



A defence of the category 'women'

Lena Gunnarsson

Örebro University, Sweden

Feminist Theory

12(1) 23–37

© The Author(s) 2011

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1464700110390604

fty.sagepub.com



Abstract

Against influential strands of feminist theory, I argue that there is nothing essentialist or homogenising about the category 'women'. I show that both intersectional claims that it is impossible to separate out the 'woman part' of women, and deconstructionist contentions that the category 'women' is a fiction, rest on untenable meta-theoretical assumptions. I posit that a more fruitful way of approaching this disputed category is to treat it as an abstraction. Drawing on the philosophical framework of critical realism I elucidate the nature of the vital and inevitable process of abstraction, as a means of finding a way out of the theoretical and methodological impasse that the 'ban' on the category 'women' has caused. Contrary to many contemporary feminist theorists, I contend that, although the category 'women' does not reflect the whole reality of concrete and particular women, it nevertheless refers to something real, namely the structural position as woman.

Keywords

abstraction, Judith Butler, critical realism, essentialism, intersectionality, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, social structure, 'women'

In the closing session of a recent feminist conference,¹ the moderator asked about what it is about feminist theory that makes it *feminist*. One of the conference participants offered an elaborate answer, without ever mentioning the words 'women' or 'men' or anything representing specifically gendered relations. Instead, the fabric of the answer was general assumptions about power and resistance. Slightly disturbed, yet not very surprised by this, I asked what made this answer apply specifically to *feminist* theory, when actually it could pertain to all theoretical frameworks somehow occupied with issues of power and resistance.

Corresponding author:

Lena Gunnarsson, School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, 701 82 Örebro, Sweden

Email: lena.gunnarsson@oru.se

Interestingly enough, my question seemed to take the individual by surprise, who then answered that he ‘had not thought about that’.

How can this be? Is it not the very point of departure of feminist theorising that women are oppressed/exploited/discriminated/excluded *by virtue of their being women*? And is it not the case, as Iris Marion Young states, that ‘without some sense in which “woman” is the name of a social collective, there is nothing specific about feminist politics’ (1994: 714), nor about feminist theory? For any feminist theorist before the deconstructionist turn, the answer to these questions would indisputably be in the affirmative. However, my opening anecdote shows that within contemporary feminist academia there is no unanimity about this question; on the contrary, the stigmatisation of the category ‘women’ has become such a taken-for-granted element in feminist discussions that the conference participant who excluded ‘women’ from his feminist vocabulary had never even been compelled to reflect upon the tensions such an exclusion implies, until confronted by my rather basic question. Another illustration of this taken-for-grantedness is the way that Clare Hemmings defends the feminists of the 1970s against the charge of essentialism, by invoking that they too ‘challeng[ed] “woman” as the ground for feminist politics and knowledge production’ (2005: 116). This cognitive structure, wherein intrinsic links are held to exist between essentialism and appeals to the category ‘woman’/‘women’, helps explain why I felt somewhat awkward about posing my unanticipated question in the conference plenary. ‘Women’, as Susan Gubar states, has become ‘an invalid word’ (1998: 886).

As I agree with Young that the category ‘women’ is absolutely indispensable to the feminist project, in this article I lay bare some conceptual confusions underpinning the widespread tendency to write it off. I show that the category ‘women’ is vital since it relates to something real, and that this statement implies neither essentialism nor homogenisation. Firstly, I examine the characteristic ways that feminist theorists have influentially argued against the use of ‘women’ as a category of analysis on the grounds that it implies ethnocentrism, essentialism et cetera. I scrutinize the meta-theoretical assumptions underpinning these arguments, which can be said to emerge from specific versions of what I call the *intersectional* and *constructionist* paradigms. The theorists I examine do not reject the category ‘women’ in any wholehearted way, but acknowledge the analytical and political problems implied by such a rejection. Prescribing parodic (Butler, 1999) or strategic (Spivak, 2006) uses of identity categories like ‘women’ are solutions that have been offered to the dilemma produced by this acknowledgement. Still, what remains throughout all these ambivalences is a deep scepticism against any positive (as opposed to deconstructive) theoretical validity, not to say *realness* of the category ‘women’. It is this scepticism that I confront by demonstrating that it rests on implicit meta-theoretical premises that are highly disputable. Secondly, informed by the philosophical framework of critical realism, I present an argument about how we can think about the category ‘women’ in more fruitful and consistent ways. In this endeavour the method of abstraction plays a crucial role.

The intersectional challenge: Women are not only women

Intersectionality is a theoretical perspective, method and concept that has recently gained an immense influence among feminist theorists (see Davis, 2008; Lykke, 2007; McCall, 2005; Zack, 2005). It refers to the intersection of different social relations in every concrete subject, so that studying gender through an intersectional lens means emphasising that women are not only women, but also black, white, rich, poor, heterosexual, homosexual, etc. I here use the term in an unusually broad sense so as to include postcolonial feminism and black feminism, the common denominator being that they all highlight the complexities stemming from women's different positioning in power relations other than gender. Although theoretical attention to people's multiple positioning might seem a rather unspectacular undertaking, intersectionality has, as Kathy Davis puts it, 'been heralded as one of the most important contributions to feminist scholarship', even as 'a feminist success story' (2008: 67). What is it about intersectionality and its propagation that rendered/renders it such an allegedly indispensable *challenge* to other feminist perspectives? I will show that, while intersectionality in its most basic terms does not need to define itself against feminist theory in a more traditional sense, the intersectionality paradigm as a whole harbours two moves, one rhetorical and one theoretical, which largely account for its pioneer status.

The background of the rhetorical move is that intersectional feminism emerged out of a disappointment among feminist women of colour with what they saw as ethnocentric and homogenising modes of feminist thinking about women. Non-white and non-Western feminist scholars (see, for example, Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981; Mohanty, 1988, 2003) brought to light that, contrary to what many feminist theorists seemed to believe, unless other power relations than gender are taken into account some women's experiences will be invalidated and power relations among women made invisible. It was, for example, emphasised that for women who do not enjoy racial and class-based privileges, womanhood was not necessarily the most salient factor of oppression, and that ways of referring to 'women' and 'blacks' actually tended to include only white women and black men respectively, while ignoring the specific experience of black women (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981; McCall, 2005; Spelman, 1990). As well as calling attention to these modes of neglecting the specificities of non-white women's lives, intersectional feminists also pointed to modes of distortion, wherein non-white and non-Western women tend to be represented as a homogenised whole, defined as the victimised Other (e.g. Mohanty, 1988, 2003).

This scrutiny of assumptions about 'women's experiences' has been crucial to the project of revealing ethnocentric biases and generally simplifying tendencies. Many feminist theorists, indeed, have made untenable generalisations about what it means to be a woman, obscuring the complexity and diversity caused not only by women's different positions in racial, class and sexual relations, but by the multi-levelledness of power and being itself. However, these legitimate grounds for criticism aside, the sharp dichotomy between a universalising before and an intersectional after has been questioned by, for example, Davis, who emphasises

that Kimberlé Crenshaw, known for having introduced the concept of intersectionality, 'was by no means the first to address the issue of how black women's experiences have been marginalised and distorted within feminist discourse. Nor was she making a particularly new argument when she claimed that their experiences had to be understood as multiply shaped by race and gender' (2008: 72–73). For example, in 1977 the black US feminist lesbian group Combahee River Collective gave out their influential manifesto making the case for a feminist analysis including issues of race, class, and sexuality along with gender.

Much of the rhetorical force of intersectional arguments has come to depend upon caricature-like representations of 'earlier', 'Western' or 'hegemonic' feminist theories. For example, although Chandra Talpade Mohanty, widely praised for her seminal work on Western feminists' ethnocentric intellectual practices, does seek to qualify her use of the term 'Western feminism' – a term she repeatedly invokes as the subject guilty of homogenisation and objectification of non-Western women (2003: 18) – the end result is nevertheless that 'Western feminism' appears as much a homogeneous entity in her account as the 'Third World women' in the writings she confronts. Anna G. Jónasdóttir and Kathleen B. Jones point to the tendency among poststructuralist feminists to simplify and obscure the theoretical past in order to make their own argument appear as 'a necessary remedy' (2009: 34) and, in a similar vein, Hemmings highlights the frequent mode of unreflectedly contrasting oneself against the 'naïve, essentialist seventies' (2005: 116). Perhaps Leslie McCall is right when stating that 'the social construction of all new knowledge tends to have a particular structure to it. In this structure the development of a new field is celebrated on the tomb of the old' (2005: 1783–1784). The framing of intersectional feminism as a fundamental challenge to other kinds of feminism is partially due to the rhetorical strategy of contrasting oneself against 'invented targets', to borrow Andrew Sayer's expression (2000: 68).

Besides this rhetorical element, there are also theoretical tendencies accounting for the sometimes antithetical relation between intersectional and 'regular' feminism. McCall highlights that intersectionality can be based on different meta-theoretical assumptions, ranging from simple attention to the complex interplay between different axes of power (Crenshaw, 1991) to more radical perspectives 'that completely reject the separability of analytical and identity categories' (McCall, 2005: 1771). In the most elaborate versions of the latter approach, which McCall labels 'anticategorical', the rejection of the category 'women' comes logically from the general theoretical framework that denies categories any analytical validity by virtue of their empirical inseparability. It is this version of intersectionality that I take issue with here. Judith Butler summarizes the foundational principles of this approach, when stating that 'because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities... it becomes impossible to separate out "gender"' (1999: 6). Although this way of arguing may seem plausible at first sight, it suffers from self-contradiction. As Jónasdóttir and Jones highlight, Butler's statement that 'gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities' becomes absurd if it

is impossible to distinguish gender analytically from other categories, 'since intersection logically implies the coming together of "parts" that are conceptually distinct from each other in some identifiable way' (2009: 41).

Some anticategorical feminists like Wendy Brown are aware of this contradiction and, in the name of consistency, sceptical of the concept of intersectionality itself. Few wish, however, to completely reject concepts like race, class and gender: the awareness of the dangers of individualism and voluntarism is too strong. Brown is concerned to find ways of theoretically recognising that power relations, like race, gender and class are different in kind and that therefore they must be attributed some kind of separate analytical existence. However, she does not embrace this need for analytical distinctions and make it an integral part of her theoretical framework. Instead, the necessity of distinction, albeit recognised, is conceived as fundamentally at odds with the fact that 'we are not fabricated as subjects in discrete units by these various powers: they do not operate on and through us independently, or linearly, or cumulatively [and] are not separable in the subject itself' (1997: 86). For Brown, the need for categorisations on the one hand, and the empirical inseparability of categories on the other, seems to be a theoretical enigma that she can only think of in terms of a 'paradoxical moment' (1997: 93).

Elizabeth Spelman also displays a largely unresolved ambivalence about her generally disapproving approach to categorisations. She concedes that she has no trouble sorting herself out as woman *and* white. 'What gender are you?' and 'What race are you?' 'appear to be two separate questions, which I can answer separately' (1990: 133). However, like Brown, she feels a need to emphasise that there are no 'discrete units' (Brown, 1997: 86) of gender, race et cetera; Spelman is careful to stress that it is impossible to distinguish the 'woman part' from the 'white part' of herself.

If there is a 'woman part' of me, it doesn't seem to be the kind of thing I could point to – not because etiquette demands that nice people don't point to their private or covered parts, but because even if I broke a social rule and did so, nothing I might point to would meet the requirements of being a 'part' of me that was a 'woman part' that was not also a 'white part.' Any part of my body is part of a body that is, by prevailing criteria, female and white. (1990: 133–134)

In Brown's and Spelman's theoretical universes, the possibility of thinking about women *as women* is conditioned on the possibility of pointing out specific 'women parts' or 'units' – that is, we must be able to separate out the 'womanness' on the concrete level of existence. However, if we distance ourselves from an empiricist fixation with physical appearances and directly accessible entities, we can avoid being caught by irresolvable paradoxical moments.

Before outlining how we can think of 'womanness' in other terms than an empirical entity, I want to call attention to a somewhat different mode of dismissing the category 'women' than the one offered by proponents of the anticategorical approach. Mohanty, for example, explicitly distances herself from

postmodernist approaches that fail to take into account the structural reality of the power relations which categories represent. Still, she sees the specific category 'women' as inherently problematic, asserting that '[t]he phrase "women as a category of analysis" refers to the crucial assumption that all women, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a *homogeneous* group' (2003: 22; emphasis added). This, indeed, is a radical contention, which would need an elaborate theoretical justification, since the awareness that women are different far from necessitates a rejection of 'women' as an analytical category. Sayer reminds us that the search for commonalities actually presupposes diversity, which in turn becomes meaningful only from the perspective of some kind of sameness. He points out that '[t]he nature of the difference between various groups of people is more interesting than the difference between people and toothpaste partly because the former have some things in common' (1997: 457). Developing this point in relation to gender, Naomi Zack emphasizes that 'commonality . . . does not ignore or suppress differences because it is the basis on which difference exists, and what we implicitly refer to whenever we say that women are different' (2005: 9). We must question the very dualism between sameness and difference that rejections of commonality are so often premised upon.²

Mohanty does not offer any theoretical defence of her categorical dismissal of 'women' as a category of analysis, considering it enough to show that some feminists have used the category in homogenising ways. It is my contention that this kind of slide is indicative of a lot of contemporary feminist scepticism towards talking about 'women'. Mohanty has no problem invoking other categories as highly meaningful analytical devices; notably, she addresses the 'common social identity of Third World women workers' (2003: 163). Might not the category 'Third World women workers', just as much as 'women', be deemed inherently homogenising according to the theoretical standards she applies to dismiss the latter? After all, differences related to, for example, sexuality and nationality risk being made invisible when the women are categorised in these terms. Ann Ferguson is critical of how Mohanty's discriminatory way of dealing with categories gives analytical (and political) priority to work-related structures while neglecting the more gender-specific 'sex-affective relations' (2011: 248). Similarly, Nina Lykke notes that some intersectional feminists are 'so absorbed by feminist-bashing' and by questioning the 'primacy of gender' that they tend to emphasise class and race at the cost of gender (2007: 138).³ This kind of discriminatory anticategoricalism, in which the category 'women' has become something of a particular minefield, can only be understood in the light of the rhetorical tendencies highlighted above.

The constructedness of women/'women'

The assumption that gender is socially constructed is an all-pervasive fundament of feminist theory and gender studies, although there is no consensus as to *how* gender is socially constructed or whether there is any pre-social ground at all for the process of construction. For example, Carrie Hull (2006) and Caroline

New (2005) emphasise that there is a fundamental biological base to sexual difference, while theorists like Butler (1993, 1999) and Judith Halberstam (1994) view such biological conceptions as themselves altogether discursive constructions. Disagreements aside, the assumption that gendered relations and identities are historical/social products rather than universal or 'natural' givens constitutes a necessary condition for occupying the feminist philosophical position. The important point, though, is that whether one believes that a world without sex/gender is possible or not, it is still a fact that women and men exist as categories pervasively structuring the world.

In the theoretical landscape of queer-oriented feminists like Butler, the notion that gender is constructed entails that it is a *fiction*. Butler asserts that, since there is no 'univocity of sex' or 'internal coherence of gender', these are 'regulatory fictions' (1999: 43–44).⁴ Furthermore, she holds the category 'women' to be fictive and arbitrary on the grounds that it is not 'a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and present' (1999: 6), that there is no 'substance' of gendered identities (1999: 25), and that 'a good ten percent of the population has chromosomal variations that do not fit neatly into the XX-female and XY-male set of categories' (1999: 137). In addition to implying that some unnamed other feminists consider 'women' to be a stable signifier and gender identities to have a substance, Butler also makes some presuppositions about what can be considered to be real and about what categories are for. Reality can only be conceived of in terms of coherent substances, and categories are held to be valid only if they reflect concrete reality in all its singularities. Jónasdóttir and Jones rightly contend that Butler 'conflates feminists' efforts to formulate concepts of gender and complex theories of gender systems' (2009: 39) with the 'development of a language that fully or adequately represented women' (Butler, 1999: 4).⁵

Sayer has coined the term 'pomo flip' to describe this phenomenon in which theorists, in their efforts to break with positivist and empiricist assumptions, tend to invert the theoretical structure and thereby 'retain...the problematic structures which generated the problem in the first place' (2000: 67). Hull similarly highlights the continuities between poststructuralism and positivism, to the extent that they both tend to presuppose that 'theories are verified only when 100 percent accurate predictions of empirical events can be obtained, and categories or kinds are considered legitimate only when every individual within them is identical' (2006: 87). The radicality of the insight that gender is socially constructed lies exactly in the element that our experiences as women, men, transsexuals and queers, *although real*, are not pre-given, static entities but products of historically determined human activity and thus subject to change. The radicality does not lie in *refuting* the reality of that which is socially constructed; that only retains the positivist assumptions of what reality is, assumptions that feminists have found crucial to dismiss since gendered power structures could not possibly be proved to exist according to such standards. Although gender categories are socially constructed, they are not mere nominal categories only arbitrarily related to

the world. Women and men may be social constructs, but nevertheless, as Jónasdóttir puts it, 'women and men *are* the kinds of people they are, *historically*, at present' (1994: 220; emphasis in original). Feminists have long been aware of the political dilemma constituted by the fact that when we invoke the word 'women' in order to describe, explain and challenge gendered power, this also risks reproducing patriarchal notions of the significance of sexual difference. But instead of seeking to erase this contradiction by simplified emphasis on one of its poles, we should seek to develop theoretical frameworks that can contain it – because the dilemma is real and must therefore be lived through and solved through practical struggle.

Butler and her followers have carried out an important task in highlighting how the very subjects that we struggle to liberate are themselves products of relations of power sustained by certain signifying systems that make some identities intelligible at the expense of others. The ways that we use categories like 'women' and 'men', 'feminine' and masculine' will never be innocent but part of determining how possibilities and vulnerabilities are distributed in the world. However, gendered identities cannot be reduced to the signifying processes through which they are produced, even if we see them as produced entirely through such signifying processes. However produced they may be, as products they possess a relative stability, autonomy and causal efficacy of their own. It is in this sense that gender categories are not only conceptual in character but also real groupings in the world. The crucial import of this is that not only do symbolic gender categories structure our perception of human beings; also, the real groupings of women and men act back upon our systems of meaning so that these categories are necessary if we are to make sense of – and effectively change – the world.

Butler and others have acknowledged the political problems that their philosophical framework can cause. What, after all, as Linda Martín Alcoff puts it, 'can we demand in the name of women if "women" do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do?' (2006: 143). Strategic essentialism has been suggested as a way of enabling political claims in the name of groups, with the ontological existence of such groups nevertheless interrogated (Spivak, 2006). Butler, for her part, emphasises that '[although] "gender" only exists in the service of heterosexism, [that] does not entail that we ought never make use of such terms... On the contrary, precisely because such terms have been produced and constrained within such regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims' (1993: 123). However, so long as women and men are denied an unequivocally *real* existence, we will have neither reliable nor credible criteria for judging when it is appropriate and strategic to invoke their names and not. As Alcoff argues, 'a claim can only be taken seriously – and thus have its strategic effect – when it is taken as truth in a real and not merely strategic sense' (2001: 323). In the following I draw on the philosophical framework of critical realism⁶ in order to show how we might think of the category 'women' as real without the implications of essentialism, homogenisation or ethnocentrism.

The concrete and the abstract

Sayer, a critical realist sociologist, notes that, in popular usage, the adjective 'abstract' often refers to something vague, esoteric and 'removed from reality' (1992: 87). However, besides being essential to theoretical activity in the qualified sense, abstractions are actually an inevitable part of our most mundane dealings with the everyday world. What, then, is an abstraction? It may be illuminating to have a close look at a passage in Spelman's *Inessential Woman*. Aimed at revealing the absurdity of talking about women simply as women, Spelman invokes a line by the American author Gwendolyn Brooks: 'The juice from tomatoes is not called merely *juice*. It is always called *tomato juice*' (cited in Spelman, 1990: 186; emphasis in the original). Now, little effort is needed to disqualify this statement, for it is certainly not the case that we always call tomato juice 'tomato juice'. Sometimes – and appropriately so – we call it 'juice', sometimes 'drink', and occasionally even 'liquid'. One might also hold that it is utterly important to distinguish between a branded and boxed tomato juice and freshly-made tomato juice, arguing that subsuming these under the same category would be a serious simplification of reality. The simple truth is that all these words are valid ways of calling attention to the qualities of the concrete object 'tomato juice', but that they all operate on different levels of abstraction, which place the tomato juice in different categories. As Bertell Ollman puts it, abstraction operates 'like a microscope that can be set at different degrees of magnification' (2001: 292). Which level of abstraction we choose depends on which aspect of reality we wish to call attention to, in turn depending on the reasons for the calling of this attention.⁷

Neither in everyday life nor in scientific practice can the truth about something be simply translated into one concept or the other, for our conceptualisations are always determined by the problem that made us approach a thing in the first place. As Ollman emphasises, 'it is essential, in order to understand any particular problem, to abstract to a level of generality that brings the characteristics chiefly responsible for the problem into focus' (2001: 293). If we want to explain, for example, a person's experience of discrimination, we normally do not draw attention to the fact that the discriminated person is a mammal or a Libra, while the fact that she is a woman and an immigrant will probably be held to be more significant. This judgement depends on our theories – academic or intuitive, explicit or implicit – about the nature of zoological, astrological, gendered and racial structures, which operate relatively autonomously from each other in spite of their unification in the specific person and situation at hand.

The word 'concrete' stems from the Latin *concreescere*, meaning 'grow together'. Sayer notes that this etymology 'draws attention to the fact that objects are usually constituted by a combination of diverse elements or forces' (1992: 87). Karl Marx puts it in a similar way: '[t]he concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity in the diverse' (1993: 101). The term 'abstract', for its part, originates from the Latin *abstrahere*, meaning 'draw away', referring to the activity of 'drawing away' certain aspects from the concrete whole. As Sayer puts it: 'an abstract concept, or an abstraction, isolates in thought a one-sided or

partial aspect of an object. What we abstract from are the many other aspects which together constitute concrete objects such as people, economics, nations, institutions, activities and so on' (1992: 87). If tomato juice is a composite matter, people are even more complex, not the least since they have the capacity to reflect upon and change the conditions of their own being. However, recognising that people are continuously constituted by a range of diverse determinations, which themselves constantly change and which people's self-reflective agency can counteract, is not valid grounds for disqualifying efforts to sort out these determinations. We can talk about 'women' without thereby assuming that 'women' is the only thing that these persons are, or that 'woman' is a fixed category. By its very definition, the method of abstracting presumes that the concrete totality from which one abstracts is not exhausted by the abstracted element. Berth Danermark et al. emphasise that 'abstractions are not there in order to *cover* complexity and variation in life; they are there in order to *deal* with just that' (2002: 42; emphasis in original).

If we acknowledge that abstract concepts, such as 'women', are qualitatively different from lived reality, we can seek to use them effectively without any expectation that they will correspond to this lived reality in any clear-cut sense. As Sayer (1992) stresses, abstractions are not problematic as such; the danger lies in making false abstractions (such as 'woman is goodness') or in not taking abstractions for what they are (that is, treating them as if they gave a total picture). Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) points out the crucial fact that differences between people cannot be understood simply as a matter of identity, since they are based in social structures which are autonomous from each other and reside on a level distinct from that of our concrete embodiment and experience. Spelman and Brown are right that there are no discrete racial, gender and class parts at the level of concrete identity; nevertheless, the structures of race, gender and class have distinct existences in so far as they exercise their causal force on our lives in ways relatively independent from each other. One of the great merits of abstraction is that it is an indispensable tool for identifying structures of this kind. Indeed, we can obtain knowledge of structures only in so far as we experience their effects on an empirical level. Yet, the intellectual recognition of a gender-specific power structure was not based on any kind of straightforward discovery of an empirical entity called patriarchy, but on the creative development of new modes of abstracting certain invisible but pervasive features from the concrete reality that we could measure, observe and feel. No matter how different women's lives were, what feminists put their fingers on was that there was something quite disadvantageous about all women's lives and that this something had to do with their being women.

Structures, positions and people

If womanhood is typically thought of as a reified property contained in each female individual, the tools of critical realism allow for a radically different understanding. According to the critical realist perspective, people exist only by virtue of the

relations and forces that constitute them, through the medium of structural positions. For Douglas Porpora, '[s]ocial structures are systems of human relationships among social positions which shape certain structured interests, resources, powers, constraints and predicaments that are built into each position by the web of relationships and which comprise the material circumstances in which people must act and which motivate them to act in certain ways' (1998: 343–344). Because of their enabling, constraining and motivating power, our structural positions make us able and inclined to act in specific ways and likely to suffer certain things. The position as woman will make its occupant apt to act in ways commonly understood as feminine and experience things that males do not tend to experience. She will tend to earn less than her male colleagues, since those who decide her wages are in positions motivating them to discriminate against women, and in order to promote her short-term interests she will be motivated to dress in feminine clothes. Breaking with these structural tendencies is likely to cause suffering in the short run (Porpora, 1998).

However, and importantly, people's actions and experiences are not pre-determined by or reducible to the tendencies inherent in their positions. Thus, stating that women share a common position as women is not the same as maintaining that women are the same. The reason is twofold. Firstly, people have a certain amount of freedom vis-à-vis their positions in virtue of their reflexivity: 'we can interpret the same material conditions and statements in different ways and hence learn new ways of responding, so that effectively we become different kinds of people' (Sayer, 1992: 123). This is what makes it possible for us to act back upon and change the constellation of relations of which we are made up. Secondly, as intersectional theorists point out, women and men as concrete individuals are never simply women and men. We exist only by virtue of our positions in an array of overlapping structures on different levels of reality. It is through these multiple determinations that we become unique and complex individuals. The important and simple point that I want to make is that this multiple positioning is not the same as no positioning. Although women and men are more than women and men, they are still women and men.⁸

Conceptualising women as those who occupy the *position* as woman is thus very different from reifying, homogenising and essentialising accounts of women. From this perspective, instead, '[t]o speak of what women and men are is... actually to speak about the social conditions in and on which they act. Thus, the attempt to conceptualise what women and men are does not necessarily imply any kind of mysterious essentialism or biological reductionism' (Jónasdóttir, 1994: 220). It is crucial to note, however, that although the identity and experience of a woman cannot be reduced to her position as woman, the relation between the gendered position and its occupant is not one of disconnection and arbitrariness, as Mohanty suggests (2003: 19). The womanhood or 'womanness' emerging from the position as woman is a real feature of women, whether they wish it or not. This is because people are what they are by virtue of the assembly of relations – biological, economic, cultural – that constitute them. In this sense, as put by Mikael Carleheden,

'[t]o find one's identity is to be able to relate to one's historical situatedness' (2003: 57). Although I have not chosen my position as woman, I can only be the one I am by means of this position (amongst others). This is why it is so problematic not to recognise the reality of women's 'womanness', however much we disapprove politically of the gendered structure by virtue of which we emerge as women. Through collective struggle we may be able to change the very structure of which our position as women is part, but without a category that can take this positioning into account, such a struggle will not be possible. The problem with the poststructuralist tendency to downplay the realness of 'women' as collective category is that it rules out conceptualisations of the material relation between a woman's life and her structural gender position. As opposed to Mohanty, who distinguishes between "'women" as a *discursively* constructed group and "women" as *material* subjects of their own history' (2003: 22–23; emphasis added), from the critical realist point of view the group of women has just as material an existence as individual women, in so far as the people belonging to the group are intrinsically tied to a common position in a materially (and discursively) constituted gender structure.

Conclusion

As many intersectional feminists have pointed out, understanding the life of a particular person is not a mechanical matter of 'adding' the 'contents' of the different positions that constitute her. Theorising is a messy and never clear-cut project, taking place in the dialectic between the concrete and the abstract, the subjective and the objective, the specific and the general, and not the least between the fundamentally processual character of concrete reality and the irredeemably static quality of the words and signs which we employ to understand and explain it. We can never single out gender from, for example, race and class in any neat and absolute way, since these structures are in constant transformation and only *relatively* autonomous from each other. Gender is not a global monolith, but must be studied and theorised in all its local variations. Nevertheless, it is possible to think of women as a group on a global level, because although the gender structure looks different in different locations, it possesses so much internal coherence so as to deserve to be thought of as one (differentiated) whole.⁹ As Jónasdóttir puts it, women's commonality has to be thought of as very 'thin' and cannot be transferred to the empirical level in any direct sense. This thin commonality implies neither a common experience nor a unified struggle, but it entails 'a common *basis* for experience and thus a common *basis* for struggle' (1994: 41; emphasis added). The reason why it would be fatal to leave 'women' behind as a feminist category of analysis is that we need it to denote women's specific relation to a gender structure the properties of which we may only then struggle to define. We should, indeed, continue to deconstruct deterministic and essentialist notions of what it means to be man or woman, but such negative relating to gendered categories can never be exhaustive of feminist theorising.

Notes

1. *Gender, Sexuality, and Global Change*, Conference of Workshops arranged by GEXcel Centre of Gender EXcellence, Örebro University, Sweden, 22–25 May 2008.
2. While my focus here is the tendency to emphasize difference at the cost of similarity, Carolyn Pedwell draws attention to the equally questionable ‘temptation to substitute problematic “difference” with problematic “sameness”’ (2008: 91) which is at work in some feminists’ cross-cultural comparisons between, for example, female genital cutting and cosmetic surgery.
3. My translation.
4. Butler makes no distinction between sex and gender, since she refutes the claim that there is a biological reality relatively autonomous from discourse.
5. Jónasdóttir and Jones also point out how poststructuralist rhetoric uses ‘a politically charged language to establish that feminist theoretical concepts were not only analytic heuristics but also were ideologically constructed ontological categories defining an “essential” being of woman/women’ (2009: 34).
6. Critical realism is a philosophical framework, developed by Roy Bhaskar, which is critical of both positivism and postmodernism. One of its crucial tenets is the distinction between ontological and epistemological questions. Another important feature is the stratified and differentiated view of reality wherein entities, aspects and levels of reality are seen as distinct and irreducible albeit co-constitutive of each other (Archer et al., 1998; Danermark et al., 2002).
7. For example, if I have walked through a desert for ten hours without drinking, the most significant aspect of the tomato juice would probably be that it is a drink. An expert on tomato juice who is searching for the best tomato juice in the country, however, would most likely feel motivated to set the microscope at a much larger degree of magnification.
8. By this I do not mean that all people are either men or women in any unambiguous sense; what I claim is that those who are, are so in spite of the fact that there being men or women is not exhaustive of what they are and although these identities are not fixed.
9. The notions of ‘differentiated totalities’ and ‘unity in difference’ are crucial for critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008).

References

- Alcoff LM (2001) Who’s afraid of identity politics? In: Moya PML and Hames-García MR (eds) *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 312–344.
- Alcoff LM (2006) *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Archer M, Bhaskar R, Collier A, Lawson T and Norrie A (eds) (1998) *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*. London: Routledge.
- Bhaskar R (2008) *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Brown W (1997) The impossibility of women’s studies. *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 9(3): 79–101.
- Butler J (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler J (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.

- Carleheden M (2003) The emancipation from gender: A critique of the utopias of postmodern gender theory. In: Ervø S and Johansson T (eds) *Among Men: Moulding Masculinities*. Vol. 1, Aldershot: Ashgate, 44–65.
- Collins PH (1990) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Crenshaw K (1991) Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241–1279.
- Danermark B, Ekström M, Jacobsen L and Karlsson JCh (2002) *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge.
- Davis K (2008) Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory* 9(1): 67–85.
- Ferguson A (2011) How is global gender solidarity possible? In: Jónasdóttir AG, Jones KB and Bryson V (eds) *Sexuality, Gender and Power: Intersectional and Transnational Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 243–258.
- Gubar S (1998) What ails feminist criticism? *Critical Inquiry* 24(4): 878–902.
- Halberstam J (1994) F2M: The making of female masculinity. In: Doan L (ed.) *The Lesbian Postmodern*. New York: Columbia University Press, 210–228.
- Hemmings C (2005) Telling feminist stories. *Feminist Theory* 6(2): 115–139.
- hooks b (1981) *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Hull C (2006) *The Ontology of Sex: A Critical Inquiry into the Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Categories*. London: Routledge.
- Jónasdóttir AG (1994) *Why Women are Oppressed*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Jónasdóttir AG and Jones KB (2009) Out of epistemology: Feminist theory in the 1980s and beyond. In: Jónasdóttir AG and Jones KB (eds) *The Political Interests of Gender Revisited*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 17–57.
- Lykke N (2007) Intersektionalitet på svenska. In: Axelsson B and Fornäs J (eds) *Kulturstudier i Sverige*. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 131–148.
- McCall L (2005) The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39(3): 1771–1800.
- Marx K (1993) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Mohanty CT (1988) Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn): 61–88.
- Mohanty CT (2003) *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- New C (2005) Sex and gender: A critical realist approach. *New Formations* 56 (Autumn): 54–70.
- Ollman B (2001) Critical realism in light of Marx's process of abstraction. In: López J and Potter G (eds) *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*. New York: Athlone Press, 285–298.
- Pedwell C (2008) Weaving relational webs: Theorizing cultural difference and embodied practice. *Feminist Theory* 9(1): 87–107.
- Porpora D (1998) Four concepts of social structure. In: Archer M, Bhaskar R, Collier A, Lawson T and Norrie A (eds) *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*. London: Routledge, 339–355.
- Sayer A (1992) *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*. London: Routledge.

- Sayer A (1997) Essentialism, social constructionism, and beyond. *Sociological Review* 45(3): 453–487.
- Sayer A (2000) *Realism and Social Science*. London: SAGE.
- Spelman E (1990) *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. London: Women's Press.
- Spivak GC (2006) *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, new edn. London: Routledge.
- Young IM (1994) Gender as seriality: Thinking about women as a social collective. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19(3): 713–738.
- Yuval-Davis N (2006) Intersectionality and feminist politics. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3): 193–209.
- Zack N (2005) *Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.