

# Doing intersectionality in academia: theoretical and practical challenges of a controversial tool



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## What's happening with intersectionality?

- Intersectionality refers to the **interconnected nature of social identities**, such as race, gender, class, and more, and how these identities intersect and overlap to create **unique experiences of discrimination and oppression** (Crenshaw 1989) under a constellation of power relationships (Collins and Chepp 2013)
- In social research, intersectionality can be understood as a lived experience, heuristic device (Bello 2020), framework for analyzing inequality (Al-Faham et al. 2019) or social justice framework (Carbado et al. 2013, Smooth 2013)
- Intersectionality is an old concept that struggles to express its **transformative potential** in policymaking (Coll-Planas et al. 2023, La Barbera et al. 2022), and at the same time is an exercise of **opening possibilities** (Contreras and Arellano 2022)
- The lack of a clear definition in the transition from activism to policymaking leads to a **merely discursive use** (Jiménez Rodrigo 2020) without practical effect, while the **coexistence of different conceptualisations** leads to contradictory results (Christoffersen 2021)

## The good and the bad news: Horizon Europe

- **EU as a "global gender actor"** (Debusscher, Manners 2022). EU has an important role in fostering gender equality despite its structural limits and conservative political forces across Europe. Growing attention to the notion of intersectionality
- Having a **GEP is mandatory** in order to apply for fundings+ Research always need to integrate gender
- Specific **fundings for gender and intersectional research** (Cluster 2 Program Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Societies)

### Horizon Europe Guidance on Gender Equality Plans:

- **"Gender+" datas** (migration, disability, low socio-economic status, LGBTIQ+)
- Consider how **gender inequalities interact with other form of discriminations** (ethnic, disability, social origins, sexual orientation) and ways to address them.
- Gender datas **beyond gender binary** based on gender identity (W, M, Non-binary)

## Weaknesses

- Focusing on the discriminated individual, which leads to **difficulties in grasping power asymmetries** and hierarchies, which results in the lack of a transformative approach to the academic institution
- Privacy legislation makes it difficult to collect **sensitive data** e.g. sexual orientation, disability outside medicalisation
- Horizon Europe still **lacks a clear definition of intersectionality** to help plan the next steps after the 'diagnosis' and there is no tool for developing intersectional policies. The risk is to relapse into **additive or multiple discrimination**, which has so far been judicially relevant and severely limited in scope compared to the transformative potential of intersectionality

## Strengths

- **Promoting the circulation and systematization** of already existing **good practices** (e.g. in Italy measures for transgender and gender non conforming people in academia or disability office)
- Specific fundings for gender and intersectional research will help fostering and strengthening the already existent **expertise on these topics** around Europe
- Questioning of gender binary from **data collection** through emphasis on gender identity instead of sex assigned at birth
- In addition measure to encourage the **collection of data** on people with a migration background, with disabilities, with low socio-economic status, belonging to the LGBTIQ community in the context of Academia.

## Conclusions

Intersectionality as a privileged lens to broaden and enrich data collection (diagnostic phase), but the lesson of Bacchi and Eveline (2010) is to investigate what is not (yet) problematised: data on educational poverty on the territory, precariousness of teaching careers, racial discrimination, LGBTQ+, etc.

Challenge: maintain intersectionality as a **social-justice oriented tool** (Rice, Harrison, Friedman, 2019) in a **conservative institution** such as Academia. What space left for the fundamental aspect of self-reflexivity (Misra, Curington, Grenn, 2021)?

## Essential bibliography

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The project aims at increasing SSST's research profile, boosting its research capacity, especially in the field of equality, diversity and inclusion. It's a proper 'twinning exercise', building on key actions from joint training and research paths to bilateral meetings, short visits, dedicated conferences and summer schools, leading to new research opportunities and joint research projects in the field.

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