

## Sensitizing concepts in action: expanding the framework

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### Introduction

The relationship between data and social reality is considered a common methodological problem in social research independent of research strategy (Blaikie, 2000: 120). Most researchers recognize that data are produced by the activities of social researchers on a certain version of social reality. Nevertheless, there is little consensus among scholars regarding what the solution to this challenge should be. Some scholars argue for placing greater weight on lay terms to develop a deeper understanding of laypeople. For others, this appears naïve. They argue that researchers must and should interpret the world according to theories and concepts.

Certain scholars argue that because social reality has no independent existence apart from the knowledge held by the social actors, researchers' way of gaining access to this knowledge is to enmesh themselves as deeply as possible in the everyday world of the actors. Thus, researchers can access laypeople's understandings and interpretation. Others find this view to be overly optimistic and hold a different view of the relationship between language and reality. For still others, the task of sociological theory is to remain critical and the researcher's role is to unveil hidden forms of oppression and power.

Nevertheless, despite all of the scholarly debate regarding observation as theory dependent, the following dilemma remains: how do empirical researchers obtain the right balance? Using intersectionality as an example, I will argue for understanding sensitizing concepts as a methodology for striking this balance. Since the 1990s, gender, queer and postcolonial studies have given intersectionality many roles—so many, in fact, that it has been

called feminist theory's buzzword. As a fuzzy and contested concept, intersectionality is well suited for discussing the role of theories and concepts in social research.

To approach research through a sensitizing concept is sociology's tool to facilitate a position in which one can perceive something new. It allows empirical researchers to start with a concept to provide direction and to develop theoretical/analytical tools in close dialogue with data. Despite this potential, I will argue for the need to expand sensitizing concepts beyond the interactionist framework.

### Intersectionality

Gender, queer and postcolonial studies have all taken an interest in the interaction among different dimensions of inequality (Winkler and Degele, 2011). The term intersectionality was coined both to achieve this task and to emphasize the interwoven nature of categories such as gender, race/ethnicity/nationality, class and sexuality and how they mutually strengthen or weaken each other. Feminists hold different views of whether intersectionality is a theory (de los Reyes and Mulinari, 2005), a framework (McCall, 2005), a politics (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991 in Carbin and Edenheim, 2013) or a discourse (McKibbin et al., 2015).

The dearth of empirical studies and relative absence of discussion regarding the methodologies used to study intersectionality led a group of Norwegian researchers to explore the possibility of conducting qualitative empirical intersectional work (Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad, 2010). In that book, we examined the debates regarding (ethnic) diversity ('mangfold' in Norwegian) and (gender) equality ('likestilling' in Norwegian) by analysing how (gender) equality and Norwegianness are involved in different constellations of majority-

and minority-making processes<sup>1</sup>. Through different qualitative studies, we explored how processes that create gender intersected with processes that create ethnicity/race, sexuality, class and nationality in Norway.

In scrutinizing these processes, we found it important not to assume a pre-established hierarchy of differences. We were preoccupied with exploring how intersectionality—in the form of intersecting dimensions of difference—works and how it creates hierarchies that crystallizes certain groups as minorities. We understood gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality and nationality as something practiced or *done*. To us, it was important to avoid an ontological ranking of differences, that is, defining a priori which forms of differences are most relevant or most important (gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality etc.), instead allowing the empirical investigations to provide the answer.

Western feminism has tended to privilege white heterosexual women's experiences. This privilege operates such that the experiences of this group of women appear general and set the standard for normality. Judged by this standard of 'woman', all other women's challenges and problems become special interests that are not defined as questions of gender or as relevant to the women's movement. The theoretical and political limitations of this gender perspective were scrutinized within feminist theory, and intersectionality surfaced as one possible way to problematize it.

Whereas Davies (2008) celebrates the role of intersectionality as a buzzword in feminist theory, Carbin and Edenheim (2013) criticize the tendency to expand the scope of intersectionality to an all-encompassing feminist theory. In their view, intersectionality has been so successful within different feminist approaches precisely because it does not meet the

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<sup>1</sup> We developed our methodological position in the introductory chapter of the edited book (Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad, 2010). That chapter and the chapter by Kramvig and Flemmen (2010) provide the basis for my argument in this paper.

requirements of a theory. It does not provide us with an ontology either of the subject or of power. Statements such as ‘social positions intersect’, ‘categories are intertwined’ or ‘power relations are complex’ are so general that everybody can embrace them. Thus, they disguise the ontological differences between different feminist approaches, according to Carbin and Edenheim. From their poststructuralist position, Carbin and Edenheim are concerned that embracing intersectionality as a common feminist concept will reduce feminism to a liberal consensus-based project<sup>2</sup>.

Debates about the fruitfulness of the concept persist, as do the different approaches to it. For the purpose of this paper, I will consider these differences as disagreements with regard to research tradition and to the role of concepts in research.

#### Use of concepts within different research traditions

To contextualize the argument, I will outline how four different research traditions view the role of concepts using feminist theory and intersectionality as an example. Crenshaw (1989, 1991), the American law professor who coined the term “intersectionality”, described intersectionality using supporting concepts such as ‘axis’, ‘lines’ and ‘systems’. These axes were layered over each other to create forms of oppression that were double, triple or multiple. Black women are oppressed as women (by the patriarchy), as black (through racism and colonialism), etc. Crenshaw’s understanding of intersectionality can be viewed as part of an *ontological research tradition*. In this tradition, one is concerned with establishing the main features of social reality to create a theoretical synthesis with a strong ontological emphasis (Blaikie, 2000). Hill Collins (1998) developed this thinking further into a ‘matrix of domination’ in which gender and race are the main categories. She also linked this idea to an

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<sup>2</sup> For similar criticism, see Carbin and Tornhill (2004).

epistemological position, a feminist standpoint, in which certain positions based on gender, class and race are believed to provide access to a particular insight and knowledge of the world. Hill Collins correlates the ‘matrix of domination’ for various groups within larger social groupings with patterns of privilege and marginalization (Winkler and Degele, 2011).

Crenshaw and Hill Collins have both been criticized for their ontological determination of the categories of woman, black woman and white woman. They introduce both categories and structures as disparate and pre-existing, independent of social and historical conditions. The categories thus come to be perceived as static and unchangeable, as additive and structural.

Modelling income indicators and income differences among (fixed) social groups is an example of what is called an intercategory analysis of intersectionality (McCall, 2005)<sup>3</sup>. This approach ‘makes a *strategic* use of categories and analyses relations of multiple inequalities between socially constructed groups’ (Winker and Degele, 2011: 53). Intersectionality understood as intercategory complexity can be viewed as a work within the *operationalizing research tradition*. This tradition is concerned with specifying and measuring concepts to produce variables for particular research projects (Blaikie, 2000). This approach to intersectionality has been criticized both for not being sufficiently radical and for assuming and strengthening pre-existing differences (Egeland and Gressgård, 2007).

Intersectionality can also be used hermeneutically. The *hermeneutic research tradition* is concerned with deriving technical concepts from lay concepts (Blaikie, 2000). Because intersectionality itself is not a lay concept, these types of studies are not common. There are, however, examples of theoretically oriented actor-network inspired ethnographic studies that attempt to avoid predefined categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., for as long

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<sup>3</sup> McCall categorizes the use of intersectionality into three approaches. The others are the anticategory and the intracategory (McCall, 2005). I will not discuss these other two approaches here.

as possible to allow social actors and the ethnographical context to actualize what is relevant to the situation (Kofoed, 2004).

A fourth research tradition related to using concepts within the social sciences is *sensitizing*, where refining an initial flexible concept in the course of research is viewed as the optimal way to proceed (Blaikie, 2000). Our approach to intersectionality can be viewed as a work within this tradition (Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad, 2010). We argue that intersectionality is best approached as a concept that draws the researcher's gaze towards ordering practices, that is, practices that produce phenomena and categories such as minority and majority, saturated by gender, race and ethnicity. Intersectionality challenges singularity while demanding specification and actuality. To study intersections one must, in our view, explore how they are enacted and performed in specific times and places, how bodies are gendered, racialized and sexualized, made familiar or strange, comprehensible or incomprehensible. Intersectionality guides our attention in the direction of multiplicity and ambivalence, towards what is not stabilized or fixated (Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad, 2010).

This approach to intersectionality has been criticized both as a 'doing gender' perspective and for not exploring contexts in which these differences are *not* done, or 'the undoing' of social differences, and hence for tending to reify the categories of difference. Orupabo (2014), inspired by Winkler and Degele (2011), advocates studying the meaning of intersectionality at different levels at which identities, representations and structures are not mutually exclusive categories. This is a critique from the ontological research tradition.

In the following section, I argue that by expanding the sensitizing tradition we can open up new possibilities for theoretically inspired empirical studies. To accomplish this I will first revisit Blumer and the theoretical and methodological challenges that sensitizing concepts were developed to address. Second, I will show intersectionality as a sensitizing concept in action.

Third, I will suggest how sensitizing concepts can be expanded to overcome certain shortcomings of interactionalism.

### Sensitizing concepts

The conceptual space from which sensitizing concepts arose was a discussion of social theorists' preoccupation with the literature of social theory at the expense of connecting with the empirical social world (Blumer, 1969: 142). In an address to the American Sociological Society in 1953, Herbert Blumer (1969) asked, 'What is wrong with social theory?' His concern was threefold: first, that social theory neither in origin nor in use did appear oriented towards the empirical world; second, that social theory failed to guide research because it was divorced from empirical investigations; and third, that social theory failed to benefit from the growing accumulation of 'facts' issuing from research (Blumer, 1969: 141-142).

Blumer criticized researchers for relying upon a priori theoretical schemes and sets of unverified concepts. The prevailing practice at the time was to allow a theory, a model, a concept, a technique and the scientific protocol to coerce research. This resulted in a bending of analytical depictions of the empirical world to suit the form of theories (Blumer, 1969: 34).

In Blumer's view, the difficulties in social theory were related to the fact that the concepts of our discipline in a fundamental sense are sensitizing instruments. He named them sensitizing concepts, contrasting them with definitive concepts.

A definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects by means of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed benchmarks. (...) A sensitizing concept lacks such specification of attributes or benchmarks and consequently does not enable the user to move directly to the instance and its relevant content. Instead, it provides the user with a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive

concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look (Blumer, 1969: 147-148).

What we are referring to with any given concept takes a different form in each empirical instance. When a concept is sensitizing it does not have a clear definition based on specific criteria or properties (see also Hammersly in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*, 2003). Sensitizing concepts cannot be empirically delimited, and the point of their vagueness is that they can help us look in a specific direction without locking us into a certain understanding of the phenomenon (Sohlberg and Sohlberg, 2013: 136).

In contrast to the natural sciences and their fixed semantic units, social science addresses (or should address) concepts in continuous change, which is more apt to provide direction than the iron fence created by definitive concepts (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 1994: 67). Sensitizing concepts in continuous change make it possible for the researcher to become successively acquainted with the subject of research, stimulating researchers to sense new relations, perspectives and worldviews. Therefore, sensitizing concepts may serve as heuristic devices.

The main purpose of sensitizing concepts is to open the field up for exploration. The development of concepts is viewed as resulting from studying a subject and not as something that should structure our understanding of the subject beforehand. To Blumer, sensitizing concepts emerge when the observer discovers something worth problematizing (Faulkner undated), which is similar to Peirce's view on abduction.

Blumer was very concerned with the importance of discussing the methodological role of concepts:

Throughout the act of scientific inquiry concepts play a central role. They are significant elements in the prior scheme that the scholar has of the empirical world; they are likely to be the terms in which his [sic] problem is cast; they are usually the categories for

which data are sought and in which the data are grouped; they usually become the chief means for establishing relations between the data; and they are usually the anchor points in interpretation of the findings. Because of such decisive role in scientific inquiry, concepts need especially to be subject to methodological scrutiny (Blumer, 1969: 26).

Opposed to the positivism that was popular at the time, Blumer was influenced by pragmatist philosophy in his methodological thinking. Pragmatists, particularly Dewey, argued that concepts are tools that should be judged according to their instrumental value in enabling people to understand and to act on the world. Theory, according to Blumer, is of value only in the empirical sciences to the extent that it connects fruitfully with the empirical world. The only means of establishing such a connection is through concepts, as they point to empirical instances.

The methodological problem encountered by all social researchers is that they can collect empirical data only from a certain point of view. Observations are shaped and coloured by the researcher's language, culture, and discipline. They are based on knowledge, past experience (professional and lay) and the expectations that result. Because all observation is theory dependent, there will always be a gap between the data and the reality they are supposed to represent (Blaikie, 2000: 120).

### Intersectionality: a sensitizing concept in action

Recognizing that researchers always have to collect empirical data from a particular point of view, we found sensitizing concepts to provide a good balance between a pre-established theoretical commitment and an overly open approach.

The focus on intersectionality in our research is meant to make us sensitive, that is, attentive and responsive, to complex power relations without assuming an ontological hierarchy

of differences. Like other social researchers, we assume that certain differences do exist—we have recruited our informants based upon, inter alia, imagined differences among gender, ethnic groups, classes or similar markers. Therefore, we have not started out in a manner that is completely open and inductive. To use a well-known phrase, we ‘started with an open, but not an empty mind’. We started with such categories, but then we opened them up. Therefore, we worked both *with* and *against* the categories. We explored which phenomena create difference and are at work in specific contexts.

In the study of multicultural and transnational families in Sápmi we explored the meaning of ethnicity with regard to how women and men do gender (Kramvig and Flemmen, 2010). Northern Norway is traditionally a multiethnic area where the indigenous Sami population, the Kvens (Finnish minority) and the Norwegian majority population have intermarried for centuries. The ethnic mix in the area is becoming more complex as a result of new international migration patterns. Immigrants from neighbouring Russia are visibly present in the local communities as are marriage migrants, labour migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from all over the world.

Recognizing this complexity, the research needed to open up the categories of ethnicity and gender because it was impossible to decide theoretically beforehand how they were understood and which category was most important. A majority-inclusive perspective made it possible to include the majority (those who at any given time constitute the ‘we’ in a society) and the relationship between the majority and minorities in the analysis. Therefore, the social categories were not only a lens through which to understand the other, such as ethnic minorities or women; instead, certain people were perceived as ethnically minoritized, others as ethnically majoritized, some as ethnically marked and others as ethnically unmarked or neutral, some as privileged and others as less privileged (Kramvig and Flemmen, 2010).

Our material implies that the stakes for the couples we met were negotiations regarding mutual respect (Kramvig and Flemmen, 2010). Individual dignity had to be sustained while a new union was established between the two. In couples from different ethnic backgrounds, many differences had to be seen and recognized. It was a part of everyday life and negotiations regarding which languages to use in the family, finances, and (ethnic and gender) equality in which dignity and equality were developed as key factors in the relationship between the women and the men.

By focusing on the processes of negotiation, we came closer to understanding autonomy or what it means to be ‘in place’ (Ahmed 2006). Whereas access to paid labour and gender equality was important to the Russian women, the Sami women underlined ethnic equality and the importance of reclaiming partially lost Sami knowledge and traditions in terms of their autonomy. The Norwegian colonization of the Sami people, their language and traditions is still being repaired not only at the political level but also in peoples’ everyday lives<sup>4</sup>.

Whereas equality (in Norwegian, ‘likestilling’) implicitly involves gender equality in the Norwegian public discourse and for the majority population, we found it to be linked to ethnicity by the indigenous Sami people with whom we spoke (Kramvig and Flemmen, 2010). To the Russian female marriage migrants and their husbands equality was linked to both gender and ethnicity but in a different way than for the Sami.

Intersectionality thus worked as a sensitizing concept, as a concept not clearly defined and delimited, which made it possible to analyse the complexity of lived experience. Categories are continuously created, performed, quoted, reproduced and transgressed in the daily

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<sup>4</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the historical Norwegian politics of oppressing the Sami (and the Kven) population in the area, leaving generations in pain and for some a shame so strong that they have denied their ethnic heritage. As a result of this history, the ethnic negotiations in the area occur both within families and among different ethnic groups.

interaction between actors (Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad, 2010), and to us, it was important to empirically explore how this occurs.

We concluded that intersectionality, as a methodological principle and not a theory, can

- Help us see something that otherwise would be difficult to see (this specific complexity)
- Point to a necessary work of destabilization and change
- Draw our gaze towards ordering practices or what is often taken for granted
- Make us pay attention to how intersections are done
- Clarify how phenomena and categories such as minorities and majorities are produced (Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad, 2010).

Sensitizing concepts are open and empirically grounded in a way that definitive concepts and abstract theories are not. To me, the value of the relatively awkward (in Norwegian) concept of intersectionality can be found here, in its sensitizing function. It provides the opportunity to discuss what this concept does, not what it is. When processes, relationships, patterns or themes are made into theories, they become more fixed and tend to lose their sensitizing function and therefore the openness to what surfaces as important empirically.

In the final section of this paper, I will suggest three ways of expanding the interactionist framework to allow sensitizing concepts to perform their above-mentioned bridging function.

### Expanding Blumer and the interactionist framework

Approaching sensitizing concepts as a methodology allows us to maintain a theoretical openness that is both useful and necessary. This openness, however, is not sufficient. It is necessary to expand and refine Blumer's original reflections outside the interactionist framework that initially surrounded it. Three areas require expanding:

- Introducing the possibility of theoretically inspired concepts (and thus recognizing the comparative element of research)
- Showing the relationship with other concepts and theories (such as assisting the development of an integrated network of concepts that fits the empirical case we are studying)
- Sensitizing the researcher by recognizing the situatedness of the researcher but also the limits to this critical position

Below, I will address each of these three areas.

#### *Theoretically inspired concepts as comparative element*

According to Bulmer (1979), Blumer's division between sensitizing and definitive concepts is *inadequate*. Concepts are not theories in themselves, Bulmer notes; they are categories for organizing ideas and observations. To form a theory, concepts must be interrelated. Concepts mediate between theory and data; they form a bridge between them.

Bulmer points to the much debated, inescapable and difficult paradox of categorization: where do concepts originate from in the first place, and what are the justifications for the use of particular concepts? Bulmer's argument is that concept formation in the analysis of sociological data proceeds neither from observation to category nor from category to observation but in both directions simultaneously and in interaction (Bulmer, 1979: 652-653). Concepts are formed and modified both in the light of empirical evidence and in the context of theory.

In contrast to his understanding of Blumer, Bulmer is critical of the view of quantitative social research concepts as pre-formed and fixed, while in qualitative analysis they tend to be fluid and emergent. To Bulmer, concepts such as social structure, personality and culture rest upon a general sense of what is relevant rather than on clear-cut prior specification.

Although Bulmer agrees with Blumer's view that theory, enquiry and empirical data are closely interwoven and that their interplay is the means by which an empirical science develops, he disagrees with how Blumer depicts the nature of concepts, particularly definitive concepts (Bulmer, 1979: 655). Bulmer questions the distinction between a theoretical language and an observational language. In his view, differences in the nature of concepts are in not ontological. 'The meaning of a theoretical term is fixed by horizontal as well as vertical members of the conceptual structure, and only the structure as a whole, at best, rests firmly on empirical ground' (Bulmer, 1979: 658).

This variety is not recognized in Blumer's picture of scientific concepts. To Bulmer, concepts are not simply developed out of observations, but neither are they imposed *a priori* categories. Their use is somewhat justified in terms of their context in a particular theory and particular observations that the theory seeks to explain (Bulmer, 1979: 659). Thus, theories are not developed either deductively or inductively but instead through a process that Bulmer calls retroduction. 'Theories put phenomena into systems. They are built "in reverse"—retroductively. A theory is a cluster of conclusions in search of a premise' (Bulmer, 1979: 660). I would have called the process described by Bulmer abduction, but that is of no consequence to my argument.

Finally, Bulmer criticizes Blumer for providing little guidance about how to develop sensitizing concepts in practice. Bulmer describes the routes to the formation of concepts in qualitative research as 'empirically variable, according to the general sociological orientation of the researcher, the richness of the existing literature, and the nature of the phenomenon being studied' (Bulmer, 1979: 671).

In a broad sense, our approach concurs with Bulmer's reflections. The concept of intersectionality was a theoretically inspired concept that we chose to bring with us into our study, not a lay concept introduced by the study's informants.

A research process always involves comparing the study that is underway with other studies. This must be recognized and made explicit by the sensitizing research tradition. Choosing to use the intersectionality concept was thus the comparative aspect of our study. We observed that intersectionality had been found appropriate in other research to explore the (gendered, ethnic, minoritized, majoritized) complexity we were studying. It allowed us to keep open which differences were most important to people in a particular place and time. Sensitizing concepts thus take inspiration from what has been found appropriate in other studies and are furthermore amplified and deepened through comparative use (Addelson, 1994: 171).

As a sensitizing concept, intersectionality thus provided a link between the particular and the general. A concept cannot, however, stand alone. Instead, it must be integrated into a network of concepts or a theory. This is the second area in which the interactionist framework must be expanded.

#### *Developing an integrated network of concepts*

The point of sensitizing concepts is not the confirmation or falsification of theories. Sensitizing concepts are suited to assisting the development of an integrated network of concepts that fits the empirical case we are studying (Addelson, 1994: 171).

In our study, we did not develop intersectionality into a theory. We used intersectionality as a methodology that allowed us to combine it with the relevant network of concepts to grasp what was occurring in the empirical material. Framed by our research question on how transnational and multicultural families contended with diversity, similarity and equality, we found the concept of gift exchange useful (Kramvig and Flemmen, 2010). Gift exchange provided an opportunity to understand the challenges people encountered in grappling with how to address their dependency on others, while simultaneously demarcating the boundaries between themselves and others. The challenge in these somewhat contradictory processes was

to find the balance between sustaining individual autonomy, one's own identity, while also needing others. Differences can be transcended through the gift. We suggested that the gift is an institution than can be used to manage difference, complex situations and complex power relationships.

In addition to gift exchange, we found Leigh Star's concept of power useful. Power is defined as a question of whose metaphors are bringing the world together and are capable of keeping it together (Leigh Star, 2001: 51). Allowing ethnicity to be an open concept meant it was non-exclusionary, that is, not a question of either or, as either Sami or Kven/Norwegian/Russian, but a question of combination, both Sami and Kven/Norwegian/Russian. Thus, the important identity processes occurring in the area could be captured and recognized (Kramvig and Flemmen, 2010).

Our expansion of sensitizing concepts is similar to Layder's (1998: 115-116) orienting concepts: we do not think of sensitizing concepts as standing alone but instead view them as directive of theoretical inquiry through networks of concepts. Although I am in agreement with Layder with regard to much of his critique of the interactionist framework, I suggest retaining the term sensitizing concept, as it is an established concept within sociology and the social sciences.

### *The sensitized researcher*

A lack of reflection on the role of researcher and the relationship between researchers and the people they study is a problem with the interactionist tradition. To expand our approach, we must address two topics: the implications of research being a collective activity (Addelson, 1994) and the role of critique (Mol 2005; Boltanski and Thevenault, 1999).

One limit of the interactionist approach is that the sensitizing concept does not consider the fact that research is a collective act (Addelson, 1994: 173). By collective act, Addelson refers to the relationship between the researcher and the people or objects of study:

For the interactionist approach to work, the researcher must be sensitized, but not only to concepts that capture the lay activity per se. Instead, the researcher needs sensitizing concepts to capture the relationship of his or her own research activity and the lay activity. The researcher needs sensitizing concepts that captured the collective activity of the researcher's profession in relation to the vast collectivities of laypeople. In their studies, researchers need to include themselves and the collective intrusion and authority of their professions. They do offer concepts and research useful to understanding the importance of the activities of professionals, but these are for participant-observation and are not reflexive (Addelson, 1994: 173-174).

Interactionists therefore rely on their own professional authority and place in the social order, she concludes. To address this shortcoming in the framework, Addelson introduces the notion of 'the sensitized researcher'. She does this to take into account the researchers' double participation: their intellectual and professional work and their moral and political work; that is, she accounts for the living, sensitized, embodied being of the researcher (1994: 173).

It is difficult to participate in politicized conversations from a position as researcher. Because topics of gender equality and ethnic diversity are controversial and high on the public agenda, this is important to understand. Our understanding of the researcher is not that of a judge who decides whether peoples' practices are good or bad (Berg, Flemmen and Gullikstad, 2010). Inspired by Mol (2005), as researchers we were preoccupied with investigating people's choices and what constitutes their practices. We seek the standards employed in our empirical materials, not to bring our standards to the field. This does not mean that we considered ourselves neutral. The researcher is positioned academically through the theoretical and methodological choices made and the analysis performed.

A second and related topic that must be addressed is the role of criticism and critical theory. In our approach, we wanted to position ourselves outside the traditional framework in which critical research meant either assuming a negative position or locating the only possibility for critique either in the theoretical apparatus or in the researcher. Our approach has affinities with Boltanski and Thévenot's reflections:

The main problem for critical sociology is its inability to understand the critical operations undertaken by the actors. A sociology that wants to study the critical operations performed by actors—a sociology of criticism taken as a specific object—must therefore abandon (if only temporarily) the critical stance to recognize the normative principles that underlie the critical activity of ordinary persons. If we want to take seriously the claims of actors when they denounce social injustice, criticize power relationships or unveil their foe's hidden motives, we must conceive of them as endowed with an ability to differentiate legitimate and illegitimate ways of rendering criticism and justifications (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 364).

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that sensitizing concepts are sociology's tool for being theoretically inspired while remaining analytically open. Sensitizing concepts enable an empirically oriented approach to theorizing without denying that observations are theory dependent. By using the contested concept of intersectionality as an example, I have argued for a methodological approach that expands the interactionist framework from which sensitizing concepts emerged by addressing some of its limitations.

Three areas must be incorporated. First, we must recognize the comparative element of research by explicitly stating the possibility for theoretically inspired concepts. Second, we must assist the development of an integrated network of concepts that fits the specific empirical case by showing the relationship between the sensitizing concept and other concepts and

theories. Third, we must recognize the situatedness of research and the researcher by sensitizing the researcher.

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