

Winner of the ISOS Essay Prize 2025

Let's Talk About the Metaphysics of Intersectionality—But Let's Take It Slow

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Abstract: Recent analytic feminist proposals explore the metaphysics of intersectionality through frameworks such as grounding or emergence (Bernstein 2020; Jorba and López de Sa 2024). However, these approaches, rooted in hierarchical ontology, risk yielding counterintuitive interpretations of marginalized experiences or exacerbating their marginalization. This paper has two objectives: (i) to advocate for a more reflective methodology to theorizing the metaphysics of intersectionality and, more broadly, mind-dependent structures within social ontology; and (ii) to propose an alternative framework that centers power relations while rejecting hierarchical fundamentality. Unlike existing proposals, this alternative does not treat any group's experiences or identities as more fundamental than others, and so aligns with the core principles of intersectionality.

Keywords: intersectionality, fundamentality, methodology, critical social ontology, social metaphysics, power

1. INTRODUCTION

Much research in sociology, gender studies, decolonial studies, and adjacent fields uses an intersectional lens, recognizing that individual experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of power or oppression. In doing so, it illuminates often-overlooked dimensions of varied and important phenomena or categories, such as the historical

10.25365/jso-2025-9743

Published online July 17, 2026

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devaluation of social reproduction labor and the marginalization of the experiences and oppressions of women of color.¹ Most contemporary scholars who write on the subject acknowledge that theories addressing intersectionality—though not necessarily using the term—have long been central to the analysis of marginalized groups' experiences. This predated Kimberlé Crenshaw's coining of the term in 1989. Women of color feminists, including Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, the Combahee River Collective, and others, have long examined the intersectional oppressions and power dynamics experienced by Black women, highlighting the often-overlooked struggles and experiences of Black women within white-centered feminist movements.

Ever since the term was coined, scholars have used *intersectionality* in a variety of ways: as a descriptive project (Crenshaw 1989), as an empirical methodology (McCall 2005), as an ontological and epistemological framework (Hill Collins 1990), and so on.² When Crenshaw first introduced the term “intersectionality,” her focus was on the *structural subordination* that marginalized groups experience. For example, when immigrant women experience domestic violence and seek refuge in shelters, funding for rape crisis counseling often fails to meet their needs because it is not designed with their specific forms of oppression in mind. As Crenshaw argues, understanding the experiences of Black women—and the structural subordination they face—requires more than viewing their situation as the simple conjunction of being Black and women. Instead, we must recognize how race and gender interact to shape their lives, in ways that *cannot* be reduced to the additive sum of gendered and racialized experiences: “they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women” (Crenshaw 1989, 149).

Leslie McCall positions identities or social categories, along with their related experiences, at the heart of intersectionality.³ McCall's focus has primarily been on understanding intersectionality as an *empirical methodology*. She interprets the disagreements among leading intersectionality methodologies as differences in how they

1 An intersectional perspective provides valuable insights into how different powers interact to shape individual and group experiences, though it is not without its critics. Feminists, in particular, have debated whether intersectionality disrupts the sense of “unity” among women and creates divisions. First, I think that the focus should be on *solidarity* among women rather than a delusional notion of unity. Second, the claim that adopting an intersectional perspective on gender issues inevitably leads to division is question-begging and risks further marginalizing less privileged groups—creating a so-called “unity” that excludes those who face various forms of oppression. For these reasons, I will not engage with such a debate in this paper. For those interested, I think bell hooks (hooks 2015) and Annette Martín (Martín 2023) have offered thoughtful responses.

2 I will only outline some leading approaches to intersectionality in the introduction. While this list is not exhaustive—Ashley Bohrer (Bohrer 2019), for instance, identifies five main uses of intersectionality—I believe these are sufficient for the purposes of our discussion, specifically what these theories have in common in terms of their goals.

3 I use “identities” and “social categories” interchangeably in this paper.

“understand and use analytical categories to explore the complexity of intersectionality in social life” (McCall 2005, 1773). For example, some empirical approaches to intersectionality examine inequalities in access to resources, opportunities, social visibility, and power *across* different social groups, while others, including McCall’s own work, explore the complexity and variation of lived experiences *within* particular social groups. Regardless of the methodology’s precise approach, McCall argues that the core aim of an intersectionality methodology should be to understand the complex experiences of individuals or groups through their social categories.

Patricia Hill Collins, in contrast to both Crenshaw and McCall, centers her intersectionality account—though she prefers the term “matrix of domination”—on the mutually constitutive relationship between race and gender structures (Hill Collins 1990). For Collins, race is inherently a gendered category (as well as classed, sexualized, nationalized, etc.), and gender is inherently a raced (and classed, sexualized, etc.) category. Collins argues that intersectionality is not merely an empirical framework but also provides a *metaphysical* account of how social, political, economic inequalities (or powers) are produced, shaped, and sustained. Within this metaphysical framework, social systems of domination cannot be understood separately and additively if we are to fully grasp how groups are oppressed. According to Collins, the goal of intersectionality is to explain and understand how different forms of inequality and power relations constitute, interact with, and shape one another.

Scholars approach and theorize intersectionality in various ways. Despite their differing views on the specific focus or scope of intersectionality, scholars generally agree on the following points: (i) an intersectional framework aims to avoid further marginalizing already marginalized groups while addressing issues faced by minorities; (ii) non-additivity: the experiences (and identities) of marginalized groups, such as Black women, should not be understood as simply the sum of their experiences (and identities) as Black and as women; and (iii) non-separability: the experiences (and identities) of marginalized groups, such as Black women, should not be understood as the experience (and identity) of being a woman, separate from the experiences resulting from their other social positions.

Recently, philosophers in the analytic tradition have begun exploring intersectionality as a metaphysical framework, proposing theories to understand its metaphysical aspects. For instance, Sara Bernstein (Bernstein 2020) considers the explanandum of intersectionality to be social categories, arguing that intersectional categories, such as Black women, are metaphysically and explanatorily prior to their non-intersectional counterparts. In contrast, Marta Jorba and Dan López de Sa (Jorba and López de Sa 2024) view the explanandum of intersectionality as experiences emerging from the intersection of social categories. While I share an interest in the metaphysical dimension of intersectionality, I find that recent proposals—both relying on a meta-

physical framework that appeals to hierarchies of fundamentality in carving out the world—to be rather hasty. These accounts often result in inaccurate explanations of the experiences of marginalized minorities, fail to adequately account for the complex socio-historical processes by which identities are shaped and constituted, or risk further marginalizing already vulnerable groups—ironically undermining the very purpose of intersectionality.

As I will show later in this paper, one of the main weaknesses of existing proposals on the metaphysics of intersectionality is their reliance on hierarchies of fundamentality to carve out the world.⁴ These limitations highlight the need for a more reflective approach to developing a good theory of intersectionality's metaphysics—and, more broadly, a good theory of mind-dependent structures and phenomena within social ontology. I argue that, before evaluating which metaphysical framework is most suitable for a theory of the metaphysics of intersectionality, we must first identify what such a theory should look like—specifically, the key criteria it *must* satisfy. In Section 2, I will outline three necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, desiderata for a good theory of intersectionality's metaphysics. With a clearer understanding of the goals a good theory should achieve, I will then evaluate the two recent proposals—Bernstein 2020 and Jorba and López de Sa 2024—in Sections 3 and 4, such as how well they meet these criteria. Finally, in Section 5, I will propose an alternative framework that, while not perfect, moves away from hierarchical notions of fundamentality and better aligns with the goals of a good theory of intersectionality's metaphysics.

2. THE DESIDERATA

The three desiderata I introduce in this section are necessary criteria, though they may not be sufficient. The most crucial principle that unites all these criteria is that a good theory of the metaphysics of intersectionality should avoid providing explanations or accounts of marginalized groups' experiences that ultimately undermine the very purpose of the intersectional framework.⁵

⁴ Elizabeth Barnes (Barnes 2014) and Mari Mikkola (Mikkola 2017) have also argued that many of the current metaphysical frameworks—such as Ted Sider's work on fundamental joint-carving and Jonathan Schaffer's work on grounding—are hostile to feminist metaphysics due to their reliance on the notion of fundamentality. Schaffer has responded (Schaffer 2017), claiming his grounding framework avoids their objections because (i) it posits more than just fundamental entities, and (ii) treating entities as non-fundamental is not the same as treating them as politically secondary. I agree with Barnes and Mikkola's overall critique, but I will also show in this paper that any proposal relying on hierarchies of fundamentality, including Schaffer's, runs counter to the aims of an intersectional framework.

⁵ Note that in this paper I am not limiting myself to structural intersectionality. Structural intersectionality can be understood as focusing on the intersections between macro-level socio-political structures (e.g., (neo)colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, ableism, etc.) in an attempt to tease out the ways in which these

As noted in the introduction, advocates of the intersectional framework critique universal and essentialist understandings of identities and their associated experiences. They call for analyses that situate the experiences of specific groups within the socio-historical and material contexts in which those groups are embedded. It is often the case that essentialist, universal conceptions of categories such as “woman” or “Black” lead to the erasure or marginalization of certain groups’ experiences or forms of oppression.

Philosophers working on the metaphysics of intersectionality are acutely aware of the influence that metaphysical assumptions about identities have on intersectional theories. For example, both Bernstein and Jorba and López de Sa aim to develop proposals that remain as neutral as possible regarding debates on the metaphysics of identities. While I agree with Bernstein and Jorba and López de Sa that a theory of intersectionality can attempt to remain neutral on issues such as the metaphysics of gender and race, there is one area where neutrality is *not* acceptable: a good theory should leave *no room* for essentialist, universal conceptions of social categories. Metaphysical neutrality is *not* always a virtue—being metaphysically neutral about essentialist understandings of identities defeats the very purpose of an intersectional framework.

There are many ways in which one can fall into an essentialist understanding of identities. In this paper, I will specifically focus on the essentialist view that treats identities as ahistorical, and turn our attention to the importance of considering the socio-historical contexts in which identities and their associated experiences are embedded. One of the greatest dangers of treating identities as ahistorical is that it risks legitimizing systems of oppression, suggesting that inequality is not the product of historical power dynamics and social constructions.

Instead, a good theory of the metaphysics of intersectionality must recognize that identities are contingent and products of socio-historical and material processes. It cannot simply isolate contemporary social inequalities without acknowledging how these inequalities were historically shaped and maintained. One way this failure occurs is when intersectionality is understood as a set of “interlocked” oppressions that do *not* alter the nature of the categories involved. For example, this view might hold that racism is *not* mutually shaped or constructed by patriarchy or heterosexualism, or that gender is not shaped by capitalism. This perspective has been explicitly criticized as adopting an essentialist “logic of purity” (Lugones 1994; 2007). A good theory of intersectionality, by contrast, must be able to account for how different social

structures of domination interact. By intersectionality, I mean both structural intersectionality and more meso- or local-level intersectionality.

categories and their respective power structures—or matrices, axes, or whatever terms are used—mutually shape one another in different socio-historical contexts.

By using the term “shape,” I aim to remain neutral on whether the relationship between different categories or axes is one of mutual *change* or mutual *constitution*. Some theorists, like Ann Garry (Garry 2011), argue that intersectional oppressions are mutually shaped and changed, while others, such as María Lugones (Lugones 2007) and Collins (Hill Collins 1990), take a stronger position, asserting that categories and matrices mutually constitute one another. I believe this is where a theory of the metaphysics of intersectionality can remain neutral: by acknowledging that the nature and qualities of identities are contingent upon specific socio-historical contexts, one can remain neutral about whether identities mutually shape and change each other or actually constitute one another.

For instance, Collins’s “matrix of domination” framework emphasizes the role of socio-historical contexts in structuring social locations through intersectional systems of race, class, and gender oppression. Collins views these systems as interconnected, constantly shaping and being shaped by each other. In this sense, we should understand the axes or sites within the matrix as relational and mutually constituting:

Viewing relations of domination for Black women for any given socio-historical context as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression expands the focus of analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect. Assuming that each system needs the others in order to function creates a distinct theoretical stance that stimulates the rethinking of basic social science concepts (Hill Collins 1990, 222).

Taking identities not as fixed, isolated categories, but as shaped—or even mutually constituted—by interlocking systems of oppression that interact in dynamic ways underscores the contingency of identities, which is a key element for any metaphysical theory of intersectionality. Similarly, Marxist scholars have long emphasized that social categories, including gender, race, and class, are deeply linked to material conditions like the mode of production and historical systems such as colonialism and capitalism. For instance, as Eve Mitchell argues, oppressive power relations such as patriarchy and white supremacy also need to be understood in relation to their historical material conditions:

Patriarchy and white supremacy [...] are particular expressions of our labor, our life-activity, that are conditioned by (and in turn, condition) our mode of production [...] We are constantly interacting with the world, changing the

world and changing ourselves through our “metabolic” labor. So patriarchy and white supremacy, like all social relations of labor, change and transform (Mitchell 2014).

And here is bell hooks on the relationship between capitalist exploitation and gender-based oppression: “[feminist consciousness-raising] has *not* helped women understand capitalism: how it works, as a system that exploits female labor and its inter-connections with sexist oppression” (hooks 2015, 159, emphasis added). Interestingly enough, Martha Gimenez also criticizes (some theories of) intersectionality for having “taken for granted categories of analysis whose meaning apparently remains invariant in all theoretical frameworks and contexts,” rather than providing a causal-historical account of these categories (Gimenez 2001).⁶ Here is Charles Post on how gender- or race-based oppressions are not qualitatively the same under feudalism and capitalism:

The structure of the capitalist labor market, with its differentiation between the active and reserve armies of labor and relatively low wage/labor intensive and high wage/capital intensive branches of production, both compels and enables capitalists and workers to racially structure the distribution of labor-power across the economy (Post 2020).

In short, a good theory of intersectionality must be capable of addressing the socio-historical contexts in which identities are shaped and maintained—which is our Desideratum 1. When I say that a good theory should leave room for the historical construction of social categories, I mean not only categories like “Chinese working-class woman,” but also non-intersectional categories such as “woman.”

6 Classical Marxists critique intersectionality on several fronts. Beyond its ahistorical treatment of social categories and oppressions, they argue—much like in debates between some Marxists and feminists—that intersectionality misinterprets class-based exploitation. For them, exploitation, used in a morally neutral sense, refers specifically to the appropriation of the working class’s labor power by capitalists, which is distinct from gender- and race-based oppressions not directly tied to the extraction of surplus value. Marxist feminists themselves remain divided over whether capitalism and patriarchy are distinct systems or ultimately constitute a single system (see Vogel 1983); though generally classical Marxists treat exploitation as more fundamental, other Marxist-influenced scholars have also argued that exploitation is a form of oppression (see Young 2022).

Relatedly, many Marxists (e.g., Ait Belkhir 2001; Foley 2019), and even some social reproduction theorists (e.g., Jaffe 2020), criticize intersectionality’s association with identity politics. While I agree that identity politics undermines the spirit of intersectionality, I find such critiques uncharitable to at least some proponents of intersectionality and will not pursue them further here. Some intersectionality theorists have also cautioned that prioritizing any single axis of domination—whether class, race, gender, or otherwise—risks reinforcing hierarchies among oppressions and further marginalizing already marginalized groups (see May 2014; 2015).

Second, building on Desideratum 1, a good theory of the metaphysics of intersectionality must allow explanatory space for how power dynamics evolve and how they shape interactions between identities, while also sustaining certain identities over time, which is our Desideratum 2. In the intersectionality framework, the interactions between identity categories (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) are shaped and structured by broader systems of power. As Kyla Schuller insightfully observes, “the experiences of marginalized people reveal the true workings of power in all its forms” (Schuller 2021, 20). In this context, some feminist theorists have explicitly outlined what they see as the core focus—or limits—of intersectionality.

Identity is a key part of intersectionality, but it provides the lens, not the target (Schuller 2021, 20).

Feminist theorists must reject any misrepresentations of intersectionality that suggest that the search for a theoretical frame that fully encompasses the bounds of articulable identities takes priority over a framework that sustains critiques of the institutional power arrangements that make those identities invisible and illegible (Cooper 2015, 10).

Intersectionality is not identity, but it teaches us the important lesson that systems of injustice are not, in practice, separable (Dembroff 2023, 21).

Leaving explanatory space for power dynamics is crucial not only for understanding the experiences of specific groups but also for recognizing *resistance*. Struggles for justice often disrupt the very structures of power that have historically shaped identity and experience. It is worth noting that such a theory could remain neutral regarding how power should be conceptualized—whether through a structuralist perspective or a Foucauldian framework that emphasizes its localized, immediate relational character (Foucault 1982). In fact, one might argue that these two views of power are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Third, any good theory of the metaphysics of intersectionality must carefully consider its normative consequences, ensuring that it does justice to the experiences of marginalized groups. It is crucial that the theory avoids further marginalizing these groups through its normative implications, which only serves to undermine the very purpose of an intersectional framework.

To summarize, I propose three desiderata (necessary but not sufficient) that any good theory of the metaphysics of intersectionality should satisfy. Taken together, these three desiderata ensure that any metaphysical theory of intersectionality remains faithful to the dynamic, historical, and intersectional nature of identities and their

associated experiences. Moreover, they provide the necessary framework for a theory that is not only philosophically sound but also socially and politically responsible.

Desideratum 1 It must make room for the socio-historical contexts in which different social categories come into being.

Desideratum 2 It must leave room for the dynamics of power—how they constitute, interact, and shape each other—in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Desideratum 3 It must consider the normative consequences, ensuring that it does justice to the experiences of marginalized groups.

3. BERNSTEIN: INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES AS METAPHYSICALLY AND EXPLANATORILY PRIOR

Bernstein identifies identities as the central explanandum of intersectionality, stating that “gender, biological sex, race, sexual orientation, disability status, and socioeconomic class” are key components of intersectional identities (Bernstein 2020, 322). She uses the term “identity categories” broadly, referring to them as “the metaphysical umbrella under which oppressed groups fall, whether singly or multiply” (Bernstein 2020, 322). However, as discussed in Section 2, there is controversy over whether identity should be the central focus of intersectionality and whether any theory that centers on identities can truly fulfill the objectives of an intersectional framework. For simplicity, I will follow Bernstein’s approach and consider identity categories as the primary target of intersectionality in this discussion.⁷

Bernstein proposes that “social categories can be fruitfully [understood] in terms of determinables and their determinates” (Bernstein 2020, 325). Social determinables refer to broad categories like gender, race, and class, while determinates refer to specific identities such as “woman” or “Black.” Bernstein adopts this framework to capture the “inseparability” feature. According to her, “intersectionality is a claim about the inseparability of social determinates [...] 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” (Bernstein 2020, 325). The key idea is that individuals or groups always belong to multiple

⁷ In fact, Bernstein herself, in several instances, uses social categories as a lens to discuss the experiences of individuals with the respective categories, and therefore I will also follow through in my discussion of her proposal.

specific social categories simultaneously, such as being a woman and being Asian, and these categories interact to shape their lived experiences.⁸

For Bernstein, “inseparability” should be understood as a kind of “explanatory unity” within intersectional categories: “Explanatory unity, roughly, is the explanatory inextricability of one category from another within an intersectional category” (Bernstein 2020, 330).⁹ Intersectional categories, such as “Black woman,” must be treated as a *unified entity* with its own explanatory coherence. Bernstein illustrates this using the example of norms governing Black women’s hair: these norms do not derive from general norms about women or Black people, but rather from norms specific to Black women as a *single, unified intersectional* category.

But how should we understand the relationship between categories like “woman” and “Black” and categories like “Black woman”? According to Bernstein, “intersectionality can be fruitfully understood as a kind of ontological priority of the intersectional whole over the parts” (Bernstein 2020, 331). This means that intersectional categories, such as “Black woman,” are considered metaphysically more fundamental—the existence of categories such as “woman” ontologically depends on the existence of intersectional categories such as “Black woman.”¹⁰ Bernstein, though, does not provide any justification or argument for why intersectional categories are ontologically prior, except for the claim that doing so “does justice to the idea that intersectional categories are more than mere aggregates” (Bernstein 2020, 331).

Furthermore, Bernstein argues that intersectional categories are explanatorily prior to their constituent categories.

8 It’s not clear why Bernstein thinks intersectionality is a claim *just* about the inseparability of *determinants*. It is true that, as individuals, we can simultaneously belong to multiple specific categories; but it is also true that—in the contemporary context—race, gender, class, and so on are inseparable dimensions of our identities. We will not find anyone without a race or a class status.

9 When Bernstein discusses how we should understand the notion of “inseparability,” she argues that it is important that we construct “a metaphysically substantive conception of inseparability that respects the desideratum of *intactness* of identity constituents” (Bernstein 2020, 329, emphasis added), and that “a commitment to the *intactness* and integrity of individual identity constituents seems essential to the spirit of intersectional theorizing and feminist theorizing more generally” (Bernstein 2020, 327, emphasis added). But what does it even mean to say that an identity category remains *intact*? What does “*intact*” even mean? If an “*intactness*” already implies some form of essentialist and ahistorical understanding of identities, then this already raises the question of whether it can satisfy our desideratum 1.

10 Bernstein herself might want to follow Schaffer and treat the relationship between “Black woman” and “woman” as a grounding relationship—a relationship commonly characterized as a non-causal, irreflexive, transitive, asymmetrical “in virtue of” relationship. However, grounding relationships are not without controversy and criticism. And it is simply unclear what it even means to say that “womanhood” exists *in virtue of* “Black womanhood.” In this paper, I will treat the relationship as a more neutral dependency relationship. As I will show later, if the more neutral dependency relationship has trouble passing the desiderata test, it will only pose more problems for the controversial grounding relationship.

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 (Bernstein 2020, 331, emphasis added).

She acknowledges that this view may seem counterintuitive at first, and she offers a few reasons for why she believes intersectional categories hold explanatory priority. First, she asserts that this perspective respects the idea that “membership in the intersectional category results in specific experiences and forms of oppression distinct from those faced by individual categories” (Bernstein 2020, 332). Second, she argues that intersectional categories are more *informative*, suggesting that non-intersectional categories can be better understood in the context of intersectional categories. To support this point, Bernstein uses examples such as the experiences of Muslim women who wear hijabs, which reflect norms about both women and Muslims.¹¹

In the rest of this section, I will discuss two key issues with Bernstein’s proposal: (i) her justification for treating intersectional categories as explanatorily prior to non-intersectional categories is insufficient, and (ii) her argument that intersectional categories are ontologically prior to their non-intersectional counterparts cannot be justified either—in fact, such a metaphysical framework fails to satisfy the criteria outlined in Section 2, leading to problematic conclusions.

First, treating intersectional categories as *always* explanatorily prior to their non-intersectional counterparts cannot be properly justified. Recall for Bernstein, intersectional categories are explanatorily prior because they are *more informative*. Note that there are two ways to understand the notion of “informative”: (i) it can either mean *x* is more informative than *y* because *x* provides more *detailed* information about *y*, or (ii) that *x* is more informative because *x* speaks to the *generality* that is shared by *y* and *z* (see Weslake 2010). If “informative” is understood as the level of detail in information, it should not be conflated with explanatory priority or fundamentality—

11 Bernstein’s consistent use of terms like “reflect” or “mirror” to justify why intersectional categories are explanatorily prior to their constituents is perplexing. It is important, however, to distinguish between “*x* reflects or mirrors *y*” and “*x* is explanatorily prior to *y*.” One could just as plausibly argue the opposite: that *x* reflects *y* because *y* causes *x*, or that *y* is more fundamental than *x*. Consider a simple example: Alex’s habits reflect the broader culture of their upbringing, but this does not imply that Alex’s habits are explanatorily prior to—or more fundamental than—the culture. In fact, it would be absurd to claim so. The terms “reflecting” or “mirroring” are too thin to capture the relationship between intersectional categories and their constituent categories. While we might agree with Bernstein that aspects of Black women reflect the broader experiences of women globally, this does not mean that the experiences of women globally are partially explained by the experiences of Black women.

assuming by “explanatory priority” Bernstein means that x is explanatorily prior to y if and only if y must be explained in the context of x or in virtue of x . This reasoning is problematic. When explaining a more abstract level of information, it is not necessary to do so in the context of a more detailed level. For example, is it necessary to explain why low-income Indian women face employment inequality to understand why women globally face employment inequality? Absolutely not.

However, if “informative” is understood in terms of generality or invariance, one could argue that in some contexts, the experiences of women globally such as experiencing gender discrimination could help us understand the experiences of low-income Indian women who suffer from gender violences, as we do see a global pattern of women being treated unfairly and unequally, and therefore the experiences of women globally could be informative in terms of generality. The extent to which intersectional or non-intersectional categories are informative is context dependent; it varies based on the questions being asked and the target explanandum.¹²

Moving on to the justification for treating intersectional categories as ontologically prior to non-intersectional categories. Bernstein offers no compelling argument for why intersectional categories should be ontologically prior, other than the claim that such an approach better captures their *non-additive* nature. This reasoning, however, is rather hasty. One can agree that intersectional categories are more than the sum of their parts without asserting that they are ontologically prior. If we want to assert that something x is more than just the aggregate of a and b , we have at least three potential frameworks:

1. **Emergence:** x emerges from the interaction of a and b .
2. **Supervenience:** x globally supervenes on the aggregate of a , b , and the relations among them (cf. Miller 2018; 2020; 2021).
3. **Part-whole Ontological Priority:** x —as the whole—is ontologically prior to the aggregate of a and b .

Setting aside why Bernstein rushes to take part-whole ontological priority as the best framework without considering alternative frameworks, the broader issue is that her approach struggles to account for the socio-historical contingencies of identities and the power dynamics that shape and sustain these identities and their associated experiences—what we identified as Desideratum 1 and Desideratum 2 in Section 2. To her credit, Bernstein clarifies that she “restricts her focus to intersectional

12 Bernstein does consider a slightly different version of what counts as the most explanatorily prior in her footnote 21: “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 (Bernstein 2020, 332, fn. 21). Here I agree with Jorba and López de Sa’s response: positing “social category magnets” does not solve the problem because what counts as the “most explanatory” is simply context dependent.

categories as they relate to forms of interlocking systemic oppression, rather than intersectional categories full stop” (Bernstein 2020, 323). The issue, however, lies in the question: *How* do we conceptualize the role of socio-historical contingencies and power relations within Bernstein’s framework?

There are three possible options for Bernstein:

- (i) She could treat socio-historical contingencies and power dynamics as ontologically (and explanatorily) prior to the various social categories. In this case, the existence of these categories would ontologically depend on socio-historical contingencies and power dynamics, as shown in Figure 1.
- (ii) Alternatively, she might view socio-historical contingencies and power dynamics as “scaffolding” facts—facts that underlie the dependence relations between different social categories but do not themselves participate in any such dependence relationship (cf. Dasgupta 2004; 2006), as shown in Figure 2.
- (iii) Or, Bernstein could treat intersectional categories, along with their respective socio-historical contingencies and power dynamics, as ontologically prior to non-intersectional categories and their own respective contexts, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Note that the following figures are fully illustrated in terms of their dependency relationships. For the sake of simplicity, I will also grant that some sort of dependency relationship is the target relationship we are examining here.

None of the options presented adequately address how social categories and their associated experiences are shaped and sustained. To illustrate this, consider the following two social identities:

Women (Internal) Migrant Workers in China Experiences related to this identity include, but are not limited to, precarity, strict discipline and surveillance in factory life, sexual harassment both during and outside of work, discrimination from both local urbanites and the government’s household registration system, and struggles in balancing work with reproductive responsibilities due to long hours and low wages, etc.¹³

13 Every citizen in China is classified as having either an urban or rural household registration, a status inherited from their parents, though it can be changed based on certain criteria. Before China opened up its economy, the household registration system was used to strictly control the movement of the rural population into urban areas. Even after the economic reforms of 1978, the system continues to enforce unequal access to public welfare and social securities. For example, although rural workers are now permitted to work in urban cities, they and their families remain excluded from the social securities and educational resources available to urban residents.

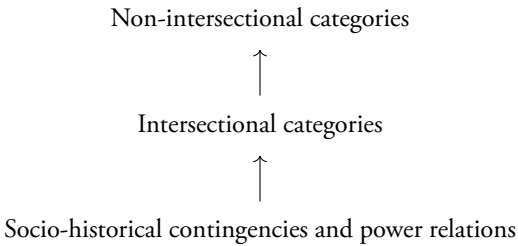


Figure 1. $X \longrightarrow Y$: Y metaphysically and explanatorily depends on X .

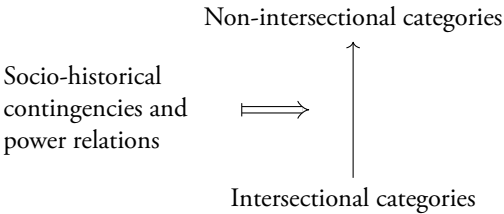


Figure 2. $X \longrightarrow Y$: Y metaphysically and explanatorily depends on X . $Z \Longrightarrow Y$ depending on X : Z underwrites but doesn't participate in the dependence relationship between X and Y .

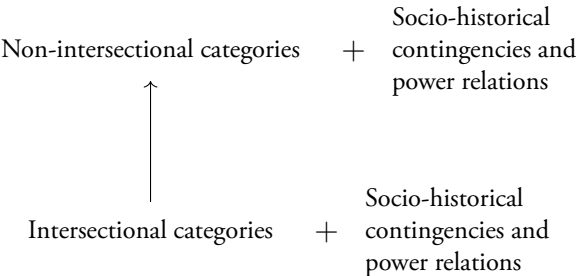


Figure 3. $X \longrightarrow Y$: Y metaphysically and explanatorily depends on X .

Women Workers in China Experiences associated with this identity include, but are not limited to, sexual harassment both during and outside of work, unpaid reproductive labor (though some may outsource domestic work), etc.

To fully understand these identities and experiences, we must take into account the socio-historical context and structures of domination, such as patriarchy in a Chinese context, China's economic opening within a global capitalist system, the establishment of transnational factories along China's coast, the gradual loosening of the household registration system, and so on. These dynamics contributed to the rise of a gendered labor market in China. Each of these identities and their associated experiences are shaped by the complex interplay of gender, marital status, age, household registration, and broader class dynamics in the country.

A few important points: First, the existence of the identity "Woman Migrant Worker in China" is shaped by—a term used neutrally in terms of ontological relationship—a specific set of socio-historical contingencies and power relations, as is the existence of the identity "Woman Worker in China." In our case, the discriminatory household registration system plays a far more significant role in shaping the experiences of migrant women workers in China than it does in the experiences of women workers in China more broadly, which includes both migrant and urban women. Each identity—whether fine-grained or coarse-grained—is *directly* shaped by its corresponding socio-historical contingencies and power relations, rather than by a transitive dependency relationship, as depicted in Figure 1. The claim that "the identity of Woman Worker in China depends on the identity of Woman Migrant Worker in China, which then depends on socio-historical contingencies and power relations" is therefore simply inaccurate. The example above also underscores the point that the existence of one category does not depend on the existence of another category, and that it is not the case that socio-historical contexts and power dynamics do not participate in these dependence relationships at all.¹⁴ This immediately rules out all of the proposed options.

Second, one might argue that Figure 3 allows for some form of dependence relationship between identities and their respective socio-historical contexts and power dynamics. However, Figure 3 also implies that the contexts associated with non-intersectional categories are ontologically posterior to those associated with intersectional categories. For instance, the interplay of patriarchy in China and transnational

14 Bernstein seems to think that identities have causal power when she suggests that "intersectional categories clearly share many of the properties and causal powers of their constituents" (Bernstein 2020, 327). But this is a mistake: it is not identities that cause some groups to experience discrimination, but rather *powers*. Suggesting that identities have causal power can lead to undesirable normative consequences, such as the legitimization or naturalization of oppression.

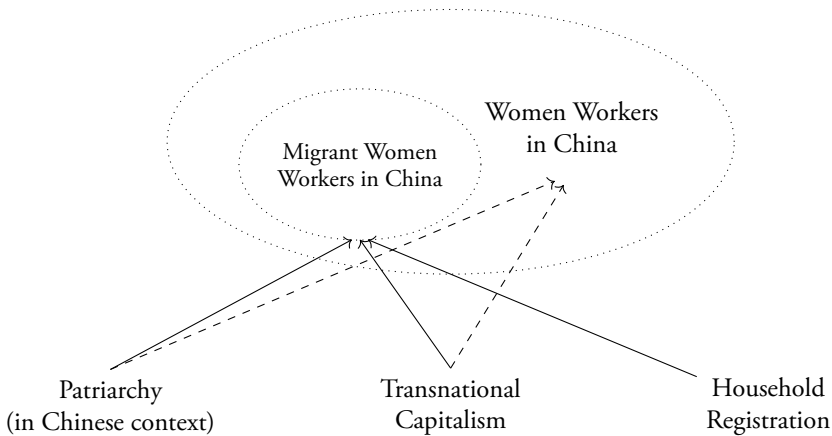


Figure 4. $X \rightarrow Y$: Y causally and explanatorily depends on X . Solid arrows target Migrant Women Workers in China. Dashed arrows target Women Workers in China.

capitalism would be treated as ontologically posterior to the interplay of patriarchy, transnational capitalism, and China's household registration system. This conclusion, however, is clearly mistaken.

Bernstein's framework would categorize the relationship between "Woman Migrant Workers in China" and "Woman Workers in China" as a part-whole relationship, with the former being ontologically prior to the latter. However, what is actually at play here is that the latter identity is simply more coarse-grained than the former, encompassing both migrant workers and urban women who have better access to social security, reproductive benefits, and stable incomes. The specific dynamics and structures that shape "Woman Migrant Worker in China"—such as the discriminatory household registration system—may not be central to the general experience of "Woman Worker in China" because different groups are positioned differently within the discriminatory household registration system. This reinforces the point that each identity is contingent on a *specific* set of socio-historical contexts and power dynamics, and a good framework for the metaphysics of intersectionality should capture the *distinct* ways in which these contexts shape each identity. Instead of treating socio-historical contingencies as a monolithic or undifferentiated backdrop, the framework should allow for the recognition of how particular socio-historical power structures specifically influence the formation and experiences of different identities, rather than lumping them together, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

The failure of all the options suggests that treating identities as the target explanandum of intersectionality and adopting a metaphysical framework grounded

in part-whole ontological priority may not be the best approach. Instead, we should consider another framework that warrants serious attention: understanding the relationship between identities such as “Woman Worker in China,” “Woman Migrant Worker in China,” or even “Woman (globally)” in terms of generality and abstraction, as shown in Figure 4. Here, the dotted circle does not indicate a part-whole ontological priority in the sense used by Schaffer or Bernstein, but rather illustrates a demographic relationship. Specifically, the individuals or populations that make up “Woman Migrant Worker in China” are included within the broader category of “Woman Worker in China.”

4. JORBA AND LÓPEZ DE SA: EMERGENT EXPERIENCES

Unlike Bernstein, Marta Jorba and Dan López de Sa focus on experiences—or, more specifically, the properties of experiences—as the central explanandum in the metaphysics of intersectionality. They adopt an emergence framework to explore the relationship between intersectional experiences and their underlying bases.

The idea of emergence has a long-standing tradition in philosophy, within attempts to capture how, under certain conditions, *novel* aspects of reality occur; in a way that is both dependent but autonomous from the world’s *more basic* aspects (Jorba and López de Sa 2024, 6, emphasis added).

With some qualification to come, we contend that emergence provides a suitable articulation of how emergent entities are, in a sense, new existents, *over and above* the *more basic* things from which they emerge (Jorba and López de Sa 2024, 6, emphasis added).

The primary motivation for adopting an emergence framework is its ability to capture two key aspects of intersectional experiences that Jorba and López de Sa consider significant: (i) that intersectional experiences are *dependent* on their basis, and (ii) that they are *explanatorily autonomous* from it. By “explanatorily autonomous,” Jorba and López de Sa refer to the *unpredictability* of intersectional experiences: “the emergent entities are *explanatorily autonomous* and, at least to some extent, *unpredictable* from the basis from which they emerge” (Jorba and López de Sa 2024, 7, emphasis added). Note, however, that while Jorba and López de Sa’s account of emergence assumes a form of ontological priority, this is not true of every proponent of emergence. Some hold that emergence merely indicates the absence of certain explanations within a given framework or model, and thus can be separated from ontological priority (see Taylor 2015).

Jorba and López de Sa view the intersection of social categories—in the relevant social contexts—as the basis of intersectional experiences: “Intersectional experiences then emerge from the intersection of social categories when there are discriminative and privileging dynamics around such categories” (10).¹⁵ One might, however, raise the question of the role that the so-called relevant dynamics and context play in this basis. Specifically, what is the relationship between the relevant social structures, power dynamics, and the respective categories—the exact challenge Bernstein’s proposal faces? Do these contexts play causal or constitutive roles in how the categories interact and how the experiences emerge? I will explore these questions further in Sections 4.2.

In the remainder of this section, I will examine two main challenges facing their proposal and explain why these challenges make it difficult for their framework to meet the proposed desiderata: (i) not only are intersectional experiences *not* as unpredictable as suggested, but the very notion of treating them as unpredictable from their basis exposes a fundamental problem with the emergence framework; and (ii) the role of socio-historical context in relation to the categories and intersectional experiences within their framework.

4.1. The Collapsing Problem: Predictable and Well-explained Experiences

Jorba and López de Sa argue that one of the merits of their proposal is that an emergence framework can effectively capture the explanatory autonomy of intersectional

15 There are two points that need clarification. First, Jorba and López de Sa use the terms “the conjunction of social categories” and “the intersection of social categories” interchangeably in their paper. This choice stems from their desire to reserve terms like “intersectional categories” for a specific metaphysical stance that treats social categories as constitutive of each other—one of the anti-essentialism views we discussed in Section 2. They aim to remain metaphysically neutral on whether social categories are constitutive of one another, considering this a strength of their proposal. First, as I’ve suggested in Section 2, metaphysical neutrality is not always a virtue. As we will see in Section 4.2, the choice to be metaphysically neutral on the historical contingencies of underlying categories isn’t neutral at all; it’s a stance in itself, much like how staying neutral on the Palestine issue is, in fact, taking a side.

Second, their characterization of the basis of intersectional experiences is inconsistent throughout the paper—and I will try to be charitable here. For example, at one point they write that “[...] intersectional experiences emerge from the conjunction of social categories when social structures make them relevant vis-à-vis discrimination and privilege” (Jorba and López de Sa 2024, 1). Elsewhere, they claim: “[...] intersectional experiences emerge from the interrelation of different axes of discrimination and privilege that are determined by the relevant social structures and dynamics” (Jorba and López de Sa 2024, 2). And later they add: “The weak emergence of intersectional experiences just requires there being a conjunction of categories, i.e., one is woman and one is poor, which social structures have made relevant regarding discrimination and privilege, as we explained above” (Jorba and López de Sa 2024, 3). Most of the time, when they present their view, they treat social categories in the relevant context as the basis of emergent intersectional experiences.

experiences. The basic idea is that when analyzing the experiences of “Chinese Migrant Workers,” for example, the intersection of social categories or conditions such as “being a woman,” “having a rural household registration,” “being low-income,” and “being Chinese,” in the right kind of context, give rise to a *new* form of experience—namely, the experience of Chinese women migrant workers with rural household registration—that is unpredictable. But is this truly the case? Consider the following tragic incident.

On June 15, 2024, in a small rural town in China, eight women workers tragically suffocated in a refrigerated van while commuting home. These women, ages 40 to 50, were gig workers at a local beef processing plant. The choice of refrigerated vans—an inexpensive but unsafe mode of transportation—was made to cut commuting costs. Unfortunately, this incident is part of a disturbing pattern: in recent years, many of the rural gig workers in China who have died while commuting have been women. In fact, while I was revising this manuscript, another tragedy occurred—fourteen rural gig workers went missing in a storm while commuting, most of them women in their 40s or 50s.

Here is an explanation of the patterns of this tragedy from an intersectional perspective.

Due to traditional gender norms and structural discrimination, rural women in China are often pushed into the informal sector, where they receive minimal wages—or even less—and lack social security. The household registration system exacerbates the challenges these workers face, particularly in accessing essential social reproductive support, such as education and healthcare, in urban industrial areas.

Rural women working in urban jobs often experience unstable and intermittent employment, heavily influenced by their age and marital status. They are more likely than their male counterparts to return to the countryside for family reasons. Even when they return, married rural women face significant time and opportunity constraints due to reproductive responsibilities, shaped by traditional gender norms, preventing them from seeking more stable work in cities.

Consequently, many women who remain or return to rural areas prioritize family over work, opting for flexible, low-wage jobs to “subsidize the family” or “earn pocket money.” To reduce commuting costs, they often resort to unsafe transportation. It’s crucial to note, however, that this flexibility is never gender neutral. Rural women’s lives are shaped by gendered expectations and the

discriminative household registration system: without sufficient social security provided by the state, they must care for children and elderly relatives, leaving them with little control over their own time. Their choice of gig jobs reflects the economic system's privatization and devaluation of social reproductive labor, perpetuating the exploitation and oppression of rural women in China.

What this analysis of the tragedy suggests is that, if an explanation *carefully* considers the complex interplay of the relevant socio-historical material context and power relations at play—in this case, the intricate relationship between gender, marital status, age, household registration, and broader class dynamics in China—we can reasonably expect to identify the patterns of such tragedies and understand how they arise. In other words, a thorough and careful intersectional explanation will *not* treat intersectional experiences as unpredictable or unexpected. If certain intersectional experiences *appear* unpredictable from their basis, it may not be because the experiences themselves are inherently unpredictable, but because the underlying basis serving as the explanation is *incomplete*.

To further illustrate why an emergence framework that considers higher-level phenomena—such as intersectional experiences in this context—to be unpredictable from their basis is problematic, let's see another toy example from Elanor Taylor.¹⁶

Consider one hundred apples arranged in a circle with a circumference of forty feet. Consider also a person with complete knowledge of the intrinsic properties of each of those one hundred apples. It is not possible for this person to deduce the circle's circumference from the intrinsic properties of its constituent apples.

[...] If the micro-level properties include only the intrinsic properties of the apples, then it is impossible to deduce the circumference of the circle from the micro-level properties, and having a circumference of forty feet meets the necessary criterion for emergence. If, on the other hand, the microlevel properties include the extrinsic properties of the apples, particularly their relative positions, then there is no failure of deducibility. It seems as if [one] has made a mistake in claiming that having a circumference of forty feet is an emergent property of the circle, because the moment we broaden the micro-level properties to include extrinsic properties, this property is plainly not emergent (Taylor 2015, 733–734).

16 Although Taylor takes the collapse problem to be specifically a problem for strong emergence, I use this example here because I think it applies to all kinds of frameworks that take emergent properties to be unpredictable.

A couple of key takeaways. First, the two examples above suggest that intersectional experiences are not—and *should not* be treated as—“unpredictable” from their basis, as the emergence framework would imply, provided we take seriously what constitutes that basis. It is worth noting, moreover, that even many proponents of emergence do not mean “unpredictable” in the sense that Jorba and López de Sa take it to be. Rather, they typically mean that the target properties or phenomena cannot be easily explained *within a given framework or model*.¹⁷ For instance, Taylor writes:

Hempel and Oppenheim explicitly associated emergence with the absence of *scientific explanations*. According to Jackson and Chalmers the facts about emergent phenomena are not a priori entailed by the facts about their micro-level bases, and this just is the unavailability of a *certain kind of explanation*, a priori reductive explanation (Taylor 2015, 745, emphasis added).

But the absence of certain kinds of explanations is *not* the same as unpredictability. Thus, the main motivation for adopting an emergence framework—that intersectional experiences are explanatorily autonomous—remains contestable and insufficiently justified.

Second, treating intersectional experiences as unpredictable from their basis carries significant normative consequences. The strength of the intersectional framework lies precisely in its ability to reveal patterns of inequality and privilege produced by nexuses of power relations across multiple axes, without resorting to essentialism. But this does not mean we cannot predict the forces at play. Social science often does so by analyzing these intersections in nuanced ways. In fields such as sociology, the very purpose of adopting an intersectional framework is to explain and predict the complex experiences arising from the dynamic interaction of multiple power relations. Similarly, many grassroots activists have long devoted themselves to understanding—and thereby intervening in—the oppressions faced by marginalized groups from an intersectional perspective. To argue that intersectional experiences are simply unpredictable not only oversimplifies the framework, but also risks overlooking, if not devaluing, the objectives and contributions of both empirical research and grassroots activism grounded in intersectionality.

4.2. The Role of Socio-historical Contexts and Power Dynamics

Assume that there are still compelling reasons to adopt an emergence framework, provided we are careful about what constitutes the basis. The challenge that Bernstein’s

17 I thank Elizabeth Miller for pushing me to make this point more explicit.

framework faces resurfaces: How should we conceptualize the roles of the relevant socio-historical context and power dynamics within such a framework? Does treating identities as the basis risk rendering them ahistorical, thus leaving room for an essentialist view of identities?

On the one hand, Jorba and López de Sa argue that it is a strength of their theory that an emergence framework—one that situates intersectional experiences as emerging from social identities—allows for the influence of socio-historical contexts and power dynamics.

The fact that experiences emerge when the relevant social arrangement is in place appropriately captures the dynamic way in which intersectional experiences of discrimination (and privilege) *depend* on power relations, and on how society evolves and changes (Jorba and López de Sa 2024, 11, emphasis added).

Our proposal contends that intersectional experiences generally emerge when social structures *make* the corresponding categories relevant to discrimination (or privilege). Intersectional experiences then emerge from the intersection of social categories when there are discriminative and privileging dynamics around such categories (Jorba and López de Sa 2024, 10, emphasis added).

At first glance, it seems that Jorba and López de Sa are addressing both Desideratum 1 and Desideratum 2, suggesting that an emergence framework could adequately satisfy these criteria.

On the other hand, Jorba and López de Sa claim that their proposal has the virtue of staying *metaphysically neutral* on whether the intersection of categories is itself intersectional—for example, whether gender is inherently a raced and classed category. To claim that one can remain “neutral” on this issue while theorizing intersectional experiences is to suggest that the authors dismiss the historically contingent nature of underlying categories as irrelevant to seriously engaging with their normative dimensions.¹⁸ This also leads Jorba and López de Sa to include the following example as one way experiences could emerge from underlying categories:

Let us consider what is very plausibly now a socially irrelevant category: “lefties”, women who sleep on their left side. Given that lefties, as such, experience no discrimination or privilege, there is no experience of being lefty for intersectional analysis to consider. But things could have been different, and might be different in the future. If society were to make that intersection relevant [...] then the

18 I appreciate reviewer 2 for pushing me to make this point even more explicit.

experience of being lefty women would emerge [...] For it to actually emerge, society must in fact arrange itself in that way, that is, arrange itself in ways that discriminate and/or privilege around that category (Jorba and López de Sa 2024, 11).

What this example suggests is that the category of women who sleep on their left side is ahistorical and fixed, remaining unchanged over time. In other words, by staying “metaphysically neutral,” Jorba and López de Sa in fact take the stance that there could be social categories that are ahistorical, static, and fixed. Socio-historical contexts and power dynamics, in their view, do not shape these categories at any given time—whether by influencing them or constituting them—but instead act as external factors that change independently. When the social context shifts to make the category relevant, this fixed category then encounters its corresponding discrimination or privilege.

If we extend this reasoning to categories such as “Black woman,” it implies that the category is likewise ahistorical and internally fixed. Social arrangements evolve externally and independently of “Black woman,” such that Black women encounter discrimination or privilege only when the external environment is “ready.” If this is what Jorba and López de Sa are committed to under the banner of metaphysical neutrality, then their theory fails to meet Desideratum 1 and cannot be said to take social contexts and power dynamics seriously. Treating social categories as fixed while treating socio-historical contexts and power dynamics as external factors cannot account for the ways in which the categories themselves are historically contingent. At best, Jorba and López de Sa can *stay silent* on the controversies over social categories, but staying silent is *not* the same as staying metaphysically neutral.

We might, of course, imagine Jorba and López de Sa revising their proposal to acknowledge that power dynamics and circumstantial factors shape social categories rather than being entirely external to them. But this move raises two problems. First, once we accept that power dynamics shape the underlying categories, we can no longer remain metaphysically neutral about the historically-contingent nature of those categories—and, as Desiderata 1 and 2 suggest, we should not. Second, such a revision returns us to the same dilemma that confronts Bernstein’s framework: Is it really social categories that give rise to experiences of discrimination or privilege, or are something else—such as power dynamics—the true basis? If the latter, then we must reconsider what exactly serves as the basis for intersectional experiences—not to mention the problem we discussed in Section 4.1, i.e., whether a framework of emergence is appropriate in the first place.

5. AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK: GLOBAL SUPERVENIENCE WITH A FOCUS ON POWER

Considering the experiences of social categories—rather than the categories themselves—as the explanandum of intersectionality is a more promising starting point for its metaphysics. But as suggested in Section 4, amending Jorba and López de Sa's proposal to better account for marginalized groups' experiences and to meet the desiderata from Section 2 would also remove the motivation for adopting an emergence framework.

The natural alternative is to adopt a global supervenience framework—one that avoids metaphysical frameworks of layered fundamentality, proposing instead that the experiences of groups or individuals globally supervene on their underlying base. In the remainder of this section, I will sketch what such a proposal might look like and explain how it can meet the necessary desiderata. Importantly, I remain open to details such as what should, or can, serve as the base; the purpose here is to show that a framework avoiding hierarchical fundamentality performs better, though *much more* work is needed to refine and fully develop this framework. For simplicity, I propose that powers serve as the base, with the events experienced by individuals or groups belonging to different social categories as the supervenient.

Philosophers have long debated different kinds of supervenience relationships, such as the distinctions between weak, strong, and global supervenience. This proposal specifically adopts global supervenience, which I believe can remain neutral in many of these debates. Global supervenience concerns patterns of global property distribution—including relationships among the relata—across different possible worlds. A general definition of the global supervenience relationship is as follows:

Global Supervenience *A* properties globally supervene on *B* properties if and only if any two possible worlds with the same distribution of *B*-properties have the same distribution of *A*-properties.

This is often expressed informally as: once the distribution of *B*-properties across possible worlds is fixed, the distribution of *A*-properties across those worlds is also fixed.

Global supervenience is focused on the covariation of property patterns and does not commit itself to metaphysical necessity or hierarchical fundamentality. Unlike metaphysical necessity, global supervenience avoids commitment to “that’s-all” truths. As Jaegwon Kim clarifies:

[...] consider a world in which an object has both *G* and *F* and another has *G* but not *F* [...] the existence of such a world is entirely consistent with *F*'s global

supervenience on *G*. Given that two objects have *G* in a world[...] [*g*] global supervenience [...] *only* requires that there *not* be another possible world in which *G* is distributed over the same individuals as in the first world but in which *F* is distributed differently (Kim 1987, 319, emphasis added).

Stating that *A*-properties globally supervene on *B*-properties does *not* entail that *B*-properties are ontologically prior to *A*-properties. Additionally, if *C*-properties also globally supervene on *B*-properties, there is no implied hierarchical relationship of ontological priority between *A*-properties and *C*-properties either. As discussed in Sections 2, 3, and 4, to do justice to the goal of an intersectional framework, it is crucial that we caution against a framework that favors hierarchical fundamentality, while carefully accounting for the relationships between identities, experiences, and the role of power and socio-historical contexts. Below is a preliminary formulation of the metaphysics of intersectionality by adopting a framework of global supervenience:

Intersectionality Facts about the world—such as facts about events that individuals or groups experience—globally supervene on the spatiotemporal distribution of power and the enabling conditions (both material and discursive) that structure those power relations. Note though, *A* properties globally supervene on *B* properties if and only if any two *nearby* possible worlds with the same distribution of *B*-properties have the same distribution of *A*-properties.¹⁹

Within this framework, there are no differences in the general properties of events experienced by low-income rural Chinese women without corresponding differences in the global distribution of power in the nearby possible worlds. Similarly, there will not be any differences in the general features of events women experience worldwide without any differences in the global distribution of power in the nearby possible worlds. Both sets of events globally supervene on the same base—the spatiotemporal distribution of powers in the world—and the specific patterns we observe in the events experienced by low-income rural Chinese women will get lost once we zoom out to the global scale.²⁰ This approach avoids positing any relation of

19 This formulation is intended to accommodate different accounts of power. For instance, while Foucault resists a metaphysical treatment of power, he remains ambiguous about whether power entails capacities to act in certain ways. In this preliminary account, I understand power as the capacities and possibilities of action available to agents or groups of agents. This view is therefore compatible with treating power as relational, though I leave room for a more precise formulation in future work. I am also grateful to August Fallar and to an audience member at the ISOS 2025 conference for pressing me to clarify what goes into the supervenient properties and the “nearby possible worlds” restriction clause.

20 One implication of this is the question of how useful highly abstract identities—such as “woman”—are for understanding experiences and power relations. On the one hand, we should be cautious about making

ontological priority between the events experienced by women globally and those of low-income rural Chinese women.

The global pattern is identified by examining the distribution of power across the world in its entirety and across different time periods. Or, if we want to talk about the global pattern of events women experience in the 21st century, we will look at the distribution of power across the world in its entirety in the 21st century. In contrast, the pattern of events for rural Chinese women is shaped by the specific socio-historical power relations that structured their lives, such as those linked to China's economic opening and its role as the "world factory" before and after its decline.²¹ These differences reflect variations in abstraction and generality, not fundamentality. Framed this way, this approach helps us avoid the pitfalls of further marginalizing already marginalized groups, thus meeting Desideratum 3.

A concern with adopting global supervenience is that its emphasis on covariance might be *too weak* to capture the determination relation needed to explain how the distribution of power shapes facts about identities and the associated events (see Kim 1987). In response, we can draw on David Lewis, who proposes understanding ontological determination or truth-making in terms of *difference-making* (see Lewis 2001; Bricker 2006). In Lewis's account, laws of nature globally supervene on the distribution of local natural properties, and such a supervenience relation can be regarded as a form of ontological determination, albeit in a different sense. For example, in a given world *w*, the generalization "all *F*s are *G*s" holds due to the absence of counterexamples: given the totality of what actually exists in *w*, everything in *w* that is *F* is also *G*, with no *F*s that are not *G*s. Thus, the generalization is made true—or determined—by the totality of properties in *w*.

In our proposal, we can apply a slightly different approach to understanding difference-making in general patterns of events. Consider the generalization "all women have experienced gender discrimination." While some women may avoid discrimination due to sheer circumstantial luck or privilege, such exceptions do not function as false-makers for the broader patterns observed among events women

general claims that risk marginalizing certain groups. On the other hand, abstract identities like "woman" may still have pragmatic value when mobilizing solidarity.

21 It may appear that *x* globally supervening on the aggregate of *a*, *b*, and the relations among them could still seem additive. However, what I want to advocate is a move *outside* of the "additive" box in thinking about intersectional experiences. If what we are—or should be—examining is how individuals are shaped by power dynamics both locally and globally, then the picture is not one where we first analyze the power distribution affecting women, then the one affecting a racial minority, and only afterward consider how they interact. That approach is simply wrong-headed. Instead, we should attend *directly* to the power distribution impacting, for example, rural Chinese women at the meso or local level—while recognizing that such local distributions are always shaped by and entangled with broader, global power structures. I thank Kritika Yegnashankaran and Kelvin Chan for pushing me to make this point more explicit.

experience on a global scale. Admittedly, much remains to be clarified about how to conceptualize false-makers and truth-making in a socially constructed, mind-dependent world. Nevertheless, we might draw inspiration from how social scientists uncover relationships of dependence or determination. For instance, methods such as regression analysis are commonly used to identify statistically significant dependence relations. Although imperfect, these tools help establish whether certain factors are at least somewhat dependent, determined, or causally related. Similar approaches might offer insights into how to approach the difference-making relationships relevant to generalizations observed in the mind-dependent world.

By focusing on distribution of powers—rather than identities themselves—as the basis for global supervenience, this proposal aligns with Desideratum 2. For example, to understand why working-class, low-income, or lower-caste Indian women have low labor market participation rates and experience high levels of gender violence, we must analyze the specific power dynamics shaping their experiences and the ways these dynamics interact, with insights supported by social science research.

Furthermore, this global supervenience framework adopts a four-dimensional approach, incorporating temporal dimensions to analyze how power relations and structures interact over time and shape identities and experiences. This ensures alignment with Desideratum 1, as it situates identities within their socio-historical contexts. For instance, to understand how transnational capitalism has shaped the identities and experiences of women in the Global South, we need to examine the distribution of power before and after the significant influence of capitalism on the region's socio-economic development.

This preliminary proposal is, of course, not without its shortcomings and requires further development. As mentioned above, one major criticism of global supervenience lies in that covariance between distribution of properties is too weak to capture any robust dependence or determination relationships. This is because covariance alone does not establish directionality—such relationships can often go either way. Earlier, we discussed one potential response to this critique: introducing false-making or difference-making as a way to conceptualize ontological determination within the framework.

At the same time, an aspect of global supervenience connected to this critique may actually work in the framework's favor—its capacity to accommodate *resistance*. While it is true that experiences and identities are shaped by the global distribution of power, the framework also allows for the possibility that collective action can create “downward” constraints, reshaping power relations in specific local contexts or even more broadly. In other words, supervenient properties may influence properties in the base. How such downward constraints operate within a global supervenience framework requires more development, but such a framework opens the door to

incorporating resistance into the metaphysics of intersectionality. Denying the possibilities for resistance and the agency of people on the ground, I would argue, is the last thing we academics—who claim to care about social justice—should be doing. This is one of the normative consequences of adopting frameworks built on hierarchies of fundamentality and one-directional dependence relations.

In short, a global supervenience framework that avoids hierarchical ontology offers a more promising alternative to grounding or emergence frameworks for understanding the metaphysics of intersectionality. Even for those skeptical of global supervenience, the discussions in Sections 2, 3, and 4 should provide valuable insights into how to approach the metaphysics of intersectionality and identify the desiderata that ought to guide its development—or so I hope.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the two reviewers for their insightful feedback. I also extend my gratitude to Elizabeth Miller and Kritika Yegnashankaran for reading an earlier draft of this paper and providing valuable comments.

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