of intersectionality. To illustrate, consider the case of *trans-misogynoir*, the particular sort of oppression targeting trans Black women that Bernstein herself mentions (2020: 333), and suppose that it is one such “joint”. Bernstein’s view in the quoted footnote would then imply that this is the *most* explanatory category *in all contexts*, more so than *trans*, *women*, *Black*, *trans women*, *Black women*, and *Black trans*. But clearly, this is implausible in itself, and in no way a consequence of intersectionality. Plausibly, in order to be able to recognize and address such specific oppression, any theory of intersectionality should allow for *some* explanations at this level of specificity *in some contexts*; but this is compatible with *other* explanations in terms of, say, Black women—or even just women—being better in some *other* contexts. In contrast with Bernstein’s account, our account is flexible in precisely this manner.¹²

4.3 Methodological openness

According to our proposal, the dynamic character of emergent intersections offers a response to the “etcetera problem”, concerning which intersections exist at all and how they in fact interact. This *openness*, we submit, is an important *methodological* upshot of intersectionality. Let us elaborate.

When responding to the previously mentioned lawsuit explained by Crenshaw, the Court replied:

The legislative history surrounding Title VII does not indicate that the goal of the statute was to create a new classification of ‘black women’ who would

¹² Despite what the jargon in her footnote may suggest, one should remember that we are interpreting Bernstein as mobilizing a real-life ordinary and scientific notion of *explanation*, as opposed to a distinctive sort of “*metaphysical* explanation”—to appropriately engage with debates about intersectionality, and as witnessed by her listing both ontological and explanatory priorities as separate components of her account. But so interpreted, as we claim, the thesis about a particular category being the most explanatory is implausible in itself, and in no way a consequence of intersectionality. Thanks to a reviewer for triggering this clarification.

have greater standing than, for example, a black male. The prospect of the creation of new classes of protected minorities, *governed only by the mathematical principles of permutation and combination, clearly raises the prospect of opening the hackneyed Pandora's box.* (Crenshaw, 1989: 142, our emphasis)

Properly attending to the intersectional insight is certainly not inconsequential, and requires a certain kind of sensitivity that we call *openness*. In a sense, yes, the prospect of creating new classes of protected minorities may *open a door*. We should be prepared to consider whether, say, *lesbian Black women* should be one such protected class. But the relevant new classes to be specifically protected are not solely governed “by the mathematical principles of permutation and combination”, but are rather to be determined a posteriori as those whose characteristic features turn out to interact in specific non-additive ways in the relevant context. Hence it may turn out that, after all, a certain class is not one such relevant class in a given context. So opening the door to new classes of protected minorities need not amount to opening a theoretically or practically paralyzing “Pandora’s box”.

In their recent paper “Intersectionality as a Regulative Ideal”, Katherine Gasdaglis and Alex Madva draw a contrast between understanding intersectionality as a general theory or hypothesis, and a claim about the metaphysics of oppression, social kinds, or experience, and instead propose to understand it as a “regulative ideal”, “a guiding methodological and practical principle” (2020: 1287). Their main objection to the first metaphysical reading of intersectionality concerns what they call “the regress problem”, which we submit is no other than the “etcetera problem”.

We think that the alleged contrast between these two understandings of intersectionality is spurious. First of all, the metaphysical understanding of intersectionality is inescapable. As Gasdaglis and Madva themselves admit, sensitivity to intersectional insights requires sensitivity to *reality* being intersectional:

[T]here are risks of epistemic loss and missed opportunities for coalitions when we fail to see an intersectional phenomenon as intersectional. (2020: 1317)

The three classification schemes of racism, sexism, and homophobia are mutually informing in the psychological context of stereotype activation and application. (2020: 1319)

This may reinforce our view that the metaphysical component is after all very agreeable—it provides the structural frame where the relevant experiences may be properly attended. The emphasis in our presentation is justified by the thought that there is insight in providing this structure explicitly, and in a way that secures the virtues we are considering.

In particular, intersectionality as a metaphysical framework as we are conceiving of it *also* has crucial methodological consequences, as we have just seen. Thus, the methodological aspects of intersectionality do not depend on it being *just a heuristic*, for they can instead be vindicated as the methodological consequences of metaphysical (intersectional) phenomena.

Incidentally, we have argued that a metaphysical reading of intersectionality doesn’t entail the “regress problem”. After considering the Court’s misgivings

about opening Padora's box in the original General Motor case, Gasdaglis and Madva worry that there are corresponding "regresses problems":

If intersectionality entails that social categories are indefinitely mutually co-constituting, then social reality is, at bottom, highly particularistic, which calls into question the possibility of social knowledge itself. (2020: 1303)

Fortunately, as seen in our discussion of the "etcetera problem", the metaphysical understanding of intersectionality has no such paralyzing implications. Not all of the conceivable intersections have emerged, but only those that are made relevant by dynamic social structures concerning discrimination and privilege.

Furthermore, it is in fact Gasdaglis and Madva's specific proposal to understand intersectionality as a "regulative ideal" that could be understood to have such paralyzing implications, at least as they formulate it. They characterize their view with the following maxim:

General Maxim of Intersectionality: (a) Treat social classification schemes, groupings, or categories *as if* they are indefinitely mutually informing, (b) with the aim of revealing and resisting inequality and injustice. (1314)

One crucial aspect of (a) is the "as if", which is presumably part of what signals the "regulative ideal" character of the view, as opposed to the metaphysical alternative. But how could one treat social classifications, schemes, groupings, or categories *as if* they were indefinitely "mutually informing"? One may worry that this approach would have paralyzing consequences, as there will always be infinitely finer-grained possible classifications to be considered. Treating them all as "mutually informing" would require us to consider them *all*—which is impossible, making this "ideal" inapplicable. Our proposal can be seen as providing a model for how their "ideal" could be understood.

In fact, Gasdaglis and Madva's actual practice is in accordance with our understanding when they consider applications. They mention Veronica Terriquez's (2015) account of how migration and LGTBQ activism can inform each other's struggles against injustice. For this, we need the existence in context of *some* specific intersectional categories (strictly speaking, *experiences* thereof), such as being immigrant and being LGTBQ—not *all* possible ones. Once again, our account of the emergence of such intersectional properties is open in precisely this contextual manner. It has the right structure to capture what seems to be the same appropriate methodological upshot that they also pursue: a demanding but not paralyzing open attitude to (potentially new) forms of discrimination and privilege. This attitude rightly forces us to "ask the other question", as Mari Matsuda puts it:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?' When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, 'Where are the class interests in this?' (1991: 1189)

This methodological aspect is what allows intersectionality to also serve as a “method or framework checker” (Garry, 2011). Thus, the final virtue we claim for our proposal is that it vindicates an appropriate attitude of openness.

5 Conclusions

Intersectionality is one of feminism’s most significant recent contributions, both to understanding how intersectional experiences of discrimination and privilege issue from social structures, and consequently to promoting social and political amelioration.

We have offered a specific proposal for articulating what we take to be part of the core of the intersectional insight in terms of the emergence of relevant experiences. The notion of emergence provides our way of articulating what is involved in claims such as the intersecting features being inseparable and mutually constituted, or the intersectional experience being greater than the sum of its constituents. As we have repeatedly emphasized, we have not aimed to exhaust the wealth of perspectives and approaches that the vast literature on the topic encompasses. Still, we hope it is of value to contribute a particular articulation that exhibits how the virtues of metaphysical neutrality, explanatory flexibility, and methodological openness could be achieved. We do not claim that our account is the only possible one to do this, nor that it is necessarily the best one. But it constitutes a “proof of concept” of how these virtues could in fact be attained—which is something that none of the recent extant attempts seem in a position to claim. Thus, our proposal improves on them, and has the potential to contribute mitigating some of the concerns and skepticism about the notion of intersectionality. In this respect, it seems to us valuable to provide a general framework that invokes metaphysical notions modeled on the structure of the domain of the special sciences, where specific claims concerning intersectional experiences can be formulated and assessed, while staying clear of controversies concerning the nature of the underlying categories. Relatedly, even if we haven’t offered concrete ways to understand or fight against discrimination in relation to specific categories or situations, highlighting the consequent attitude that seems appropriate—one that is demanding, but not paralyzing—again seems to be of value. It is in the hope that it proves fruitful in these ways that we submit the present view.

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