

ØF-notat nr. 06/2010

**Intersectionality, Power relations
and Abuse of Women with
Physical Disabilities**

Paper presented at the 13th International Conference on Violence,
Abuse and Trauma, San Diego, September 15-17 2008

av

Vigdis Mathisen Olsvik

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Foreword

This paper was presented at the 13th International Conference on Violence, Abuse and Trauma at San Diego on September 15-17 2008. Due to demand and for easier accessibility this paper is now published at Eastern Norway Research Institute. This paper is part of my Ph.D. work on violence and abuse of women with physical disabilities at the Department of Social Work and Health Science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim. It was made possible with funding mainly from the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies, and I especially want to thank Head of Research Unit Ole Kristian Hjemdal for useful comments on an earlier draft. I also want to extend heartfelt thanks to my colleagues both at the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies and at the Eastern Norway Research Institute together with my supervisor Kristjana Kristiansen at NTNU for their kind support of my work.

Lillehammer, August 2010


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Introduction

This paper is based on data collected in connection with my ongoing PH.D. study on abuse of women with physical disabilities which consists of two parts; first, in- depth interviews with 13 women with physical disabilities about their subjective experiences of abuse and violence, second, a comparative survey of abuse against Norwegian women with and without physical disabilities (Olsvik 2006 a and b). The present paper is based solely on data from the in - depth interviews.

Initially, I assumed abuse could be understood through power relations related primarily to the social categories of gender and disability. Progressively, it became clear to me that additional power relations were present and played a major role in understanding abuse. During my analysis of the qualitative study, intersectionality appeared as an interesting concept. It has so far been applied mainly within gender studies and less within disability research and research on violence and abuse. By writing this paper I want to illustrate the usefulness of the theoretical perspective of intersectionality in analyzing power relations in abusive situations and to invite researchers who are dealing with similar topics to try and apply the concept in their future analyzes of violence and abuse.

In part one of this paper, I will introduce the concept of intersectionality as it has been applied by de los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) with regard to their research on power relations and inequality. In part two, I will illustrate my use of the concept by some cases from my own qualitative study and present the results of the analysis of abuse in different social contexts. I will close with some concluding remarks on the value of using the concept in analyzes of power relations in abusive situations.

Part I Intersectionality and the analysis of power relations

The concept of intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality derives from the English word intersection and refers to the interaction of different social categories such as gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age and disability. It emphasizes how different power relations affect each other by reinforcing or weakening, supporting or competing against each other in a dynamic interplay.

The concept has its origin in the criticism of the hegemony of white feminism and was introduced by Crenshaw (1994) in her study on how race and gender interplayed in situations of violence against women of color. She looked at what she called structural intersectionality by describing colored women's positions within overlapping systems of oppression, and at political intersectionality by showing how both feminist and antiracist policies have contributed to conceal violence against colored women. She underlines that the problem is not the existence of the social categories, but the values attached to them and the way they create social hierarchies.

Progressively, more researchers have developed the concept of intersectionality, especially within feminist theory, such as Collins (1998) who used an intersectional perspective to explore how race, gender, and class operate together in people's lives. At times one of them can be experienced as more significant than another, but they all overlap and influence each other in a dynamic interplay. Race, class and gender are the most visible categories with the most direct socio economical consequences. They overshadow, according to Collins, the "newer" categories, such as age, religion, sexual identity and disability. Collins looks at what she calls "a matrix of domination" which consists of an interwoven system of oppressive hierarchies that influence both the consciousness of the individual, the relations within the social group and the access of the group to institutional power and privileges. She contrasts it with "the additive model", where one speaks of a double or even a triple oppression. But according to her, social inequality cannot be quantified in the form of a threefold oppression of race, gender and class. By looking at these categories as additive one loses the social and structural relations between them and especially the understanding of how they influence the experience of the group. The intersectional model, however, stresses how these categories relate to each other, not by investigating each one apart or summing them up, but by examining how they are interwoven and how they change in a mutual interplay.

While Crenshaw and Collins have looked at different theoretical aspects of the concept of intersectionality, Essed (1991) has introduced a method for intersectional analysis. In her work she has tried to understand an aspect of everyday racism that she calls "gendered everyday racism" (1991). Essed's qualitative analysis can help us identify how systems of domination are expressed and

experienced in everyday life. Based on her data she gives us five analytical suggestions for how to analyze qualitative data developed on the basis of narrative theory. First, it is important to look at the context, that is to explain where and when discrimination takes place and who is involved. Second, it is important to analyze what she calls the complication or “the unacceptable”, that is to explain what went wrong. Third, it is important to focus both on the reactions and the resistance of the women who have been the victims of the abuse. The fourth suggestion, “explanations”, tells us how the abuse can be understood by using the concept of intersectionality and seeing abuse as an interplay of race, gender or other types of hierarchies of power, such as privileges of age or what she calls functional power that reflects the unequal power relationship between for instance a student and a teacher. The fifth analytical suggestion she refers to is “argumentation”, which indicates if the incident of abuse is unique or if it is part of a pattern of abuse. The way to find out is to compare the incident to research, statistics or literature related to this topic. In the analysis of my data I have used elements from Essed’s framework for an intersectional analysis.

In Scandinavia there is a growing interest for the concept of intersectionality, but, so far, mostly within gender research. In Sweden there has for quite some time been a debate about the concept, which has resulted in a special issue on intersectionality in *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* (Journal of Research on Gender) (2-3, 2005). In this debate both Lykke (2003, 2005) and de los Reyes and Mulinari (2005) have been important contributors. In Denmark a special issue of *Kvinder, Køn and Forskning* (Women, Gender and Research) (2.3.2006) has also focused on the concept of intersectionality. In Norway there is a growing interest for the concept within gender studies, while the concept so far has received little attention within disability research and research on abuse and violence.

My use of the concept has been influenced by the way the two Swedish researchers Paulina de los Reyes and Diana Mulinari have developed it in their research on power relations and inequality. In their book “*Intersektionalitet*” (Intersectionality) (2005) they depict intersectionality as a theoretical perspective showing how different historically and situationally dependent power relations are constructed by the mutual interaction of gender, class and ethnicity. Their starting point is a criticism of white middle class feminism that due to its hegemony, has excluded other groups of women, like for instance immigrant women, I would also add women with disabilities. To the authors it is as important to make visible the exercise of power against these women, as it is to show the different types of resistance by the women. Only in this way can we, according to them, be able to detect how “the unstable construction of power” can be challenged, resisted and eventually neutralized.

Intersectionality and the analysis of power relations

Research on power relations and inequality has, according to de Los Reyes and Mulinari, gone through significant qualitative alterations. Structural and one-dimensional power analyzes have been replaced by theories that explain how processes create power and inequality at different levels of society. Power and power relations are increasingly regarded as constituted by the social interaction between human beings instead of being considered a result of constant and unchangeable structures that govern the lives of human beings. Social categories such as class, gender and ethnicity have long been prominent in the analysis of power, but other categories such as age has recently received increased attention, while disability so far has received much less attention as a constituting category for power analysis.

In what way do social categories such as gender, class and ethnicity differ from categories such as sexual identity, disability and age? Historically, all these categories have resulted in exclusion, marginalization and stigmatization, but some of them differ by being connected to what the authors call "constitutive forms of inequality". While categories such class, gender and ethnicity are linked to constant structural relations of exploitation and oppression, categories such as age and disability are not. Age and generational differences, for instance, follow the life cycle, and the subordination that one experiences in childhood is temporarily reversed in adulthood only to reappear in old age. The appearance of disabilities may happen at different stages in the life cycle, and, in addition, the diversity of degrees and types of disabilities is very wide.

Accordingly, the subjective experiences of these categories are both highly individual, as well as resulting in a collective experience of the disabling barriers of society. The categories of age and of disability differ from the categories of class, gender and ethnicity which represent a subordination which may accompany one all one's life. At the same time the latter categories constitute the supporting pillars of our society and, thereby, also the allocation of economic and symbolic resources. Furthermore, the analysis of the intersection between the individual, institutional and structural levels are, according to the authors, fundamental to comprehend how differing structures of oppression are articulated, and how they strengthen each other.

Part II The use of intersectionality in the analysis of abusive situations

In an earlier paper I have constructed a typology of different categories of abuse based on my qualitative study (Olsvik 2006b). To include all the types of abuse mentioned by the women in my study I operate with a wide definition of abuse that includes different types and degrees of abuse. I divide abuse in direct or personal abuse committed by individuals and indirect or structural abuse that is “built into the structure and appears as unequal power” (Galtung 1974 p.36). One subcategory of structural abuse is “institutional abuse” which Sobsey (1994) defines as “neglectful, psychological, physical or sexual abuse that takes place in the managed institutional care of human beings” (p. 90). Both personal and structural abuse are divided into different dimensions of abuse such as physical, psychological and sexual abuse in addition to “neglect” meaning that the fundamental needs of the individual are not being met or are unnecessarily delayed which is especially relevant with regard to institutional abuse.

In my study we can see how the power relations related to gender, disability, and age interplay in addition to what I call “professional power” referring to the unequal power relations within institutions between for instance patient and doctor. In the following I will analyze some cases of abuse from the qualitative part of my study using the theoretical perspective of de los Reyes and Mulinari and the analytical framework of Essed.

Examples of analyzing abuse in the school setting

In my study there were several cases of both direct abuse at schools such as physical and emotional bullying by fellow students and indirect abuse such as neglect by the teachers and the school administration. I will illustrate this with two cases. One of the women in the study, who is mobility impaired, and who has been using a wheel chair from early childhood, described the physical bullying at school in the following way: “In elementary school I was often exposed to physical bullying. It was always fun to push my wheel chair to the ground, since I was not able to get up again by myself. It happened many times that I was lying on the ground until the teacher discovered that I was missing and came to look for me”. Another woman, who is hearing-impaired, told me that during the entire elementary school she was chased and knocked over by a gang of bullies: “I remember the breaks very well. Some of the boys were after me all the time. They looked for me in the school yard, and they scared me, because I did not always hear them coming.I still have nightmares about them chasing me...No, none of the teachers did anything to stop it”.

In addition to the physical bullying both these women experienced emotional bullying. The latter in the form of gossiping, the former in the form of social isolation, because as she said: “I was the first

student with a disability who was integrated in my school, and neither the students nor their parents nor the teachers wanted me there". Both these women were in addition exposed to indirect abuse in the form of neglect. The hearing-impairment of the first student was not taken into consideration by the teachers and the administration, which resulted in her having difficulties in following the instruction. The other woman experienced that her school was not prepared to make adaptations for her specific disability which was both physical and cognitive. This had serious consequences for her education. The women's reactions to the abuse they suffered in school were different. The first one said: "I believed things were supposed to be like this, since no one reacted", while the second one who made an attempt to change her conditions, but without success, said: "It aggravated to the point, where I asked to be transferred to a so called special school, but I was not given permission to do that".

In accordance with the analytical framework by Essed we see that the context, within which the abuse took place, was both inside the school building and outside in the school yard, and that the abuse involved both their fellow students and the teachers and the school administration. In these situations of abuse "the unacceptable" is both direct abuse in the form of shoving and pushing, teasing and slandering and indirect abuse in the form of neglect by not giving these women an education adapted to their disabilities. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the abuse went on more or less continuously during their entire elementary school. Their reactions to this abuse, both in the form of resignation and as an attempt at protesting, were not taken into consideration by the school administration and did not result in any change in their situations. By analyzing the different power relations with regard to gender, age and disability in addition to the exercise of professional power we get a better understanding of the abuse. In both cases the women's disabilities were prominent both with regard to direct physical and emotional abuse and with regard to indirect abuse in the form of neglect. Age seems less important in relation to their fellow students who were in the same age group, but is more relevant with regard to the teachers and the administration which implies a child - adult relationship. Gender was especially relevant in one of the cases of bullying by the boys, and it may also have been important with regard to the teachers and the school administration. In addition, we have two examples of professional power or what Essed calls functional power in the form of a student- teacher relationship. Gender and age seem to interplay with the disabilities of the women, while the latter is strengthened at the expense of age. In addition we have the effect of the professional or functional power, which seems to add to the women's vulnerability and helplessness.

Examples of analyzing sexual abuse

Eight of the thirteen women in my study had been exposed to sexual abuse either in the form rape, fondling, peeping or sexual comments. These different types and degrees of sexual abuse took place within family settings, at boarding schools and somatic hospitals. I will illustrate this by presenting

some cases of sexual abuse that happened at different stages in the lives of the women, during their childhood, youth and adulthood.

A couple of the women had been victims of sexual abuse in their early childhood. One of them, who is mobility disabled and dependent upon the use of a wheelchair, was sexually abused by a friend of the family from the age of five until the age of thirteen. The second woman was for the first time sexually abused around the age of three by a person unknown to her, and then again by other persons during her youth and adulthood. Sexual abuse of children with disabilities seems to be related more to their age and to the sexual identity of the abuser than to their gender and disability. The first woman was very clear on this issue and said: "It did not happen due to my disability, but rather because I was a defenceless child... It had to do with power. As I grew older, my gender became relevant, but I still believe it happened because of the abuser's need for power and control".

We find the same pattern of power relations with regard to the sexual abuse that happened to three other women during their adolescence. The first one was exposed to peeping by a night watchman at a somatic hospital during one of her long stays there. The other experienced fondling by a night watchman at a boarding school for the visually impaired during one whole school year. The third one was fondled by a doctor at a somatic hospital during one of her many treatments related to her disability. While she was resting alone in her room, a doctor unknown to her came and examined her in an invading and unpleasant way. The situation was the more traumatic, since she was unable to move and therefore unable to get away from him. When another patient entered the room, the doctor abruptly left, and she never saw him again.

Using the analytical framework developed by Essed we see that the context of the abuse in two of the cases took place, within the setting of a somatic hospital. The abusers involved were in the first case a night watchman and in the second a doctor. The third case took place in a boarding school and involved another night watchman. "The unacceptable", to use the terminology of Essed, was the sexually abusive acts towards these three young girls. The humiliation and the shock of the abuse were still very vivid in their minds. The common factors for all the three cases were that the abuse happened when the women were in their puberty, that the abuse took place in an institutional setting, and that the abusers were men in a superior position in relation to the girls. In these examples we see that the age of the girls is an important factor, and that their age interplay with their gender. These two categories strengthen each other mutually and place the young women in a potentially vulnerable situation. One special feature of these abusive situations is that the abusers were men whose job was to treat or look after the girls. Instead they took advantage of their professional positions to abuse the girls sexually which is what Essed calls functional power. The underlying factor in all the cases is the disability of

the women which was the reason why they were in the institutions in the first place, and which added to their vulnerability and therefore contributed to the possibility for abuse.

Three other women in the study had been repeatedly raped during their adulthood by their partners. One of them, who had been physically, emotionally and sexually abused by her husband for many years, is severely mobility impaired and dependent on the use of a wheelchair and had no possibility to escape him. This extensive abuse resulted in serious physical damage and frequent visits to the emergency unit at the local hospital. "I had wounds and blue marks all over and went again and again to the emergency unit, until one guy there recognized me and said that he did not believe me telling him that I had fallen down the stairway and all that. So he took the initiative to file a complaint against my husband... I was so brainwashed that I did not manage to do it myself", this woman told me. The abuse against this woman happened within the context of her marriage, where the involved persons were husband and wife, and where the wife was severely mobility impaired. "The unacceptable" was in this case the physical, emotional and sexual abuse committed by her husband. Her mobility impairment prevented her from getting away, and her marriage with an abusive husband resulted in her being "brainwashed" and unable to get out of the marriage by herself. The situations of the other two women were very similar, but not this extreme.

While age was an important factor with regard to the sexual abuse committed by adult men during the women's childhood and youth, it was not equally important in the above mentioned cases, where the abusers were men at about the same age as the women. Gender is, however, an important factor within a partner relationship, and, as we have seen, the abuse can also be related to the women's disabilities, since it makes it especially difficult for them to escape the abusive situation. Their lack of mobility can, therefore, be seen as a factor that contributes to their vulnerability within their marriages.

Examples of analyzing abuse in health institutions

Institutional abuse is an example of structural or indirect abuse that takes place within the framework of an institution and is exercised both intentionally and unintentionally by the employees of the institution through their profession. I have already mentioned some cases of institutional abuse in the form of neglect within the school system. In addition, several cases of institutional abuse were reported within somatic hospitals, home care and centres for the allocation of help devices. They included cases of neglect, but also physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Institutional abuse in health institutions may, of course, happen to anyone, but persons with disabilities just seem to be more at risk due to their frequent stays there.

Several of the cases of physical abuse that took place in hospitals and private homes were related to medical treatment and care that the women experienced as unnecessary harsh treatment. One of the

women described it this way: "Yes, I call it abuse, when they cross my tolerance for pain and do not pay attention to my pain and to my screams". Another woman told me about neglect in connection with the lack of use of a catheter after an operation, which resulted in great pain and a serious infection. "It was quite simply physical torture. It was a night in the recovery room that I will never forget," she said with tears in her eyes. A third woman who spent much of her time in hospitals due to her disability, pointed to "all the abuse that doctors and nurses are exercising either because of neglectful or unnecessary painful treatment or by not respecting you as a person". Similar cases of neglectful care were mentioned with regard to home care. Some of the women were dependent upon home care several times a day, and they were, therefore, more exposed to this kind of abuse than the others. In addition there were also cases of malpractices that resulted in permanent damage to some of the women. Malpractices may happen to anyone staying in hospital, but persons with disabilities may be more exposed due to their repeated visits there. One of the women in my study became severely speech and mobility impaired due to a mistake that was made during a minor operation. She wrote about it to me on her speech machine and called it "a huge abuse not only against me, but my whole family", because, as she wrote, "my three small children in many ways lost their mother that day". The neglect was further aggravated, since the hospital did not admit their mistake. Two other women had also experienced serious cases of malpractice; one had been exposed to blood poisoning and had been close to dying, while the other one lost her eyesight completely after a failed eye operation. In addition to neglect and physical abuse several women had experienced emotional harassments in the form of degrading comments from the employees often with reference to their disabilities. One of them explained it this way: "It has to do with their attitudes and their lack of respect for persons with disabilities. They do not manage to put their job in the right perspective and to show simple human courtesy towards those they are supposed to help".

Again, within the analytical framework of Essed, these cases of abuse have taken place within the context of different health institutions, where those involved were health personal and their patients. "The unacceptable" as Essed calls it, included cases of malpractice, neglectful or unnecessary painful treatments and verbal harassments. The reactions from the patients ranged from judiciary trials and complaints to resignation and frustration. In trying to analyze the abuse within health institutions, professional or functional power appears to be a dominating factor. But the use of professional power is related to the women's disabilities, since they are dependent upon the services of these institutions to be able to function in their everyday lives. Those in need of daily personal services seem to be especially exposed to institutional abuse. Age seems to play a certain role, since children and young people are more vulnerable than adults in a hospital setting, while gender seems to play a less significant role except with regard to sexual abuse. In relation to institutional abuse professional power is, therefore, important and closely connected to the women's disabilities, due to their frequent need of

hospitalisation, while age and gender are subordinate categories that seem to play an important role only under specific circumstances, like for instance sexual abuse.

Concluding remarks

By using the concept of intersectionality, as it has been developed by de los Reyes and Mulinari, and by illustrating this use by cases from my study, I have tried to show how different power relations related to gender, age, disability and professional power play different roles in different abusive situations. Also the social categories have taken turns on being the dominant category, but often in interaction with another category. We have also seen how social categories in different abusive situations have strengthened or weakened each other. So far disability has not been the prominent social category that I had expected it would be. Disability has, however, played a role as an indirect, but important factor in contributing to situations where women are exposed and vulnerable to abuse, and where the other social categories are free to interplay and create potential abusive situations.

By using Essed's method for an intersectional analysis I have tried in a systematic way to analyze the abuse that the women in my study have been exposed to. In addition I have been inspired by de los Reyes and Mulinari's understanding and application of the concept regarding analyzes of power relations. In accordance with their suggestions I have tried to show how the intersection of the individual, institutional and structural levels of abuse interplay by giving examples how the abuse is experienced at the individual level, how it can be reinforced within different institutional frameworks, and how in some cases abuse can be a result of reforms, like the integration of disabled students in schools. More in- depth analyzes are, however, needed in this area.

More also remains to be done regarding what kind of resistance the women have used in reaction to the abuse they have suffered. According to de los Reyes and Mulinari it is as important to point out the resistance to the abuse as to make visible the abuse itself. Only by analyzing both factors can we expose what they calls "the unstable construction of power". The women in my study were by no means passive victims, but reacted to the abuse in different ways. Some of them sought help from private or public agencies. Others had filed complaints or applied for compensation for malpractices in hospitals or lack of adequate instructions in schools. Others had become supportive persons in self-help groups or activists in women's network with the intent of helping other women who had suffered similar abuse. In addition their motivation to join the research project was the result of a wish to draw attention to abuse against women with disabilities, so that their own painful experiences could serve a purpose.

By the use of the theoretical perspective of de los Reyes and Mulinari and the method for an intersectional analysis of Essed I hope I have been able to show the usefulness of the concept of intersectionality in analyzing power relations especially with regard to abuse and violence.

In my view this concept deserves more focus not only within gender studies, but also within disability research and research on abuse and violence.

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Intersectionality, Power relations and Abuse of Women with Physical Disabilities

This paper which was presented at the 13th International Conference on Violence, Abuse and Trauma at San Diego on September 15-17 2008 illustrates the usefulness of the theoretical perspective of intersectionality in analyzing power relations in abusive situations with regard to women with physical disabilities. In part one of this paper, I introduce the concept of intersectionality as it has been applied by de los Reyes and Mulinari with regard to their research on power relations and inequality. In part two, I illustrate my use of the concept by some cases from my own qualitative study and present the results of the analysis of abuse in different social contexts. I close with some concluding remarks on the value of using the concept in analyzing power relations in abusive situations in general.

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