

The Metaphysics of Intersectionality¹

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0. Introduction

Viewing social identities as *intersectional* has become central to understanding how various dimensions of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, and class interact to yield more complex forms of discrimination than those suffered by persons who fall under only one category. In this paper I develop a metaphysics of intersectionality, and thereby advance understanding of the concept beyond metaphor. As a descriptive rather than revisionary project, the aim is to reflect actual definitions of intersectionality on offer. The result will be a richer understanding of the interlevel and intralevel relationships involved in intersectionality.

Here is the plan. In Section 1, I lay out the conceptual basics of intersectionality and narrow the target *explanandum*. I survey commonly used metaphors deployed in service of defining intersectionality, and show why these metaphors are metaphysically significant. In Section 2, I draw on debates about diachronic composition to yield results for the metaphysics of intersectionality. I sketch multiple metaphysical formulations of its central tenet of inseparability of social categories, and show the advantages of one such conception over another. In Section 3, I propose and defend the idea that intersectionality is best understood as metaphysical and explanatory priority of the intersectional category over its constituents, on par with grounding claims in contemporary analytic metaphysics.

1. Intersectionality: The Basics

The basic idea of intersectionality is that forms of oppression stemming from membership in multiple social categories such as “black” and “woman” *intersect* and thereby create new forms of oppression that are causally, modally, and relationally

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different from the constituent forms of oppression merely added together. Analyzing oppression stemming from black womanhood, for example, is not just a matter of analyzing blackness and analyzing womanhood. Similarly with other finer-grained categories like “gay Hispanic male”, “disabled Jewish woman”, and so on. Intersectional identities have at least two and indefinitely many constituent categories. Gender, biological sex, race, sexual orientation, disability status, and socioeconomic class are canonical constituents of intersectional identities.

In the literature, “intersectionality” refers to a few different phenomena. Sometimes it refers to members of intersectional social *categories*, like black women. Sometimes it refers to forms of oppression faced by members of such categories, for example, those forms of discrimination faced by black women that are faced neither by women alone nor by black people alone. Intersectionality sometimes refers to a type or token of *experience* faced by members of such categories, as in experiences had by black women that are not entirely explicable by appeal to being black or to being a woman. There is a *causal* theory of intersectionality, according to which intersecting systems of power produce effects on groups or individuals that would not be produced if the dimensions did not intersect.² And intersectionality sometimes refers to a method of *theorizing* from or about a specific viewpoint, as when one is theorizing from the perspective of a disabled Jewish woman.

I will assume that all of the above phenomena are worthy bearers of the label, but I will largely focus on intersectional identity categories as the target *explanandum*. I will not delve into detail about what I take categories to be, but I will assume for the sake of this paper that they are metaphysically substantive in the sense that they are more than mere collections of social classifications: they are the metaphysical umbrella under which oppressed groups fall, whether singly or multiply.³ I will not take a stand on some substantive issues about the metaphysics of sex, gender, and race, though answers to those questions ultimately intersect with a metaphysics of intersectionality.⁴ Though there is significant controversy over both the usefulness of intersectionality and who is allowed

² See Bright et. al. (2016) for a causal theory of intersectionality.

³ For a detailed metaphysics of social categories, see Ásta (2018) and Dembroff (MS). Taylor (2016) argues that the metaphysics of groups makes trouble for theories of oppression.

⁴ For an explication of the metaphysics of gender, see Witt (2014).

to adopt it as a theoretical construct,⁵ I will assume that it is useful as a theoretical tool and that it is widely available to be discussed by those who wish to understand any system of interlocking social oppression.

Though the intersectionality literature mostly focuses on intersectional minority identities and unique dimensions of oppression faced by such minorities, it is worth noting that all identities are to some extent intersectional in a broad sense of the term. Just as there are distinctive forms of oppression for intersectional minority identities, there are distinctive forms of privilege for non-minority ones. A white upper-class man, for example, is privileged in ways not entirely reducible to the joint features of being white, being a man, and being upper class. Philosophical interest in intersectionality as a tool, therefore, is not restricted to those seeking to understand minority identities. On one way of thinking about it, we are all intersectional to some degree or other.⁶ I will, however, restrict my focus to intersectional categories as they relate to forms of interlocking systemic oppression, rather than intersectional categories full stop.

Now onto canonical accounts of intersectionality. Often described and defined metaphorically, the term originates in Crenshaw's "intersecting traffic" comparison⁷:

"Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly if a black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination [or both]." (Crenshaw 1989, p. 149).

Crenshaw's metaphor evokes a Venn diagram-like picture of social categories, according to which causal results of membership in multiple social categories can stem from one category, the other category, or both categories combined.

⁵ For example, see Carastathis (2014) for a critique of the widespread adoption of intersectionality as a theoretical tool.

⁶ This usage of "intersectionality" is not uncontroversial. For the historical origins of intersectionality, and reasons to restrict the term's usage to particular minority identities, see Gines (2011).

⁷ The *concept* of intersectionality arguably predates Crenshaw's usage. The Combahee River Collective, a prominent black feminist group, published a seminal statement in 1977 according to which "we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face."

Recent literature has refined the concept of intersectionality in order to incorporate the *inseparability* of identity categories. Whereas non-intersectional approaches treat these aspects of identity as merely additive—what it is like to be a black woman can be neatly broken down into what it is like to be both of those constituents—contemporary intersectional approaches treat these aspects as intimately attached. What it is like to be a black woman cannot be understood exclusively through appeal to the separate identity markers mashed together. Thus Garry’s (2011) preferred metaphor for intersectionality attempts to capture the complex ways in which dimensions of oppression *mix*, rather than simply being added together:

“[We] can replace vehicles with liquids to show the ways in which some oppressions or privileges seem to blend or fuse with others. Different liquids—milk, coffee, nail polish, olive oil, beet borscht, paint in several colors—run down from different places at different altitudes into roundabouts. Some of the liquids run together, some are marbled with others, and some stay more separate unless whipped together. For me, this image captures intersectionality better than many others, but it still cannot capture agency well.”

Leaning on metaphor as well, Haslanger writes that “the intersection of race and gender has an effect similar to overlapping different colored gels on a theater light” (2014, p. 116), as well as invoking inseparability of social categories as central to intersectionality:

“Experience is intersectional when it is the result of being socially positioned in multiple categories at once. Because I am socially positioned simultaneously as White, able-bodied, affluent, and as a woman, my experience of being a woman is inflected by the ways that these other social positions affect me. There are many who have argued that the experience of being a woman (or being White, or affluent) cannot be separated from the experience of the other social positions, because experience is not “additive” in the way that would be required (e.g., Spelman 1988).”

Like Garry’s metaphor, Haslanger’s comparison suggests a complex, non-additive, intermingling metaphysical relationship between different aspects of social identity. Both Garry’s and Haslanger’s metaphors suggest not just a collection of inseparable identity categories, but a mixing or intermingling of them, such that the intersectional category is metaphysically different than the identity constituents merely stuck together. What it is to be a black woman cannot be understood solely by understanding what it is like to be black and to be a woman.

Which metaphor one uses might seem to be of little consequence philosophically:

if the concept is to be understood in such a way, why split hairs over the best abstract comparison?⁸ As I shall show in the following sections, each metaphor yields metaphysical commitments that can serve as a guide to a more rigorous understanding of interconnected aspects of social and cultural identity.

Let us call multidimensional identity categories like “black woman” *intersectional categories*. And call their constituents like “black” and “woman” *identity constituents*. Several questions arise. What, precisely, is the relationship of inseparability between identity constituents? What is the relationship between intersectional categories and their identity constituents? What are the persistence and modal conditions of intersectional categories? I turn now to these questions.

2. The Metaphysics of Intersectionality

Social categories can be fruitfully understood in terms of *determinables* and their *determinates*. The determinable/ determinate relationship is a special hierarchical relationship of descending specificity that holds between general categories and their more specific instances. *Scarlet* is a determinate of the determinable *red* and *circular* is a determinate of the determinable *shaped*. Some determinables are inseparable while their determinates are separable: it is impossible to have a color without having a shape, but it is possible to be red without being circular. Similarly, it is impossible to have a gender without having a race, and impossible to have a race without having a social class. But it is possible to be a woman without being black.⁹ Thus social determinables such as gender, race, and class are inseparable while their social determinates such as womanhood, blackness, and middle-class membership are not.

As a concept, however, intersectionality is a claim about the inseparability of social determinates, not social determinables. Intersectionality is not just about belonging to any gender and any race; it is about belonging to a specific gender (for example, womanhood) and belonging to a specific race (for example, being black), and the way those determinate identity constituents interact with each other. But what, exactly, is this relationship of inseparability?

First, what inseparability is not. It is not conceptual inseparability, since one can

⁸ For another examination of the use of metaphor in defining intersectionality, see Marta Jorba and Maria Roto de Zárate. (ms).

⁹ Thanks to Marta Jorba and Erica Rodriguez for pressing this point.

certainly conceive of one identity constituent without the other. Conceptually coherent reasoning about swapping gender, biological sex, and race identity is common and unmysterious. Such reasoning often replaces one identity constituent with another while holding other constituents fixed. One might think “If I hadn’t been a woman...” or “If I hadn’t been black...” even if one is a black woman. Identity categories are conceptually separable, in principle and in practice.

The sort of inseparability at stake in intersectionality cannot be modal inseparability, since clearly it is possible for one to be a woman without being black, and vice versa. Further, people can acquire and lose some identity constituents: they can change gender identity, religion, and socioeconomic class over the course of a lifetime in ways that effect dimensions of oppression and privilege.¹⁰

Another reason to deny modal inseparability of social categories is that existing metaphysical models of gender and race take the features of each to be modally contingent. Social race realists, for example, hold that the existence and nature of race depends on a network of social attitudes and relations.¹¹ If social relations and attitudes determine what it is to be black, it follows that such a nature could have been very different than it is, since networks of social attitudes and relations could have been very different than they are. It should go without saying that race-defining social attitudes and relations *do* shift across time and across geography. (“I became black in America”, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie memorably claimed.¹²) If the features of race and gender are contingent, they cannot be modally inseparable, since presumably the modal connection would depend on their natures.

Mereological inseparability is also unhelpful: being black and being a woman don’t overlap in the way that a bicycle overlaps its physical parts. Identity categories are not physical parts, like Legos or construction beams. Nor is the relationship between identity categories appropriately described as physical contact between social categories.

To make progress on the nature of inseparability, we can fruitfully draw on results

¹⁰ See Silvermint (2018) and Tuvel (2017) for discussions of such cases.

¹¹ Haslanger’s social race realism is formulated thus: “A group is racialized (in context C) if and only if (by definition) its members are (or would be) socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) (in C), and the group is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region” (Haslanger, 2012, p. 308).

¹² “The Intolerant Left”, *The Atlantic*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/11/the-intolerant-left/545783/>.

from debates about the nature of diachronic composition. Diachronic composition is the relationship that a group of parts bears to a particular whole that it composes across time. Consider a pile of beams and parts in January that are gradually put together in such a way that they form a house in May. This relationship is one of composition, but not the type according to which parts compose a particular thing at a particular time. Rather, the house is composed across time, gradually built out of its parts.

Bennett (2011) draws a distinction between diachronic composition in which ingredients are destroyed or annihilated in the making of the object, and diachronic composition in which the ingredients are left intact. For example, in baking a cake, eggs are destroyed, but are considered constituents of the ultimate product. We can ask a similar question of identity constituents: to what extent are the categories *black* and *woman* left intact when combined into an intersectional identity like *black woman*?¹³

Here the intersectionality theorist must clarify her claim. There are two ways to go. One way is to hold that the categories *black* and *woman* do not survive the combination into the intersectional category, comparable to eggs being destroyed in service of baking the cake. Call this the *destruction conception* of inseparability.¹⁴ The other way is to hold that both categories stay intact, like the beams that eventually compose a house. Call this the *intact category conception* of inseparability. Both approaches have their challenges.

The first and biggest problem with the destruction conception is that we do not want to say that black women are neither black nor women. Indeed, a commitment to the intactness and integrity of individual identity constituents seems essential to the spirit of intersectional theorizing and feminist theorizing more generally, both of which seek to quantitatively and qualitatively expand rather than contract explanations of oppression and privilege.¹⁵ Maintaining the conceptual and metaphysical integrity of the identity constituents is a desideratum of a theory of intersectionality.

A second, related problem with the destruction conception is that the category

¹³ Coincidentally, Lugones (2003, p. 122) also appeals to the metaphor of baking, writing: “if mayonnaise is curdled, the egg yolk, oil, and water are not separated cleanly and completely; instead “they coalesce toward oil or toward water [...] you are left with yolky oil and oily yolk”.

¹⁴ This is presumably what is meant by Lugones (2007, pp. 192-193), when she writes “It is only when we perceive gender and race as intermeshed or fused that we actually see women of color.”

¹⁵ Indeed Garry (2011, p. 830) writes that intersectionality “does not abolish identity categories; instead they become more complex, messy, and fluid.”

black woman is not so distinctive as to retain no components of blackness or womanhood. Sorts of oppression faced by black women sometimes *are* explicable in terms of womanhood and in terms of blackness, at least partially. It's not as if the individual constituents never have anything to do with it at all. Intersectional categories clearly share many properties and causal powers of their constituents. For example, writing of being stopped and interrogated on her way into a fancy hotel in her hometown, Adichie writes:

“...the automatic assumption is that a Nigerian female walking into a hotel alone is a sex worker. Because a Nigerian female alone cannot possibly be a guest paying for her own room. A man who walks into the same hotel is not harassed. The assumption is that he is there for something legitimate.” (2012, p. 19)

Even if we attribute Adichie's treatment to her membership in the intersectional category *Nigerian woman*, it seems clear that it is still at least partially explicable in terms of her being Nigerian and being a woman. Adichie's membership in these intact individual categories play distinctive, though overlapping, causal roles in the incident. The destruction conception does not allow for such causal roles, since the individual categories are destroyed by belonging to the intersectional category.

The third problem with the destruction conception is that it can be construed as counterproductive for theorizing about oppression, which requires unifying explanations. We want to be able to talk about forms of oppression and privilege shared by many women, not just talk about maximally specific forms of oppression and privilege.¹⁶ Citing a complex intersectional category such as “black disabled straight unemployed middle class woman born in 1956” is helpful for assessing the very specific kinds of oppression faced by such a person. But theorizing exclusively about the finest-grained intersectional categories without regard to their individual constituents is not as explanatorily fruitful as revealing the unifying features of social categories. We seek to determine the sorts of obstacles that all women face *in virtue of* determining the sorts of obstacles that black women face and Jewish women face, not only the obstacles that are specific to Jewish women and black women. Maintaining intact identity categories best respects the letter and spirit of intersectional theorizing. For methodological and first-order philosophical reasons, then, the destruction conception is a non-starter.

¹⁶ Zack (2005) argues that the intersectional approach contributes to political fragmentation of feminist discourse.

Consider the intact category approach, which holds that identity constituents survive when combined into an intersectional category. For example, blackness and womanhood retain their properties while subsumed under the intersectional category *black woman*. This approach avoids the problem of destruction of the properties of individual identity constituents, but incurs other ontological and explanatory burdens.

First, the friend of the intact approach must accept widespread explanatory and causal overdetermination of intersectional categories by their identity constituents. In the above example, Adichie's harassment at the hotel entrance is caused not only by her being a Nigerian woman, but also by her being Nigerian and being a woman. Every causal outcropping of membership in an intersectional category will have multiple multi-level causes and explanations. Some causes and explanations will overlap and some will not, but in many cases, there will be causal and explanatory redundancy. As in the traditional setup of the causal exclusion problem, the alternatives to accepting widespread overdetermination are unappealing. One does not want to eliminate the causal and explanatory power of the identity constituents, for blackness and womanhood still have unique causal and explanatory roles. Eliminating the causal and explanatory role of the intersectional category goes against the very spirit of intersectional theorizing: the entire point is that the finer-grained category has special, distinctive causal and explanatory powers. Widespread overdetermination need not be considered problematic¹⁷, but it does multiply ontological posits of the theory.

Another way the intact category theorist multiplies entities is that she must accept a profusion of descending identity categories. On some analyses, "woman" is not a metaphysically fundamental category. It is divisible into further parts such as performative and relational aspects of womanhood, each of which themselves contain more specific aspects. This ontological extravagance isn't intrinsically problematic, but it does add an extra layer of causal and explanatory overdetermination.

The primary burden of the intact category approach is to explain how the intersectional category is metaphysically different than the combination of its constituents. Here the intersectional theorist must strike a difficult balance. As discussed above, she must not erase or degrade the individual identity constituents that make up a complex, multi-dimensional identity. Muslim women, for example, are not to be seen as

¹⁷ See Bernstein (2016) for a discussion of what makes overdetermination problematic.

non-Muslim or non-women because they belong to the intersectional category. On the other hand, the friend of intersectionality must give an account of intersectional categories according to which the categories contribute something extra to the world, ontologically speaking. If talking about intersectional categories is just another way of talking about the constituents added together, intersectionality theory is vulnerable to a charge of triviality.

I turn now to this challenge. How might the intersectionality theorist construct a metaphysically substantive conception of inseparability that respects the desideratum of intactness of identity constituents? I propose that there are at least two ways to formulate inseparability, one weak and one strong.

The first option weakens inseparability so that it is mere *interaction* between identity categories. Often, the type of interplay between different identity constituents under discussion in the literature requires only this sort of minimal relationship. What the intersectionality theorist would posit, then, is that properties of identity constituents causally and metaphysically interact but that they are separable in principle and in practice. When being black intersects with being Muslim, for example, these two identity features causally interact in order to form a distinctive intersectional identity, but they do not inextricably interconnect. Inseparability-as-interaction also explains the Adichie example above: she is harassed at the hotel entrance because her blackness and her womanhood interact, but not because they are inextricably and irreducibly linked.¹⁸ Inseparability as interaction respects the spirit of intersectionality theory without a stronger metaphysical commitment than necessary.

Given that many intersectional views are committed to *cross-constitution* of social categories, however, the mere interaction view is weaker than many intersectionality theorists would accept. Some theories posit that social categories literally build each other. Characterizing Lugones' position, for example, Garry writes:

“Systems of oppression, namely, colonial/modern power and the colonial/ modern gender system (along with heterosexualism, racial classification/ oppression, and

¹⁸ This sort of relationship seems particularly suited for capturing the relationship between disability status and gender. A common complaint among those who are visibly disabled is that they are not viewed as appropriate objects of sexual attraction. Dennis Whitcomb (private correspondence) notes that this idea is very similar to organic unity.

capitalism), **literally constitute each other** and cannot be understood apart from each other.” (p. 2011) (Emphasis added)

Of her own view, Garry writes:

“I say that gender oppression works through and is shaped by racism, classism, or heterosexualism. **Mutual construction** seems to be a good way to state their relations in many circumstances.” (ibid, emphasis added)

The weak formulation of inseparability as mere interaction would exclude many intersectional theories from the label. For obvious reasons, this is not a desirable result.

A second, stronger option is to view inseparability as a kind of *explanatory unity* of the intersectional category. Explanatory unity, roughly, is the explanatory inextricability of one category from another within an intersectional category. On this view, not only is a unified entity more explanatorily powerful than its constituents, but the unity is required to garner the correct explanations. Explanatory unity captures the central thrust of intersectionality—that social categories intermingle in meaningful, important ways—while avoiding the problems of conceptual inseparability, modal inseparability, and social category interaction. To some extent, the literature already treats intersectional categories as internally explanatorily unified. The best explanation of norms governing hair on black women, for example, stems from norms governing the behavior and appearance of black women as a single, unified category. This also holds true for social phenomena such as black toxic masculinity, Jewish womanhood, and white cisgenderhood, all of which are more suited to explanation-backing as unities than their individual constituents stuck together. As I will argue shortly, explanatory unity also comports with a systematic metaphysics of intersectionality.

Before turning to this topic in detail, a recap will be helpful. I began by examining the nature of the inseparability of social categories, the claim at the heart of intersectionality. This sort of inseparability, I claimed, cannot be modal or conceptual. I proposed two competing pictures of the relationship between social categories: a *destruction* conception, according to which constituent social categories do not survive their subsumption into intersectional categories; and the *intact category* conception, according to which social categories remain intact while subsumed into intersectional categories. I further proposed two different ways to understand inseparability under the

intact category conception. One way weakens inseparability to mere interaction. The other way views inseparability as a kind of explanatory unity. The latter, I will now claim, meshes well with a more general view of intersectionality as explanatory priority.

3. Intersectionality as Metaphysical and Explanatory Priority of the Whole over the Parts

Thus far, I have largely focused on the relationship between social categories subsumed under intersectional categories, or what might be thought of as the same-level relationship between social categories. I turn now to a different issue: what is the metaphysical nature of the interlevel relationship between constituting categories and the intersectional categories that they make up? For example, what is the relationship between the individual categories *black* and *woman* and the intersectional category *black woman*?

My positive answer to this question has two parts. First, I hold that intersectionality can be fruitfully understood as a kind of *ontological priority* of the intersectional whole over the parts.¹⁹ This view is akin to Schafferian priority monism about categories, according to which the whole is metaphysically prior to its parts.²⁰ The framework of metaphysical priority is particularly well suited to the idea that the conjunction of same-level social categories are more than mere aggregates. On the idea of the priority of the whole over its parts, Schaffer (2010) writes:

“I think common sense distinguishes mere aggregates from integrated wholes [...] Common sense probably does endorse the priority of the parts in cases of mere aggregation, such as with the heap. Yet common sense probably endorses the priority of the whole in cases of integrated wholes [...] Thus consider the circle and its semicircles (or even more gerrymandered divisions of the circle). Intuitively, the circle seems prior—the semicircles represent an arbitrary partition on the circle.” (2010, p. 11)

Viewing the intersectional category as more fundamental than its constituents does justice to the idea that intersectional categories are more than mere aggregates, without resorting to the metaphysical unclarity and internal instability of other sorts of

¹⁹ Note that this is slightly different than more general forms of social construction. For a recent account of social construction, see Díaz-León (2015).

²⁰ Indeed Schaffer (2017) himself views social construction as a kind of grounding.

“something over and above” ontologies, including nonreductionism and emergentism.²¹

Second, intersectional categories are *explanatorily prior* to their constituents. As a first pass, A is explanatorily prior to B if B is partially explained in terms of A, but not vice versa. To draw on an example from mereology: parts are often viewed as explanatorily prior to the wholes that they compose. The direction of explanatory priority is often seen to run from makers to makees, lower-level things to higher-level things, and finer-grained to coarser-grained features. The parts of the bike explain the bike; the micro-level objects explain the macro-level objects; the property *being a scarlet ball* explains *being a red ball*. Relevant for the present discussion is that conjuncts are most often viewed as explaining their conjunctions: the fact that I am tall and the fact that I am curly-haired explain the fact that I am a tall, curly-haired person.

My central claim is the opposite: intersectional categories are explanatorily prior to their constituents. Rather than the conjuncts explaining the conjunction, the conjunction explains the conjuncts. 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.

The view seems counterintuitive at first: shouldn't it be the other way around? There is a temptation to explain black womanhood by explaining blackness and womanhood, not vice versa.

But granting metaphysical and explanatory primacy to the unified category provides the best metaphysical model of intersectionality. 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. Membership in the intersectional category results in specific experiences and forms of oppression distinct from those faced by individual categories.

Further, individual identity constituents can be better understood by appealing to the intersectional category.²² Racist norms surrounding black women's hair, for example,

²¹ For a view of intersectionality as emergent, see Marta Jorba and Maria Rodó de Zárata (forthcoming).

²² Taking intersectional categories to be the most fundamental gives rise to a natural objection: are 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? Not necessarily.

provide information about social norms for blacks and for women. Issues surrounding norms of behavior for Hispanic gay couples looking to adopt currently reflect prevailing heteronormative values and white values. Issues surrounding the wearing of the hijab by Muslim women reflect norms about women and about Muslims. Intersectional categories are mirrors of their constituents.

Viewing intersectionality as metaphysical and explanatory priority of the intersectional category over its parts has several additional virtues. First, such a view comports with meaning and usage of social categories in real intersectional communities. The term “misogynoir”, coined by Moya Bailey to describe specific kinds of misogyny aimed at black women in popular culture, illustrates the explanatory priority of black womanhood over blackness and womanhood. On coining the term, Bailey explains:

“I was looking for precise language to describe why Renisha McBride would be shot in the face, or why the Onion would think it’s okay to talk about Quvenzhané the way they did, or the hypervisibility of black women on reality TV, the arrest of Shanisha Taylor, the incarceration of CeCe, Laverne and Lupita being left off the TIME list, the continued legal actions against Marissa Alexander, the twitter dragging of black women with hateful hashtags and supposedly funny instagram images as well as how black women are talked about in music. **All these things bring to mind misogynoir and not general misogyny directed at women of color more broadly.**” (Bailey, 2014) (emphasis added)

The idea here is that there is a very specific kind of racialized misogyny leveled at black women in popular culture distinct even from racialized misogyny more generally. A derivative term *transmisogynoir*, the particular sort of oppression aimed at trans black women, originates in “misogynoir”.²³ Other examples abound. Of trans women, Bettcher (2013) writes:

“It is a fact that in some trans community contexts, the meanings of gender terms (such as “woman”) are altered and their extensions broadened [...] “**Trans woman**” is taken as a basic expression, not as a qualification of the dominant meaning of “woman”. [...] When I say that “trans woman” is basic I mean that it does not route through the question of whether “woman” applies or not; that is, the criteria for the correct application of “trans woman” do not depend on the criteria governing the application of “woman.” (2013, pp. 240-241) (emphasis

Increase in a social category’s specificity does not always correspond to an increase in explanatory power. 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.

²³ Following Manne (2017), I take misogyny to refer to the "enforcement wing" of patriarchal oppression, and misogynoir to refer to the enforcement wing of racialized sexist oppression.

added)

In trans communities, “trans woman” is often viewed as a metaphysically basic category rather than a modification of womanhood. Finally, the prominent black lesbian writer Audre Lorde explains the necessity of viewing her identity as a holistic, explanatorily fundamental whole rather than separable parts:

“As a black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this a destructive and fragmenting way to live. **My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all of my different selves**, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as a part of my living. (2007, p. 121) (emphasis added)

And finally, feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa conceives of an integrated whole, split only by labels:

“Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man’s world, the women’s, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web. Who, me, confused? Ambivalent? Not so. **Only your labels split me.**” (1983, p. 205) (emphasis added)

These and similar examples suggest that the metaphysical frame of explanatory priority does justice to real-life uses of intersectionality.

Intersectionality as explanatory priority permits neutrality on the comparative fundamentality of identity constituents. Academic sociology, psychology, and gender studies have seen decades-long debates over whether race, sex, gender, or class are more fundamental than each other.²⁴ Some sociologists, for example, view race as being the most fundamental predictor of socioeconomic class, and thus more fundamental than biological sex or gender.²⁵ Others view sex and gender as being more fundamental to human experience than race. Still others hold that socioeconomic class is the most explanatorily and narratively powerful feature of human lives. A benefit of taking the

²⁴ Dotson (2016) argues against the fundamentality assumption on methodological and practical grounds.

²⁵ For example, see Wilkinson (1995).

intersectional category to be the most fundamental is that one need not view one identity constituent as more fundamental than the other: the best explanation is the unified category rather than its constituents. Such a view has theoretical virtues not only as a philosophical position, but also as an intellectual and empirical approach to social categories more generally.

4. Conclusion

This paper has offered a metaphysical theory of intersectionality, paying special attention to the contours and uses of the concept in the prevailing literature. Understanding interlevel and intralevel metaphysical relationships between social categories sheds new light on lived experiences of those who fall into multiple minority social categories. Modelling intersectionality with metaphysics enriches our understanding of the phenomenon, and of the metaphysics and explanation of interlocking systems of oppression more broadly. While I hope to have convinced the reader of the strength of my particular position, I hope even more to have laid the groundwork for a metaphysical approach more generally.

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