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The intersectional body

– an embodiment perspective on differentiated experiences

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Abstract:

Intersectionality has become a central concept for contemporary gender research. This paper explores intersectionality as embodiment, arguing that the corporal turn in social constructivism has potentials for the theorizing of intersectionality. It argues that such theorizing can draw inspiration from Merleau-Ponty’s thinking about human experience as always already being part of the physical world, and from the concept of mimesis which denotes that we are always as human beings spontaneously engaged with sociality, implying both the accumulation of practical sense and radical conditionality. It furthermore argues that while discursive thinking is not in itself a problem, thinking about social constructions and intersectionality in purely discursive terms is problematic.

The paper then outlines three potential gains of embodying the theorizing of intersectionality: 1, The problem of producing non-additive analyses might be managed as the body is by definition non-additive. 2, Considerations about fluidity and changeability might be refocused, as a central characteristic of the body is its inertia. 3, Thinking about power relations might be recast as attention is drawn to how power relations are embodied in a way which necessitates a reconsideration of strategies that focus on consciousness.
Introduction

Experience plays an important role in understanding intersectionality. In this paper we will suggest an approach to human experience which foregrounds a particular understanding of embodiment. We do this in order to broaden and enrich the possibilities of researching intersectional experiences.

The concept of intersectionality was originally coined by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), however it can be argued that the theoretical content of the concept was formed before the actual coining of the term, more specifically in black feminists’ attempts to criticize the universalisation of white, middle class women’s perspective in feminist theory and politics (Gans, 2008; Andersen, 2005; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005). This led to the development of a specific tradition of black feminism in the USA (for an early example see Combahee River Collective, 1977), which was devoted to a theoretical and political critique of oppression related to gender, race, class and sometimes sexuality. Central is the development of black American standpoint feminism, in particular Collins (1989, 1990, 1993, 2000), who theorized the mutually constitutive working of gender, race and class as interlocking systems of oppression, joined together in a matrix of domination. Because Collins saw systems of oppression as mutually constitutive she called for an analysis which does not separate the working of gender, race, class, ethnicity etc. or tries to add up the working of the different strands of inequality. In the words of Collins ‘Each system need the others in order to function’ (1990: 2). It is this point - the claim that social categories such as gender, class, race and ethnicity work in mutually constitutive ways, which we consider to be the defining theoretical core of the concept of intersectionality, whether this is taken to apply mainly on a systemic / structural level or on an individual / agency level or both.

Collins’ primary interest was to investigate structural or systemic inequality, including how structural inequality concretely affects the lives of black women. It is for this reason that her writings are considered central to the systemic or structure-oriented approach to intersectionality (Prins, 2006; Phoenix, 2006). Crenshaw (1991) maintained the focus on structural inequality but framed the
discussion around the possibilities and pitfalls of identity politics; in particular the potentials of identity politics based on complex understandings of identity. Her writing shows some influence of a Foucauldian understanding of power when she notes that ‘power has clustered around certain categories’ and that ‘identity continues to be a site of resistance’ (1991: 1297). While Crenshaw thus describes the structural intersections she maintains the importance of their individual experiential effects.

I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourse of either feminism or antiracism. (Crenshaw, 1991: 1243-1244)

The intersections create social positions that shape the individual in terms of experiences of oneself and of possibilities of agency. Thus, the development of the concept has given rise to a concept of intersectional identity (Meyers, 2000). Meyers notes: “The idea of intersectional identity is premised on the general philosophical thesis that who one is depends on one’s social experience” (2000: 153). The social construction of intersectional identity depends on social experiences and these experiences are shaped by social categories. When Phoenix & Pattynama relate intersectional processes to everyday life we are also being reminded of everyday social experiences as crucial for the processes of intersectional positioning:

Intersectionality is thus as a handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it. (Phoenix & Pattynama 2006:187)

Everyday life is the ongoing process by which people experience their world, strive to master it, feel at home in it and make sense of it. It is also here that power structures have situated effects. Phoenix and Pattynama point to the relational positioning of human beings as a common ontological assumption in intersectional research and to everyday life as the experiential framework of the power dynamics inherent in these processes.

In this paper we focus on intersectionality as social experience in relation to social structures as well as everyday life (see also Elg & Jensen, 2010). The perspective of the individual in intersectionality research has been strengthened in constructivist work with the concept. However, the
analyses of experiences of social differentiation provided within intersectionality research often focuses on personal narratives and discursive processes (Prins, 2006; Buitelaar, 2006; Ludvig, 2006; Phoenix, 2006). We argue there are considerations missing that imply a broader understanding of social experience, entailing the embodiment of social positions and with this the embodied experiences of social differentiations and interactions. We find that important aspects of experiences of differentiations are often missing in intersectionality research confined to dealing with significatory processes in discourses, narratives and – sometimes – on the surface of the body. The aim of this paper is therefore to present a perspective on intersectionality as embodied experience which contributes to a broader and therefore more precise understanding of intersectional experiences.

The perspective we present here is inspired by the corporeal turn in social constructionism in recent years and particularly writers who in different ways theorize embodied perspectives on human individuality that supplement discursive approaches (Buck-Morss, 1994; Crossley, 1995; Bacchi & Beasley, 2000, 2002, 2007; Skeggs, 1997; Bourdieu, 2000; Taussig, 1993; Gebauer & Wulf, 2001; Entwistle, 2000; Sampson, 1998; Young, 2005; Witz, 2000; Wacquant, 2004, 2009).

The first part of the paper will present a specific understanding of experience and with that an approach to embodied intersectionality. In the second part of the paper we discuss how the understanding that is presented of embodiment can affect conceptualisations of intersectionality. The third and final part presents our conclusions.

1. An approach to embodied intersectionality – a suggestion

This part of the paper is divided into three sections. The first section outlines how ideas developed within phenomenology inspire the approach we suggest. The second section describes how the notion of ‘the mimetic faculty’ informs an understanding of how experiences, social practices and differentiations are embodied. In the third section we position our ideas in relation to approaches that focus on discourses, narratives and other significatory processes in their approach to social positioning.
1.1 Inspiration from Merleau-Ponty

Our understanding of experience is inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of experience as situated, embodied productions of meaning. Dauer-Keller (2001b) underlines that these descriptions envision a specific understanding of human beings. Contrary to “being at the vertex of a perspective pointing out into an environment”, we are “out there” “among the physical things” (Dauer-Keller, 2001b: 384). Dauer Keller describe this approach to human experience as follows:

   Spontaneous experience is simply not associated with any impression that the experience originates in our selves. Meaning is not confined by physical location, and we are not in our bodies. We are lived, intentional bodies, immediately occupied by and situated in meaningful physical, social and cultural matters (Dauer-Keller, 2001b: 384)

Following this line of thought we can leave the concept of the body as an object, as something we have, something we are in. Consequently we must reflect upon embodiment whenever experience and human identity is at stake. Of course this has consequences for our understanding of intersectional individuality. Social construction and social positioning takes place through embodiment as a formation of us as physical bodies. This formation is radical, in that it not only affects material and sensational aspects of embodiment, but also practices, emotions, thoughts and the consciousness of the embodied human being. From this perspective human experience is deeply complex and “other people’s” experiences “intersect and engage” with the individual experience “like gears” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/2000: 90). Merleau-Ponty described experience of “the phenomenological world” as “inseparable from subjectivity and inter-subjectivity” (ibid). As Young suggests, following this line of thought there is a basis for creating a distance to the idealisation detected in some of Merleau-Ponty’s writing of a “pure embodied experience” “prior” to social conditioning and structure (Young, 2005: 9). This skeptical reading of the work of Merleau-Ponty is relevant for our further considerations of intersectional embodiment within a social constructionist framework.

    Merleau-Ponty inspires a phenomenology of experience as embodied beyond cognitive and discursive productions of meaning (Dauer Keller, 2001a: 547). That means that our understanding of embodied experience is at odds with those authors who have deconstructed the concept of experience from a discursive point of departure. For instance, Scott argues that what we call experience is always already discursive because it is interpreted or intermediated through discursive structures of meaning
(Scott, 1991, 1992). We question this radical discursivation of experience (for a detailed discussion see Elg & Jensen, 2010). Thus, Dauer-Keller, in his reading of Merleau-Ponty, stresses that while our experiences are in a very basic sense related to the fact that others can experience the same as us, there are not necessarily any signifying processes shaping and communicating experiences:

> At stake here are a number of more or less undifferentiated kinds of sociality and culture, which do not subject themselves to the well known categories of empirical social science. In bodily ways we all the time perceive and express meaning that is not conceptual or discursive, not based on language or sensational representation and which do not need to be subjected thematical reflection. (Dauer-Keller, 2001a: 547 our translation)

Theories of the mimetic faculty provide a framework for understanding how we embody sociality and culture.

### 1.2 The mimetic faculty

Benjamin describes the mimetic faculty as the faculty to ”become other” (1936/1994). Mimesis is a name for the impulse to embody what we are sensing, not as a result of a choice to do so but as a result of a spontaneous creativity (Elg, 2009). This impulse has different kinds of experiential effects and gives way to different kinds of actions for the situated human being.

> Along with the embodied sensation of a pattern of movement for instance, played out by other people, comes an inherent ability to imitate it and mimic that which is sensed with our bodies. If the (social or physical) environment provides the possibility of sufficient reiteration the imitation will be incorporated and turned into practice. Hereby the reoccurring sensation shapes or constructs human embodiment. This mimetic ability is crucial for the reproduction of practices, for learning and for establishing communities that build upon common and/or recognised habits. An example of this was given by a young woman with immigrant background who was interviewed for Elg’s PhD project about her first years living in Denmark (Elg, 2005). She recalled that her stay at a boarding school was “probably the best” thing that she had chosen to do (Elg, 2005: 13). Her explanation for this was the opportunity for “doing things together” (ibid). She mentions, among other things, how this improved her Danish language skills and she returns several times to the fact that she “learned to eat like the
The importance of not feeling estranged and “shocked” in eating situations is made clear in her narrative, as she recalls these kinds of experiences as both extremely tiring and upsetting. By being able to incorporate the eating practices of “the Danes” in her embodied dispositions, she gains the possibility of experiencing her daily life as “more or less normal” which, to her, was an enormous relief (Elg, 2005: 16). Through the shared practices related to eating, this young woman gets an immediate experience of normality – of being a normal part of the group (see also Elg, 2009). We return to embodied practices as something that can provide a privileged access to normality below.

The mimetic relationship is not confined to our relationship with other human beings. Benjamin (1936/1994) described how our embodied knowledge about surfaces of materials for instance is created by mimetic sensational reconstructions. By way of example most people do not need to touch a concrete wall to know how it feels. We can produce the feeling in our hands simply by recalling a concrete wall.

The actions of another, or natural events, or the social environment itself produce sensual echoes in our own physiognomy, affects whose expression gives voice to relations with otherness forgotten by instrumental reason. Think of the witness who winces when someone else is struck. Thrilling at a bolt of lightning or shuddering at the sound of thunder involves the same mechanisms at work in a child who sways back and forth and jumps up and down in an act of identification with the hero they manipulate on the computer screen. (Connell, 1998: 70)

Thus, a predisposition to spontaneously empathise with the bodies of other beings and – at the same time – their emotions is related to the mimetic faculty. It produces a sensed, empathetic connection to – and sharing of - the bodies of other beings. In social space this spontaneous ‘empathy’ towards other human beings plays a crucial role for relations and communication (Bråten, 1998). In an impulsive striving towards being and doing in accordance with the material and social environment, the individual embodies necessary practices by mimicking what others do – and it becomes one of the others through these incorporated shared practices. In other words: What is sensationally experienced affects impulsive transformative processes in the human being.

It is important to keep in mind that these experiences, transformations and the dispositions they produce to a large degree take shape in non-conscious ways. Bourdieu writes:
Exposed to the world, to sensation, feeling, suffering, etc., in other words engaged in the world, in play and
at stake in the world, the body (well) disposed towards the world is, to the same extent, oriented towards
the world and what immediately presents itself there to be seen, felt and expected: it is capable of mastering
it by providing an adequate response, having a hold on it, using it (and not decoding it) as an instrument
well at hand… (Bourdieu, 2000:142, our emphasis)

The mimetic faculty provides the embodied being with differing ways of producing “adequate
response” without cognitively decoding of the situation. By imitation the individual directly achieves
what Bourdieu called a practical sense of how to do things; a creative repertoire for situated responses
(Bourdieu, 1998). Thus, through engagement with the world a repertoire for action and a sense of
which actions might be relevant in which contexts is continuously created as embodiment. We consider
this responsiveness an important aspect of agency.

However, as described earlier, the mimetic faculty also has the effect that individual
embodiment is radically exposed precisely because it has to feel and sense and because it impulsively
strives towards mimicking what is sensed. We claim that the individual has agency, but it is impossible
to choose not to be exposed to social relations and societal structures, as one is conditioned by
embodied everyday experiences. With the tendency to impulsively incorporate and reproduce what is
experienced this means being subjected to power structures in a truly fleshy sense. Thus, by taking the
mimetic faculty into account in our understanding of intersectional social differentiations the
theoretical duality of structure and agency are in the process of being merged. The embodied human
being calls for a reflection of both as deeply intertwined.

Bourdieu also discusses human embodiment as individual and collective. He thus claims that
the body “indisputably functions as a principle of individuation” (Bourdieu, 2000:133). As embodiment
we are socially specific and physically clearly defined. In principle we can normally, beyond infancy,
continue living without symbiosis with other bodies. However the body is also a ‘principle of collectivisation’
(ibid) since it is as described a product of collective existence and radically formed by
its social and material environment - which is shared with others. Pierre Bourdieu calls the body the
“real agent” (Bourdieu, 2000:133) and he continues:

Having the (biological) property of being open to the world, and therefore exposed to the world, and so
capable of being conditioned by the world, shaped by the material and cultural conditions of existence in
which it is placed from the beginning, it is subject to a process of socialization of which individuation is itself the product. (Bourdieu, 2000:134)

1.3 Relations to discursive frameworks

While we stress that we find there are non-discursive, non-conscious processes at stake in the social construction of the intersectional individual we also wish to underline that there is by no means an attempt in this approach to present discursive and/or narrative approaches as less important. We do consider the meaning making processes they focus on to be very important in intersectionality research and we find that the focus on embodied experiences should be supplemented with or thought in relation to discursive positioning, narrative constructions and other significatory processes. We have no intention of creating an absolute divide between the discursive and the embodied, not to mention between the discursive and the material. In brief there is no opposition between these aspects of the making of meaning. In lived experience they will be deeply intertwined. Over the past two decades there has however been a strong tendency in feminist thinking to think social construction and power relations as primarily discursive. This is problematic because there are, as argued above, important embodied socializing and positioning processes that will not be grasped in these kinds of analysis (Lykke, 2008: 83; Bacchi and Beasley, 2000, 2007; Sampson, 1998; Young, 2005; Witz, 2000).

Beasley and Bacchi (2000) see a tendency to “dissolve” bodies into discourse in large parts of the feminist writings related to bodily matters.

Instead of the discursive, symbolic body and the material body being conceived as mutually dynamic and constitutive, as one might expect in any contribution towards what Michel Heher calls a ‘thick perception’ of the body (Feher 1987: 159; see also Balsamo 1996: 3), there is a tendency in both performative and corporeal feminisms to collapse bodies into cultural signs, into texts, to dissolve them into discourse (Bynum 1999: 244; Caddick 1992, 1986). The body described in these two feminist approaches is an abstracted and representational body. (Beasley Bacchi 2000.: 347)

We also find this tendency in intersectionality research. As outlined we hereby suggest an approach to intersectionality that renders exactly “the discursive, symbolic” and “the material” and sensational intersectional experiences “mutually dynamic and constitutive”. However we find very few analyses
that have taken this path (Elg, 2005; Elg, 2009; Villa, 2010). We also find that there is a tendency within much discourse analysis and discourse theorizing to claim that all human meaning making is discursive. We mentioned Scott’s discursive perspective on experience above, which is in line with Butler’s which describes experience as “discursively conditioned”

The limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and pre-empt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. This is not to say that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience.

(Butler, 1990/1999: 13)

Bacchi writes in a 2005 paper about two different “traditions” within “feminist engagements with discourse theory”. The objective of the article is to suggest clarifications of conceptualisations within these traditions. However, for our discussion it is interesting that she refers to the contributions “post-structuralist discourse psychologists” as well as Davies’ work in relation to this in the following way: “In this view there is no outside to discourse, but one can work to identify the discourses within which one is positioned (subject positions) and use them selectively” (Bacchi, 2005: 205). It is not clear whether in this article Bacchi should be read as if this is her standpoint, but this way of talking about the discursiveness of human life is quite common. This idea of a discourse with “no outside” is puzzling. However, with regard to this theoretical discussion we would rather question whether it is a relevant angle to talk in terms of an inside/outside discourse – or even an inside/outside embodiment. Our perspective is that discursive and non-discursive social processes are at stake simultaneously and coincide in mutually reliant ways.

The tendency to claim the overall discursiveness however makes it necessary to be very clear about the non-discursive, embodied dimensions we see in intersectional individuality. An example of the problems we see is laid out in Prins’ article from 2006. She argues for a “constructionist approach to intersectionality” (Prins, 2006: 277). She goes on to claim that ”actions can be perceived as enacted narratives” (2006: 281). The logic seems to be that a narrative exists on a cognitive or mental level, and it is then implemented into practice and made into actions. As we have argued above practices and dispositions for action should not be considered merely as consequences of mental or verbal representations. Practices and actions are often carried out on the basis of an embodied repertoire and a practical sense and are not necessarily filtered through cognitive or discursive processes. The empirical example given above about the practice of eating actually suggests that a lot of actions only give way to
cognitive processes *when they do not work* (Elg, 2005: 12-19). An important point in relation to this is that we do not understand the narratives of the young woman’s eating practices as discursive. We do not find that what is important here is mainly significatory or symbolic meanings of what “the Danes” do with their food. What they do with their food is interesting in order to be able to *do the same* (Elg, 2005: 15; see also Elg, 2009). Striving towards this practical sameness is a strong drive for social construction while it does not make a lot of sense as a discursive process. The theory about the mimetic faculty, however, provides a framework for understanding these dimensions of intersectional identity construction.

Butler specifically denounces the theory of “practical mimeticism” in Bourdieu’s work when she claims that it “establishes the ideal of adaption as the presiding norm of his theory of sociality” (Butler, 1999: 118; see also Elg & Jensen, 2010). Thus, the sensational, non-conscious, mimetic aspects of social construction are simply framed as a norm in Bourdieu’s thinking rather than as a relevant point of theoretical reflection.

Many constructionist approaches to intersectionality build upon an inspiration from Butler (1990/1999, 1993). What happens in these works is that they often treat the body as a surface, with social meanings appearing as bodily signs on its surface to be read. As an example the Danish gender researchers Staunæs & Søndergaard write that “The sociocultural categories are being reproduced or transformed in the mirrorings and interpretations specific persons meet qua the bodily signs other people read their belonging to categories from” (2006: 46, our translation). This is problematic because the body then appears as a clean slate, ready for inscription as well as reading, but is not itself active in the process of socialization.

Despite Butler’s assertion that bodies cannot be mere effects, they continue to be relatively passive and unproductive of meaning in the face of the dynamism of the symbolic in her analysis (1993a: 66–67). In an effort to challenge biological essentialism, Butler asserts a form of radical social constructionism in which matter effectively acts at the behest of the social/symbolic and is *given* meaning (1993a: 320). (Beasley & Bacchi, 2000: 346)

In Butler’s thinking the body is being called upon, interpellated, to *do* social categories – gender being the paradigmatic example – in ways that are considered socially appropriate, and it is this repetitive doing of discursive gender categories which produces the gendered subject (Butler, 1995). However,
we argue that the social construction of embodiment cannot be reduced to doing social categories that are imposed upon it by social normativities (heteronormativity being the paradigmatic example). Such a reduction is problematic because the impulse to socialise is not imposed on humans by discourses, human embodiment is in itself active in seeking to socialize, it is mimetic. Furthermore socialisation is not just about being subjected to norms, it is also about creating productive kinds of inter-subjectivity. This is described better in analytical frameworks that do consider discursive as well as mimetic processes.

2. The analytical consequences of intersectional embodiment

In the following section we discuss how our approach could affect recent discussions within intersectionality research. Firstly we discuss the problems that have been raised in relation to dealing with several differentiations at the same time in analyses of intersectionality. Secondly the degree of fluidity or changeability in social construction – and with that in intersectional identity - that follows from this approach. Thirdly we discuss issues related to power relations.

2.1 Embodiment, non-additivity and analytical separation

The perspective we suggest makes visible how thinking in separate social categories dominates contemporary analysis of social differentiations. It also becomes obvious that in a certain sense “it is all in the body”, to paraphrase Collins (1998). One of the debates around intersectional analysis evolves around the challenge of making a synchronous and non-additive analysis of the interweavings of all the possible categories. Phoenix writes that “many feminists are perplexed about which intersections they should analyse at any one time” (2006: 25). From an embodiment perspective that can be described as the problem of putting together, through analysis, what has been separated analytically.Embodied, situated engagement with the world is not differentiated into gender, class, ethnicity race, age, nationality, sexuality etc, and therefore the challenge of combining these is a consequence of analytical separation. This challenge is being reshaped by taking embodiment as the point of departure. Precisely because different social differences are embodied in the same “lump of flesh” - the lump of flesh that is
human embodiment is necessarily intersectional. As lived embodied experience social differences are always intersectional. To us taking embodiment as a point of departure therefore represents a promising attempt to manage the problem of non-additivity.

2.2 The inertia of embodiment

In his work with the theory of habitus Pierre Bourdieu builds upon the idea that social differentiations are embodied in ways he claims to be “biological” (Bourdieu, 2000: 134) and neurological (Bourdieu, 2000: 136). He describes the embodied engagement in the world as effecting a “durable transformation of the body” (ibid) which he also calls the “inertia” of habitus (Bourdieu, 2000: 160). Feminist discussions related to the embodiment of social differentiations have been coloured by a sympathetic striving towards a “denaturalisation” of gender categories, and with this a criticism of biological determinism (Beasley & Bacchi, 2007: 288-289). This, however, should not restrain us from taking biological and neurological dimensions of embodiment into consideration in the thinking of intersectionality, as it is providing relevant perspectives on the social construction of human beings. The “durable transformations” of the flesh, along with the biological bodily features of bodies which are prone to differentiating actions – for instance skin color and sexual organs - must be taken to be very important dimensions of social life. The same goes for the experienced fixedness that comes with these bodily features. The social constructionisms that emphasise an “endless fluidity” in social positioning miss the point in the embodiment perspective (Beasley & Bacchi, 2007: 289)

For us this is one of the main problems within Butler-inspired social constructionism. Whilst it every so often mentions the reality of structural or collective formation of individuality it has a tendency to describe it as an ideological, normative obstacle or “phantasm” that should be overcome (Butler, 1993: 3; also Prins, 2006). As we have shown above, we do not find that dispositions and differentiations are added to the individual in a way that makes it possible to be liberated from them through reflection and choice for instance. McNay points out in relation to the work of Bourdieu: “The habitus is in a state of permanent revision, but this revision is rarely radical because the new and unexpected is always incorporated upon the basis of previously established, embodied dispositions” (2001: 151). From this point of view the possibility of “durable transformation” is a basic feature of
human embodiment. The durable embodied formations can be taken as a necessary and powerful
dimension of maintaining and reproducing social relations.

Further to this the slowness provided by the embodiment of experiences allows for the
possibility of experiencing our social and physical environment as natural. We claim that the social
world must become in a certain sense natural for us, in order for us to feel at home in it. Michael Taussig describes the mimetic ability as “that nature culture uses to create second nature” (1993: xiii).

“Sex is a social construction”, “race is a social construction”, “the nation is an invention”, and so forth, the tradition of invention. The brilliance of the pronouncement is blinding [...] If life is constructed, how come it appears so immutable? How come culture seems so natural? (Taussig, 1993: xvi)

The experience of culture as “natural” is necessary in order for us to feel at ease with the world. Human beings have an ability to construct an experienced naturalness over time which is strictly cultural while at the same time does not call for reflection. This is gained by mimetic transformations of human embodiment through repetitive experience. If we end up in social circumstances that are unfamiliar to us and to which our embodied dispositions have not adjusted, we become literally physically exhausted from the work of tuning our bodies into this strange reality (Elg, 2005, 2009).

This means that our intersectionally differentiated embodiment is related to the very experience of our environment as natural as well as us being natural to our environment. Experiences of being different are thus not only related to the mirrorings and interpretations we are met with by others, but also our possibilities of mirroring and feeling natural in a certain environment. Here we can, again, consider the example of eating practice mentioned earlier. The relief of not being shocked by the practices of people around her has a profound effect on the young woman’s personal wellbeing (Elg, 2005: 16). We wish to underline that the embodiment perspective presented in this paper provides the possibility of dealing with these kinds of differentiating experiences in intersectionality research. There are important power issues related to this.
2.3 Intersectional embodiment and power relations

Although experiencing our environment as natural is a possibility provided by our mimetic faculty, these experiences are not necessarily what we have. In narratives such as the one concerning eating practices it becomes clear that these experiences of normality are a privilege that is not easily incorporated by everyone. In other words power relations are also played out as access or non-access to certain embodied dispositions. For example Bourdieu has pointed out how this plays a significant role in how children from different social classes find their way through educational systems (Bourdieu, 1995). However this has effects in many different kinds of social spaces. For instance we both have interview material in our Ph.D. dissertations showing how this plays a crucial part in experiences of racism and ethnocentrism (Elg, 2005; Jensen, 2007). This indicates that processes that that could be framed as empowerment or liberation from subjecting power structures must have an embodied dimension.

… another effect of the scholastic illusion is seen when people describe resistance to domination in the language of consciousness – as does the whole Marxist tradition and also the feminist theorists who, giving way to habits of thought, expect political liberation to come from the ‘raising of consciousness’ – ignoring the extraordinary inertia which results from the inscription of social structures in bodies, for lack of a dispositional theory of practices. (Bourdieu, 2000: 172)

Another dimension of embodied intersectionality that can be grasped by the approach we suggest in this paper is the effects of attitudes towards our visual presence. For example the subtle distributions of acceptance and neglect inherent in the gazes and movements we are met with shape our position in power relations, our embodied expectations and experiences of self over time. These processes can be relevant in research of experiences of for instance racism and sexism. In our Ph.D. dissertations respondents with an immigrant background tell about experiencing the gaze of the majority in everyday life (Jensen, 2007; Elg, 2005). For instance Tahir, who is interviewed for Jensen’s PhD project, speaks of his everyday experience of being seen in the streets of the Danish city where he lives approximately a year after the attacks on the World Trade Center 11th September 2001:

Tahir: Just on the street. You know, just the way people look at you. After September 11. People think that any guy with black hair is Al Qaeda, right?
Int.: Hmm. How is it people look at you?

Tahir: You’re just looked at with … you know, people think you are a terrorist when you are Arab or Muslim.

Interview 3 November 2002

*Being seen* is a basic condition of human life. Elg (2009) has shown how being seen, and seeing how others see us, conditions our social identity. By experiencing the gaze of the majority Tahir experiences that he is different, and that this difference, through what we can conceptualise as the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity and age, is perceived as dangerous. While this account clearly connects experiences of being seen to the social categories and hegemonic discourses in the society Tahir lives in, the experience of *dangerous differentness* can be framed with our proposed embodiment perspective as extremely personal as well as related directly, through the gaze of others, to Tahir’s flesh.

Here we can return to the question about the possibilities of changing our embodied being – or the embodied being of others – and frame it in a power perspective. From our perspective access to certain embodied experiences – and the possibility of avoiding certain experiences – will be decisive for the individuals experiences of empowerment and agency in power relations in society.

**3 Conclusions**

In this paper we have outlined an understanding of the socially constructed individual as intersectional embodiment. We claim that what forms an individual are the experiences it has as an embodied being throughout its life, as it is engaged in the social world by necessity. However we stress that these experiences need to be understood as a broad spectrum where some will be “discursively conditioned” (Butler, 1990/ 1999: 13) whereas others will be conditioned by sensations and emotional relations that enter the human body because of the mimetic faculty. Thus, a certain understanding of experience leads to a certain understanding of embodiment. The understanding of embodiment we suggest is one that is open to the world and which has an impulse as well as a need to engage with the world, to socialise.
Through the mimetic faculty it is formed by this engagement and accumulates a capacity for agency by this engagement.

The understanding of experiences we employ is that they are related to configurations of gender, class, ethnicity, race etc in quite different ways. Some experiences will be shaped by subtle, often non-conscious patterns of movement and bodily pace for instance, whereas others will be constructed in accordance with structures in society as they will be affected by how we are categorised by others, where and how we live, what work we do, how empowered we are, what groups we participate in, how natural our surroundings seem, what activities we engage in etc - in fact the whole array of differentiating experiences which are embodied and constructs us as individuals. Thus in this thinking about intersectionality there is a “both / and” approach to dimensions of agency and structure in social constructionism.

The understanding of experience and embodiment we suggest for intersectional thinking is conceptualizing human embodiment as situated accumulation of experiences and with this approach it should be obvious that in the lived experience we are always intersectional. The discrete social categories we struggle with in intersectionality research are the results of an analytical separation that research might benefit from trying to overcome.

Another analytical separation our approach suggests should be overcome is the separation of discursive and non-discursive experiences. With the understanding of social construction we outline here it would make sense to analyse a broad spectrum of social constructions in the research of intersectional identity.

The perspective on embodiment presented in this paper places emphasis on the durability and thus the inertia of social constructions. Furthermore it emphasises that the possibility of change in the social construction of the individual is not merely a matter of cognitive realisation as much as it is a matter of practical participation. This introduces some very important dimensions to our understanding of the power relations at work in the differentiating processes in social construction. As parts of what constructs us socially is non-conscious and un-verbalised, as well as physically incorporated in durable ways, we have limited possibilities of knowing and not least controlling and changing the conditions that constructs us as intersectional embodiment. Access to certain kinds of experiences - and the
possibility of avoiding others – will shape the social position of the individual as well as the individual experience of empowerment and belonging in a certain environment.

References:


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