

Representing Individuals -

The Concept of Intersectionality in Media Studies

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To:

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Defining Intersectionality

Even though intersectionality as a factor of identity construction has existed ever since, the discourse about intersectionality as a concept is rather new. It was especially studies of discrimination such as in feminist or racism studies that shaped and defined the concept, and made it obvious in society. There are many examples in everyday life as well as in media representation that make the concept understandable. In the 2007 American slapstick comedy "Suburban" by Greg Mottola, two policemen are called into a liquor store after an armed robbery. The two white, male policemen start interviewing the African-American, female shop assistant about the offender. Referring to his skin colour, they ask her circuitous: "Was he like... us or like... you?" which the shop assistant responds annoyed: "A woman? Female?"

Without assuming that the filmmakers wanted to point at the concept of intersectionality on purpose, this scene is a great example of how different dimensions contribute to an individual's identity and how this fact is oftentimes violated discriminately (as like in this example racist). In one of the first articles about intersectionality, Kimberle Crenshaw writes:

"I argue that Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender." (Crenshaw, 1989, 140)

In the same article, Crenshaw highlights the great importance of intersectionality while referring to US-American employment policies during the 80s in cases where white women were employed to comply with the requirements of gender equality and black man were employed to comply with the requirements of race equality. Obviously, there was a margin left out by any gender or race non-discrimination policy. It is the disregard of intra-group differences that discriminates and excludes certain individuals of a group. These individuals are not only defined by identity dimensions (female AND black), but as well by power relations within a group. Referring to these two dimensions of intersectionality, Leslie McCall defines the concept as followed: Intersectionality is "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (McCall, 2005, 1771).

Intersectional Research and Methodology

As much as the concept of intersectionality contributes to the analysis of identity construction, discrimination and identity politics, that much it makes the analysis on the other hand more complex. The multifactorial examination of individual's identities and their social relations raises many problems in terms of methodology and research practice that has – considering that intersectionality as a concept has a rather short research tradition anyway – insufficiently been addressed in contemporary research (cf. McCall, 2005, 1772f). The main challenge in this regard is to overcome binary oppositions such as male/female, black/white, upper class/lower class etc. Even though Hall (1997) – referring to Saussure – argues that the creation of difference is essential to the creation of meaning, it manifests on the other hand relations of inequality and predomination, since one pole of a binary opposition is always more powerful than the other (cf. Hall, 1997, 234f). This power relation however, is exactly what shall be erased or at least critically highlighted in intersectional research. As a consequence, intersectional research has to do the analytical step to avoid categories or at least to take these categories itself not for granted.

“That is, since symbolic violence and material inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender, the project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of positive social change.” (McCall, 2005, 1777)

McCall (2005) provides further three approaches on how this can be done. Referring to the example at the beginning of this text, an intersectional research approach could be to question if the policemen would have addressed an African-American male shop assistant in the same way. This approach would count to the so-called intracategorical approach (McCall, 2005), which deals with individuals that overlap the boundary of only one category. This approach is often applied in research on black women. Crenshaw provides some good examples for this kind of research (cf. Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw 1990). Besides this approach, McCall distinguishes the anticategorical approach, which rejects categories at all and aims at deconstructing master categories, and the intercategorical approach that takes the relationships between constituted social groups as the matter of analysis (cf. McCall, 2005, 1785). Referring to “Superbad”, one research question that follows this approach could be, how the policemen construct the

“otherness” of the shop assistant and if they reflect in this context on their own whiteness.

Intersectionality in Media Studies

When talking about social construction of groups, categories and differences, the media plays of course a central role, since it shapes discourse and creates images, stereotypes and frames of those who are represented in it and especially of those who lack representation. The representation of societal groups and especially of minorities is therefore a major concern of media studies as well as media regulation and politics. It is important to acknowledge that the studies of media representations are not limited to concrete media texts, but coexist with the studies of audiences and media effects (such as agenda setting, framing, cultivation) as well as the studies of media practice (such as news values, gatekeeping, media ethics) (see Downing & Husband, 2005, 25f; 49ff). Even though intersectionality is rarely named in this field of research, the concept is used to question the creation of “otherness” and indifference of social groups. The research deals thus rather with the absence of intersectionality than with the concept itself.

A major topic is here the marginalisation of social groups through for instance stereotyping. “Stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (Hall, 1997, 257). It separates the “Other” from the predominant “Us” in media texts, which is as Richard Dyer (1997, 3) points out in Western societies clearly white. Thomas K. Nakayama (2004) stresses that as a result of that any representation of individuals that differ from this normal state of being, tends to stand for a group as a whole. The representation of gay Asian-American individuals (to stick to Nakayamas example) is automatically a representation of gay Asian-Americans in general, where on the other hand “seeing any specific image of whites (...) does not lead to conclusions about whites in general” (Nakayama, 2004). This is not only restricted to the dimensions of race. Media studies show that the representations of individuals that do differ from the hegemonic media constitution tend to get de-individualised in many contexts (Pool (2002) deals with the representation of Muslims in British press, Skeggs (2006) deals with class, Nixon (1997, 300f) with the representation of gender in the context of invented categories of masculinity). The reduction of an individual to only one identity dimension manifests categories, constructs stereotypes and leads to discrimination (cf. Downing & Husband, 2005, 9).

The diffusion of intersectionality in media studies is therefore to welcome. The concept does not only enable **media scholars** to analyse stereotypical patterns in contrast to multidimensional identities, but as well **media producers** to apply intersectional methods into their own work. The first can be retraced in the works of Downing & Husband (2005), Hall (1997) or Dyer (1997). Dyer (1997, 12) for instance states that the representation of whites is “individuated, multifarious” in contrast to stereotypical representation of non-whites. This statement would not be possible without the concept of intersectionality and the awareness that it is a multidimensional identity that creates individuality. Non-intersectional approaches are moreover not possible to indicate differences in intra-group representation. The representation of black woman compared to black man for instance (this lack of differentiation can be retraced in the work of Mastro & Tropp [2004] who examine stereotypical patterns in “black sitcoms” without distinguishing stereotypical male and female patterns). The concept of intersectionality allows media scholars to address the lack of multiple dimensions in the representation of minorities. Audience studies reflect this effort back to feminist, post-colonial, racism or gay studies, while examining, how this mono-dimensional representation leads to discrimination and exclusion in society. Media studies can as well provide useful work for responsible media practice, while highlighting the importance of open categories, individual representation and cautiousness in applying stereotypes. “Our aim should be to critique media failures and outrages tellingly, not sloppily, and to help reframe media practice” (Downing & Husband, 2005, xii). By doing so, media studies can stimulate a representation of minorities that is not fixed in categories. That this is not impossible shows the example of “Superbad” quite graphically.

Sources

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