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Intersectionality: Reception in France and Findings from a study of the transition from childhood to adolescence¹

Virginie Vinel

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Introduction

The notion of intersectionality is now used in many fields in sociological research in France, a sort of methodological „must” frequently invoked in research on gender studies. My paper is in two parts: the first focuses on the way the notion of intersectionality was received in France in the early 2000s and how it was used; the second is a presentation of a study on the transition from childhood to adolescence² that a team of researchers including myself carried out and during which we noted instances of intersectionality at play.

Intersectionality: its reception in France

In France, the notion of intersectionality appeared in 2004-2005, with the translation of an article by Kimberlé Crenshaw (2004) in a well-known French publication on gender studies, the *Cahiers du genre*. This article was defined by a number of French commentators on intersectionality as Act I of the movement, with Crenshaw in the role of the inventor of the term. The article brought about a great change in approaches to women’s studies: Crenshaw attacked these studies for their ethnocentrism; feminism was nothing more than ‘white’ feminism which, in so far as it related to the United States, excluded consideration of the plurality of „racial” groups of American women and the situation of those who were both Black and female. In France, the article was well received and introduced the idea that gender relations should be articulated with national origin, colour and social class, that is, those other social relations referred to in the triptych „gender, class, race”.

In my view, as an anthropologist, the term „race” is problematical because it creates

¹ Translation from French to English by Philippa Norriss.

² Research Program *CORAGE*, *Experiencing Bodily Changes and Crossing Age: the case of 9 to 13 year-old Children (France – Italy)*, funded by the French National Agency of Research (ANR), directed by Nicoletta Diasio and Virginie Vinel.

confusion. In the recent social sciences, the term is a concept used in reference to the varying forms of social construction of population differentiation based on the colour of the skin or country of origin (Dorlin, 2012; Fassin, 2012). In common parlance and in the early years of anthropological studies, the word „race” is used to define populations thought of as naturally different from each other; and yet, as we know, „races” in the sense of genetically different human entities, do not exist: human beings form a single race. I feel that, in using the same term, the social sciences run the risk of giving credibility to popular, dated ideas, and we know what damage these did in the 20th century in Europe. I prefer to speak of „racialization” or „colour boundary”, even the expressions are a little long.

The translation of Crenshaw’s article into French was followed by a large number of conferences and seminars in sociology, history and the political sciences³, by translations and annotations of other founding American texts on the intersectionality movement, and by further theoretical thinking and field work⁴. This great intersectionality wave should not however obscure the earlier pioneering work of certain French-speaking writers. Colette Guillaumin (1992) at the end of the 1970s showed that hierarchies related to gender, the colour of the skin and national or ethnic origin are ideologies and social constructs. She first emphasized that „sex”, like „race”, are naturalized social categories. The work of Danièle Kergoat (1973) brings out the heterogeneous nature of and the antagonisms within the working class (immigrants, women, „national” male workers), though the main emphasis of her work was hierarchical gender relations. These pioneers are now recognized in France for their contribution to discussions on intersectionality; the work of contemporary French theorists, on the other hand, tends to be in line with English perspectives on the subject.

Among the many publications since 2004, special mention should be made of those by Elsa Dorlin, a philosopher and specialist in the history of ideas. She has edited and annotated articles published in *Black feminism* (2007), thus making these available to a wide public; she has also published essays on the joint historical construction of gender and population/race-related hierarchies through the history of colonialism and slavery from the 17th to the 19th century (Dorlin, 2006).

3 For example the conférences *Race, classe, genre comme catégories de la différence et de l'inégalité. Comment profiter des approches de l'intersection: Colloque junior* du Ciera (Histoire), September 2009; *À l'intersection des situations de domination: Perspectives transnationales et transdisciplinaires*, Eleni Varikas (GTM/CRESPPA-CNRS, PARIS 8) and Patricia Paperman (LABTOP, PARIS 8) (*Etudes politiques, Sociologie*), 7-8th June 2011.

4 Cahiers du Cedref, *(Ré)articulation des rapports sociaux de sexe, classe et „race”. Repères historiques et contemporains*. 14 |2006 ; *Genre et perspectives postcoloniales* 17 |2010 ; Hamel Christelle and Siméant Johanna, „*Genre et classes populaires*”, *Genèses*, 2006/3 no. 64, p. 2-4.

The synthesis in French edited by Sirma Bilge (2010), a Professor of sociology at the University of Montreal, made a significant contribution to thinking on theory and methodology. She identifies three major approaches to intersectionality in English and French speaking research circles. The first approach is analytical: one relation or term takes precedence over the other; this other term is presented as an extension, or development of the first one and so is soluble in it. For instance, „racism is an extension of sexism”. The second approach to intersectionality is from the arithmetic perspective. Here, intersection is presented either as an addition or as a multiplication of distinct forms of domination, the number of which can be infinite (Bilge, *ibidem*). For example, addition is involved when discrimination by gender is compounded by discrimination by national origin (female immigrants from North Africa); multiplication when interaction between axes of domination occurs (this is frequently expressed as „reciprocal attachment”). Third, according to Bilge, there is a more holistic approach to the interweaving of social relations and power which demonstrates how categories can be constructed together. Elsa Dorlin (2006), whom we mentioned earlier, adopts this approach. She shows how, historically, the construction of the concepts of race and gender emerged in parallel, in other words, when a hierarchy of gender was developed alongside a hierarchy of populations: in the 19th century, the body of a Black was thought of as pathogenic – like the body of a woman – and so Blacks were considered to be naturally inferior to white Europeans.

The large number of publications and conferences in France on intersectionality since 2004 shows that researchers have been keen to find a frame of analysis that would both articulate and bring together otherwise disconnected research work conducted during the 1990s on the subject of gender relations, social class, racialization and ethnicization. The notion of intersectionality came at just the right time for thinking forms of inequality in their complexity. But a review of works, conferences and seminars over the last five years shows that research groups today invest the term with different meanings and for different purposes. First, some research groups emphasize the forms of oppression women are subjected to, particularly in the context of globalization, and how women distance themselves from these through engaging in social movements; others expose the oppressions that come from linking sexuality and race, such as the discriminations experienced by black homosexual males. These groups are in the tradition of critical feminism. On this point, it is interesting to note that S. Bilge (2013) should recently have published an article criticizing the depoliticization of the concept of intersectionality. Other research groups are highly critical of the notion: they

contend that, in wanting to capture the plurality of power relations populations find themselves involved in, intersectionality completely effaces or dilutes those fundamental power relations of social class and gender domination⁵. Other publications based on empirical field studies on migrant, transnational populations in particular, have provided insights into those forms of categorization and discrimination certain populations are subjected to, and how individuals identify with categories of gender, and ethnic group according to the situation they find themselves in. They have also shown how negatively-viewed populations (women, migrants, those in employment low down in the social hierarchy) also have strategies and are not simply the „victims” of power systems: as, for example, in the case of female child-careers from the Philippines in Europe (Fresnoza-Flot, 2013) or of transnational African trades-women (Catarino, Morokvasic & Hily, 2005). A number of sociologists have emphasized that social relations are not limited to the triptych „gender, race, class”, and that to these should be added hierarchies by age and generation, which are also naturalized social orders (Achin, Ouardi, Rennes et al., 2009; Voléry & Legrand, 2013; Diasio & Vinel, 2014). The main thrust of the conference we organized in June 2015 was to define methodology for observing and reporting back on the interconnexions between power relations that take all these elements into account⁶. Our research on preadolescence was conducted with the same end in view.

A study on the transition from childhood to adolescence

In a four year study that a team of researchers and I carried out from 2010 to 2013 on discourses and practices on the subject of preadolescence, the intersections of gender, racialization and age were observed. Today, preadolescence is considered to be a period of transition between childhood and adolescence; we set out to examine attitudes towards this period and how it is handled on three different levels of involvement: one team⁷ focused on the discourse and practice of educational professionals and P.E. teachers; the second⁸ analyzed a corpus of medical literature and the discourse of practicing professionals on

⁵ For example: *Comment le genre trouble la classe*, Agone 43, June 2010.

⁶ Conference *Age, genre, corps: approches empiriques et entrecroisements des rapports sociaux* [Age, gender, body: field work and intersectionality], University of Franche-Comté, Laboratory of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Strasbourg, Centre conflit, corps, créativité, and University of Lorraine, Laboratory of Social Sciences Lorraine, 2nd of June 2015.

⁷ Ingrid Voléry, Caroline Hérasse, Benoît Dejaiffe and Simona Tersigni.

⁸ Donatella Cozzi, Nicoletta Diasio and myself.

puberty, more particularly on the issue of early onset of puberty; the third team⁹ concentrated on the children themselves and their parents.

Our research was based on a qualitative methodological approach which included: semi-structured interviews with the children (N=69), the parents, educational professionals (N=40), school doctors and nurses, family doctors and pediatricians (N=52); ethnographic observations within the families concerned and in the areas where the children were active (in the neighborhood, the garden and the street), and an analysis of medical and epidemiological literature on puberty (N=110 articles).

The question of intersectionality appeared at several levels during our study:

- in discourses on and representations of children
- in the ways children construct their identity
- in the interactions between the children themselves
- in the way the researchers themselves categorize children.

In this article, I shall focus on the first two points. We examine these issues from the double perspective of materialist gender theories (Guillaumin, 1992; Mathieu, 1991; Tabet, 1979) and English interactionist theories. These latter take their inspiration from the approaches to borderwork developed by Frederick Barth (1969). They pointed to the similarities that exist in the way borders of age, gender and ethnic grouping are produced. Here, I shall draw more particularly on the work of Barrie Thorne (1987; 1993; 2004). In her main book, *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*, she shows how divisions by gender, age, country or origin and ethnic grouping are continuous, active processes that can be observed in given situations: in the practices of children (who plays with whom in the yard or in the neighborhood), and in speech („Dolls? They’re for girls”; „Boys are stronger”), words that label groups of individuals by gender or age or colour. My first example is taken from an analysis of a corpus of medical literature on the notion of precocious puberty among Black girls. The second focuses on the discourse of community workers on the children they supervise; the third and last is on the ways children identify with an age or gender, or cultural or ethnic differences.

9 Nicoletta Diasio, Marie-Pierre Julien, Simona Tersigni, Louis Mathiot and myself.

Representations of young Black girls in medical discourse¹⁰

My study focused on a medical controversy surrounding the early onset of puberty -more particularly, early breast development- American researchers had observed, among Afro-American girls. (Hermann-Giddens et al., 1997). The Hermann-Giddens findings were well received by a number of French doctors and transposed to France.

An American study published in 1997 showed that there had been a significant drop in the age of onset of puberty among girls since the 1960s (using the Marshall and Tanner scale (1969) breast development was put at 11,5 years and menarchy at 13,5). The study was given wide coverage in the English and French speaking worlds and in medical journals, but the subject was highly controversial. For example, later French and Danish articles on the issue (Gaudineau et al., 2010) pointed out that the American studies did not apply in the European context. Even so, other French specialists made indiscriminate use of the findings in the articles they put out on internet, thereby encouraging the emergence of stereotypes that came from linking gender, age and racialization.

The article entitled „La puberté avant l'âge. Nouveaux aspects” (Puberty before its time. New aspects) (Pienkowski & Granjean, 2008) and put out on internet by the Toulouse Children's Hospital is a case in point. We read: „If the age at which Caucasian girls have their first period seems to have stabilized in the mid-20th century, different studies carried out since the 1970s show that the first signs are appearing earlier and earlier”. (*ibidem*, 6). The article made no mention of discussion of the issue in America, or to the dietary and social differences between the United States and France; it simply took as given the findings of the Hermann-Giddens study (1997); it spoke of a „racial difference” with no critical regard for what the notion might imply. The reference to „race” is repeated several times: „There is hardly any difference between the races for the age at which periods first occur” (*ibidem*, 13) and „In Europe, for Caucasians, discounting exceptional cases, the lower age limit of puberty is put at 8 for girls and 9 for boys” (*ibidem*).

In another article, the notion of ethnic group is evoked in relation to those of African origin: „What is new”, says the article, „is the physiological variability and the many factors influencing the age of onset of puberty. A drop in the age of onset over the last 100 years in the industrialized countries (...); ethnic variations (precocious puberty among girls of African

¹⁰ Cf. Cozzi & Vinel (2014).

origin (...)” (Cartauld, Edouard, Pienkowski & Tauber 2008, 1311). But we know, first, that the African ethnic group does not exist - there are many ethnic groups in Africa - and second, that in the United States (the study on puberty originated there), division by colour of the skin, a legacy of the slavery era, is based on social hierarchies that come from naturalizing intellectual and physical skills and associating these with skin colour (Pap, 2006; Bosa, 2012)¹¹. Today, at census time, individuals define themselves in terms of ethnic group (Latinos, Indians) or racial group (black, white, half-caste). It is thus impossible to transfer these racialized or ethicized American social groupings to European populations. The notion of Afro-Americans is not relevant to France. Even so some practicing professionals have transposed it, replacing it by the term „black girls”, or the more politically correct expression „girls of African origin,” in spite of the fact that the Afro-American populations studied by American epidemiologists today have little in common with those African groups who, in many cases, have recently emigrated to France and Europe generally.

This confusion was apparent in what an endocrinologist I interviewed said: „What I mean is, the onset of puberty will always occur earlier among black girls than among young whites. So it also depends on the racial context.” But when I asked him if girls living in Africa also experienced early onset of puberty he said „No”, and seemed confused by the distortions that arose when relating the notion of race to place of residence, social conditions of living and diet.

In intersectional terms this analysis shows that certain medical representations are based on stereotypes linking race, gender and age: the Black girl is tall, with developed breasts, and sexually mature at an early age. This figure is a legacy of the eroticized, sexually attractive black woman, and is as much in evidence in French colonial literature (Dorlin, 2006; Boëtsch, 2006; Tarraud, 2003) as in American pro-slavery literature.

Intersectional stereotypes on the children are observed too in the discourse of other professionals: community workers.

Boys and girls from the housing estates

¹¹ Persons with the darkest skin found themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy and were relegated to the hardest work up until the middle of the 20th century only Anglo-Saxons were considered as Whites (Pap, 2006; Bosa, 2012). Categorization by colour of the skin continues to stratify American society but American racial groupings are presented as social entities not as biological or genetic types.

This example is based on interviews, observations and publications made by my colleague Ingrid Voléry (2014, 2016). Two expressions are used by community workers for distinguishing children who are difficult to work with from those who are not. These figures are used when the social workers speak of children living in areas with a large immigrant population. The terms in French are the „caïd de cite” and the „fille-de-quartier” which in substance mean, respectively, „the gang leader”, and „the girl from the housing estate”.

The community worker speaks of the boys from these areas as if they had a form of sexualization different from other boys. Indeed, in our study, generally, the adults - and this includes doctors - say that girls grow up more quickly than boys (which echoes what we said earlier on puberty). However, when talking of the boys from the estates, the community workers say that sexualized behavior begins very early, sometimes at the age of 8. They frequently talk of boys who have come to be sexually active through access to pornographic material. When talking of 12 year-olds, Maxime, a 26 year-old community worker said: „The problem you can come up against is unrestrained sexuality and then you’ve got no choice, which means you talk with them to try and get them to understand things like self-respect and so on.” (Voléry, 2014, 85). These young boys are also characterized by the difficulty they have in controlling their bodies for example, controlling their emotions or channeling their energy: „Actually, it’s a bit like young people in the disadvantaged areas. You get the impression that they can’t contain their energy, but as soon as you give them a tip or two, they find they’re able to direct it!” (ibidem, 86). These boys are considered to have been badly brought up, to be incapable of respecting the public and the private spheres alike; their parents are considered to have failed to educate them in exercising self-control.

My colleague Ingrid Voléry and I think that the intersection of age, gender, ethnicization stereotypes comes into play here: the young boys of immigrant descent are thought of as being uncivilized¹²; they are thought to move on from childhood earlier than other boys.

The way the community workers consider the girls is totally different. In contrast to those popular images constructed around the figure of the young North African female immigrant (alluring, wild, loud-mouthed), the community workers in our survey spoke of the girls they knew as discreet and reserved. First, because they reveal their bodies with restraint - that is, in conforming to the norms of gender and age the professionals live by. The girls from the estates are said to be serious and well within the age norms of growing up to womanhood.

¹² It reminds a former French minister in 1999 talked of boys from the suburbs as „*sauvageons*” *id. est* „savages”.

They stand in contrast to the „Lolitas” who are often represented as girls from the lower social classes (cf. *infra*).

The two figures used when referring to young people from these housing estates are stereotypes that do not take into account the diversity of girls and boys of immigrant families living there. The community workers have constructed norms of what girls and boys should be at a given age. These reflect the middle-class social norms of the native population: thus, young boys will be virile but not violent; young girls, reasonable, measured, tempered.

Intersectionality in identification and labelling

My last example is on the ways children identify with an age, gender, cultural or ethnic group in a given time and place, and on how they are labelled by other children using the same criteria.

First, the case of Simon¹³. Simon (10 years old) lives in a socially mixed suburb of Strasbourg. When the interviewer first went to see him, he demonstrated his culinary skills by preparing and serving a chicken-based Mauritian dish. This visit was the occasion for him to explain that his grandparents on his father’s side are, like his great-uncle, all Mauritian, but that his father and mother are French. His mother (divorced) says that Simon likes going to see these relations: „They are nice and friendly. They have also brought him close to the Mauritian culture and I think he needs that.”

In everyday life, such as we were able to observe and also from what his mother said, Simon has many friends and extra-curricular activities. At primary school and at secondary school, he was a good pupil (in primary school he even skipped a class). His mother describes him as being in advance for his age, both physically and intellectually, and in terms of independence. His friends are the boys in his class, French, and – because of his skipping a class – often a year older than him. He does not like girls because, as he says, „they’re silly.” His mother says that at primary school he was the object of racist talk, linked to the colour of his skin, and so she chose to send him to a private secondary school where he has not experienced the same problems. This school is a selective one; the children, like Simon, are mainly good pupils and come from middle or upper-middle class families.

In terms of intersectionality and borderwork, the elements used for identifying and labeling

13 An observational study carried out by Marie-Pierre Julien and myself.

Simon are a function of the social situation (Barth, 1969). At school and in his extra-curricular activities, Simon identifies himself with boys and insists on maintaining gender borders by downgrading girls of his age as when he says „they’re silly.” In the private sphere, he demonstrates his identification with the Mauritian culture through his interest in cooking and his attachment to his grandparents. Being intellectually and physically advanced for his age, and given he shows independence, he manifests his desire to identify with children a little older than him. The educational establishment endorses this when it invited him to skip a class in primary school. But, at the primary school, in a socially and ethnically mixed district, some children erected colour borders when, through their racist comments, they made him conscious of the colour of his skin. This case study points to the need to make situation by situation observations of the production of intersectional identification or labelling by gender, age and colour of the skin.

From other cases in our study we found that foreign children who had recently settled in France were also labelled; skin colour was not the issue here. For example, Louis (13 years old) is from Chechnya and had been living in France for two years when he was interviewed. He said he had grown a lot since arriving in France; now he was 1,75 m tall. He told us that the boys in his class made fun of him because he was - in their words - „too” tall and developing facial hair. Another case, analyzed by Simona Tersigni (2014), was a Philippine girl who was 11 and in a class of ten year-olds. She was considered to be under-height, a dwarf, even though she was not the smallest in the class.

These features (being over-height, under-height, over-developed or using too much make-up) frequently appeared in the interviews with children who were quick to label other children who did not quite correspond to the average norm for a particular age group. But what is striking here is that these marks of differentiation and stigmatization are used in relation to foreign children: as if there were a need to find in those children’s bodies differences leading to their exclusion.

In the children’s discourse, and even more in that of the parents, a negative figure was frequently mentioned: that of the bimbo or the „Lolita” type. One characteristic of these young girls (in the discourse of the other children and their parents) is that they are taller on average than the others. Generally speaking, too, pubertal physical changes are apparent in these girls, particularly in terms of breast development. They wear heeled shoes that some call „stilettos” and then add: „Well, that’s maybe an exaggeration.” They are said to use too much

make-up and pay too much attention to the kind of clothes they wear. They have often redone a year at school and so are older than most of the other girls in the class; they are looked up to by the younger girls, which stands in contrast to the institutional sanction. The other children, particularly the smaller and younger girls, and the same goes for adults, too, see in these taller girls who adorn themselves with the marks of adult femininity (high-heeled shoes, make-up) persons who transgress the codes of childhood and femininity during the age of childhood. This stereotype, which intersects gender and age, stands in contrast to the discreet girl mentioned earlier.

Boys, on the other hand, are not stigmatized for their over-masculinity. When boys talk of other boys, censure by social class comes into play: very low-slung „baggy” pants are considered by boys from the central areas to be yobbish (the term has ethnic undertones and opposes the middle-class town center to the suburbs/housing estates where a large proportion of descendants of immigrants live); the nicely dressed boy is „chicos”, that means smart, classy, bourgeois. But, neither the children nor their parents mention sexualization or over-masculinity when talking about boys: an illustration of the fact that, on such gender-related issues, girls are negatively viewed, more readily criticized, stigmatized than boys of the same age.

These case studies show that intersectional elements (gender, class, colour of the skin, ethnicity) are not mobilized in all social situations. Conversely, a particular factor may not be present in some situations but serve to stigmatize in others. The sociologist has to analyze each social situation and how instances of intersectionality are at stake.

In conclusion, the notion of intersectionality opens up the field for further research and reflexion. In my view, it should be factored into sociological and anthropological studies on different counts: first, because, as our study shows, intersectional elements in discourse on individuals are present in instances of labelling; second, because through observing the ways people construct their identity as a process in a social situation we can see how intersection is at play in the interactions between the actors themselves (who is friends with whom, and who exclude whom); finally, because intersectionality provides a frame for analyzing the way researchers themselves categorize people. The study of preadolescence we carried out shows that we need now to identify those social situations in which the qualifiers gender, age and colour, or social and cultural difference are mobilized: in other words, determine those elements which individuals use, and in what situations, to construct the „us” group and the

„them” group -those we do not associate with, those we stigmatize, exclude, downgrade. Detecting intersectional relationships at play can be usefully applied in schools. Future teachers would do well to espouse the notion. This would enable them to override prejudices and promote equality precisely through being able to pick up on those expressions of discrimination that intersect the elements of gender, age, colour, origin.

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