



# Intersectionality as a Useful Tool for Capturing Social Inequalities: An Interview with Professor Mary Romero<sup>79</sup>

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Křížková, Alena, Romero, Mary. 2018. „Intersectionality as a Useful Tool for Capturing Social Inequalities: An Interview with Professor Mary Romero by Alena Křížková.“ *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research*, Vol. 19, No. 2: 182–188. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13060/25706578.2018.19.2.431>.

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<sup>79</sup> Rozhovor vznikl v rámci projektu Intersekcionalita v sociologickém výzkumu sociálních nerovností a dopadů ekonomické krize na zaměstnanost GA ČR (reg. č. 15-137665) a RVO: 68378025.

**A: When I read your books *Maid in the USA* (1992) and *The Maid's Daughter* (2011), I realised that you talked about gender, race, and class dominance, but you didn't call it intersectional analysis. Was that an intention?**

M: Actually, I am surprised to think back and realise that I didn't use intersectionality, but I'm not sure how common the term intersectionality was in the early 1990s. I don't think of intersectionality as just a theory. I use it for methodological purposes and recognise both its methodological roots and theoretical roots. To me intersectionality represents a useful tool. It is a lens, which helps me capture the intersections of issues of power and social inequality. I know some of my colleagues have elaborated on intersectionality as if it were a field of its own, and while I embrace the concept of intersectionality, I first consider it a tool for getting somewhere else. Trying to conceptualise it has been a challenge for a lot of people. I find it easier to use an intersectional perspective in research rather than to define it because its application can reveal new dimensions. Adopting an intersectional perspective is challenging because many sociologists are trained to consider only gender, only race, or only class. I've always been attracted to the messiness of trying to understand how they all collide together and analyse the different power relations and how they interact.

One of the reasons I was so attracted to intersectionality when I started doing the research on domestic workers was because the setting poses a very rare situation. My research was in a social setting in which women of different races and different social backgrounds came together in the intimate space of the home. This provided a platform for seeing the way that the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, etc., played itself out in employer/employee interactions and in the way the work was structured.

**A: You talk about yourself in *Maid's Daughter* too, because you have a background of domestic work in your family.**

M: Yes. My mother was a domestic worker and I worked with her when I was growing up – during vacation and summer. As a graduate student I was short of money the semester I was finishing my dissertation and I began to work again as a domestic worker. It was an odd experience working for women with less education than me.

**A: You also described how through practices of hired domestic work, one learns from a very young age about class and racial inequalities. Could you explain your argument a bit more?**

M: I started to think about how hiring a domestic worker confirms and enhances the status of the employer. Since the US government hasn't really stepped in to provide families with the resources they need, affluent families who have the means



to purchase this labour do so. In purchasing domestic labour, children are exposed to and learn about class, gender, and racial stratification. The first time I thought about it was when I was reading an article in which the journalist was describing an interview she had with the employer of a domestic worker. While she was talking to her, the domestic worker was ironing and the child she was watching was pulling on her clothes. Since she wasn't giving him/her full attention the child kicked the woman. In the interview, the employer told the journalist that she thought her domestic worker was ideal because she spoke Spanish. Given the large numbers of Spanish-speaking people in California, the employer felt that a Spanish-speaking nanny could provide her kids with the opportunity to learn Spanish as a second language at home. Yet, as the journalist reflected on the child kicking the worker, she realized that the child was also learning about race, class and gender.

Spanish-speaking Latinas dominate domestic service demographics in California. As people live in heavily segregated neighbourhoods, the only brown women coming to the neighbourhood are cleaning and caring and serving other people. Children see Latino/a people in those roles and learn to assume that they are always just the help. Additionally, children who are cared for by a domestic worker are not taught to do any care work, such as picking up after themselves. This practice reinforces the concept of privilege, which other kids, say the children of the domestic worker, may not have. This process then continues to be repeated as subsequent generations repeat and reproduce these systems of inequalities and privilege.

Domestic service has an effect of socializing these children, and even the employers, to assume that these women are there to wait on and care for them. If they have a conversation, domestics are there only to listen, but not to have a meaningful dialogue or an exchange of ideas. They are there to provide emotional or domestic labour and there is no reciprocal relationship. Domestic workers do not have the parental power to engage with the child, so they are obviously not going to treat the child as their own child, and the children learn this and take advantage of it.

**A: Now let me focus more explicitly and conceptually on the intersectional perspective you introduce in your new book *Introducing Intersectionality* (2018). Patricia Hill Collins (1990), who was one of the main figures in the development of the intersectional perspective, defined intersectionality as a critical social theory that aims to transform institutions and social structures. It is also an interdisciplinary concept. However, some authors criticise the approach for its fragmented empiricism. As a sociologist, do you think that intersectionality has the power to change the way research on social stratification is traditionally done in sociology and to provide an explanation of how the system functions?**

M: Yes, I hold a lot of hope for intersectional approaches to studying power. I read a book by two legal scholars Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2003) – *The Miner's Canary* – and they used the metaphor of the miner's canary to examine the group who is in the most subjugated and subordinated position. They argue that if their needs can be addressed, then the needs of other groups less impacted are addressed. In their case studies they focused on the people in communities who were suffering the most or who were the most negatively impacted. By starting with their positionality, they were able to find a solution that benefited other people as well. I have always thought about intersectionality in terms of trying to find the person most impacted by a social problem or issue, we can begin to understand how the systems of oppression function. As we ourselves rarely experience only disadvantages, and indeed we all experience privileges in certain settings, if we begin to understand how the two interact with each other, we have more information about how structures operate and function.

**A: So do you think that intersectionality can become a mainstream way of thinking in sociology?**

M: Well, I think in some fields it is becoming more mainstream, but there are certain fields that are still holding out. Quantitative fields have a hard time with it. I can't imagine mathematical sociology quickly adopting intersectionality as a practice. Other fields have begun to incorporate intersectionality, such as sex and gender and immigration. To some degree there's still a reluctance to talk about race from an intersectional perspective; instead some mainstream scholars continue to talk about ethnicity. We're still far away from intersectionality being taken for granted as a practice in sociology. Intersectionality came in as a challenge to the way traditional sociology was being done and the status quo is still resisting.

**A: What do you think of recent developments around gender studies and women's rights worldwide? Examples are: the assault on women's reproductive rights in the US, the assault on gender studies in Hungary, and other anti-feminist actions and movements. I am sure we would agree that an intersectional approach to the social problems that are at the roots of this 'war on women' is definitely needed, but I would like to know how you think these actions or historical developments might impact the development of an intersectional perspective.**

M: In recent years, intersectionality has been a central organising theme among activists. Rather than narrowly defining an issue or the consequences of a particular policy or practice, activists are adopting inclusive measures. I believe we have a lot to learn from organisers using intersectionality as a tool, as a practice rather than simply a theory or research method.



**A: In your new book *Introducing Intersectionality* you give a great example of an intersectionality perspective in analysing the Take our Daughters to Work Day initiative. The aim of this educational initiative has been to take daughters (and also sons) to work to introduce them to higher-paying, male-dominated careers and to increase their self-esteem. It assumes that gender is a universal experience and that girlhood does not differ by race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and disability. But the reality of, for example, domestic workers is fundamentally different and this work can in fact rather lower the self-esteem of workers and their children. Using this example you also illustrate the problem with the idea that gender socialisation is the major source of social inequality. Can you explain this idea more in the context of an intersectional perspective?**

M: I don't think I did identify gender socialisation as the major source of social inequality. In the case of domestic workers, class, race, religion, and immigration status are forms of domination that place these women in vulnerable positions. While the employers may be women, they do not share the same class status or, frequently, the same race or immigration status as the worker. Depending on the worker's circumstances and social context, she may have access to outside resources to assist in grievances that emerge working for an employer. For instance, in the US, domestics employed in states with a Domestic Bill of Rights have basic labour protections. Not all workers are oppressed in the same way and not all employers share the same privileges. Laws surrounding labour and migration are significant in maintaining oppression and privileges.

**A: I very much like your Rubik's cube metaphor, which is highly illustrative, as everyone knows the Rubik's cube puzzle and how it functions. This metaphor has the advantage of being dynamic compared to other metaphors used to explain intersectionality. On the other hand it also has the problem of simplifying the linearity of the functioning of each system of dominance as well as the problem of the definite number of systems of dominance that are included in the analysis (because each Rubik's cube has 6 colours). Also, I remember this puzzle from my childhood, and often some cube(s) fall out. or it is possible to dismantle the cube into pieces and put it back together – in fact, to solve the puzzle by cheating. I think the missing cubes might signify very often the missing important data that we need for the analysis but which we don't have. How are you developing the puzzle of intersectionality further in your work?**

M: My use of the Rubik's cube is limited to its serving as an analytical tool. I agree that it does not capture the fluidity of intersectionality as it operates in everyday life.

However, to analyse social action, social relationships, or social problems (to name a few), the Rubik's cube is useful in holding intersectional perspectives in place to identify the ways that various power dynamics function. We tend to identify the most obvious or the group most impacted at a point in time, rather than the complexity of social inequality. At this point, I do not have plans to further develop the puzzle of intersectionality.

**A: As the 110th President of the American Sociological Association (ASA) can you share with readers some of your intersectional insights from this organisation? What is the position of the intersectional perspective there as well as of the aim to achieve social justice? Sociologists are often criticised for not speaking up (in the media) about social problems and about the results of their research that might help to understand social problems if not to help solve them. What do you think about it?**

M: ASA members are aware of social inequalities within the association. Contingent versus tenured faculty is a major source of inequality. Salary is another issue, along with discrepancies in development funds among faculty, which are used to cover the cost of membership, registration, and expenses incurred while attending the annual conference. There is also concern that the association addresses the needs of research universities and fails the needs of sociologists employed in other kinds of educational and research institutions. ASA has tried to include community colleges and state colleges and universities with higher teaching responsibilities. They have reached out to high school students and sociology high school teachers. There are efforts underway to be inclusive of contingent faculty, which is an increasing population among sociologists. Several ASA sections are working with the leadership to address the intersectional culture of classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in the discipline. Since Michael Burroway's 2004 conference theme on public sociology, there has been a strong movement to disseminate research findings beyond journal articles and into the society at large. Younger sociologists are doing an incredible job of writing for local and national newspapers, giving TED Talks, and posting videos and blogs about social issues and sharing research findings. An increasing number of news reporters are soliciting a sociological perspective in their stories. We have a long way to go before sociologists gain the kind of status as economists advising policy-makers.

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