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Looking for Difference?

With the development of postmodernism, the usefulness of social categories such as gender and ethnicity has been questioned. As a result, feminist theorists have made a clear and convincing case against the use of gender, class or ethnicity as single analytic categories. The treatment of gender as a single category has arguably been afforded the greatest attention, and theorists have robustly criticised the unreflective and uncritical deployment of the category 'woman'. Feminists have been criticised, often (but not only) by other feminists, for erroneously homogenising the experiences of women and for ignoring other important sources of variation that cut across gender in important and complex ways.

Moreover, where multiple aspects of identity have been considered, researchers have been criticised for implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) treating multiple dimensions as additive and separable. In Spelman's (1988) seminal work, she refers to this as the "ampersand problem" – the problem that arises when researchers assume that the experiences of black women, for example, can be deduced by understanding separately the effects racial discrimination and the effects

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of gender discrimination. Multiracial feminist theory has played a crucial role in the development of these critiques, often referred to as 'interesectionality', arguing that their experience of race and gender could not be separated but rather needed to be considered as interrelated and inseparable aspects of identity. As Brown and Misra (2003) succinctly put it "Race is 'gendered' and gender is racialized', so that race and gender fuse to create unique experiences and opportunities for all groups" (p. 488).

In an effort to accommodate these criticisms, some researchers have called for the adoption of analyses that focus specifically on within group differences. In contrast to anti-categorical approaches which emphasise the deconstruction of analytical categories and argue against the use of fixed categories as "simplifying social fictions" (McCall, 2005, p. 1773), the literature on intersectionality has motivated intra-categorical and inter-categorical approaches. The first takes the form of in-depth qualitative analyses of, for example, South Asian migrants. The latter approach attempts to analyse more directly how analytically defined categorical differences – gender, ethnicity, social class and age – intersect in practice and in relation to particular economic and geographical contexts. This way of thinking more obviously lends itself to large-scale quantitative analyses, suggesting that data should be analysed focusing on different combinations of characteristics as opposed to different, separate social categories.

Notwithstanding some notable exceptions, quantitative researchers have been less quick to adapt their methods and models to take into account

the concerns raised by feminist theorists. For the most part, demographers and quantitative social scientists continue to employ, often uncritically, methods that fail to acknowledge or address these concerns. All too often, researchers who want to carry out gender sensitive analyses estimate models that include separate controls (often in the form of discrete sets of dummy variables) for gender, race/ethnicity and age bands. In regression analyses, this modelling strategy effectively imposes the strong assumption that the 'effects' of gender, race, and age are separable and additive. In effect, modelling strategies often ignore the complexity and intersectionality issues that feminists have discussed for more than two decades and impose the additive logic of the ampersand problem. Demographers and other quantitative social scientists can and should begin to pay greater attention to issues of intersectionality and to reflect on the assumptions that underlie their choice of method and the models they estimate.

Applications of the inter-categorical approach can uncover important differences that are masked by more simplistic, additive approaches. For example, looking across cities in the United States, McCall (2000) finds that class and racial inequalities among men, racial inequalities among women and gender inequalities among the highly educated are likely to be higher in post-industrial rather than older industrial regions, the class inequalities between women show the reverse pattern, as does gender inequality among the lower educated. These patterns could not have been identified with the simple inclusion of linear and additive dummy variable controls.

While the inter-categorical approach offers quantitative researchers a way of dealing with intersectionality, it is important to stress that its implementation will always be partial and become ever more complex as additional dimensions of diversity are considered. For quantitative research, data availability can seriously limit the extent to which intra-categorical approaches can be applied. Sample sizes are often limited, especially for some population sub-groups, and data requirements increase substantially with each additional dimension. Although data limitations – both in terms of information and sample size – mean that it is not possible to account for all sources of difference and diversity using an intra-categorical perspective, it is nonetheless true that intersectionality could be far better accommodated than it currently is in much of the extant literature.

So what can researchers do? When estimating regression models, researchers should, at a minimum and wherever possible, interact different identity characteristics and examine critically the size and significance of their parameters. Additionally, depending on the research question, interactions with other key variables of interest should be tested, again wherever sample size permits. All interactions should be tested for significance (with careful attention to sample size problems and how they can affect measures of significance) and compared with the results from the more restrictive model. Obviously, where more simplistic models fit the data well, simplicity is a virtue. But simplicity should be confirmed rather than assumed.

Moreover, researchers who are interested in carrying out more gender-sensitive analyses should ask themselves whether the regression approach is always the best option. More person-centred approaches like classification and regression trees (CART) or cluster analysis can help researchers identify differences across more complex groups and may be better suited

in some instances (see, for example, Zhang and Singer, 1991). In some cases, person-centred analyses can be used as a preliminary step that can be employed to identify, inform and complement the other statistical techniques such as regression analysis.

Although some analysts make an effort to examine women and men separately wherever possible, or to examine broad racial groups separately wherever possible, the idea of intersectionality provides a theoretical motivation for this practice and stresses the importance of incorporating multiple axes of differentiation. Although the findings will never be comprehensive or definitive in the sense that we can conclude there are no other social structures that need to be incorporated in order to document and understand the outcome of interest, the value in adopting this way of thinking and linking it to how we carry out our work will help elucidate areas that need further attention in our own or future work. This is one the most important contributions intersectionality has to make to demographic research.

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