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Retrieving Materialism: The Continued Relevance of Dorothy Smith

Rebecca W. B. Lund[1] iD

Abstract

In this article, I argue that Smith's continued relevance coincides with more recent retrievals of Marx-inspired materialism. This materialism and the associated understanding of human beings—the social, language, and world people share in common—certainly do not capture all there is to say about Smith's eclectic and expansive social theory. However, the material dimension distinguishes her work from many other feminist sociologies and results in her continued relevance as a thinker who brings to the table another way of doing feminist sociology. I illustrate this by showing how Smith's Marx-inspired materialism and its associated understanding of language offer a productive and timely alternative to the feminist social theory of anti-categorical intersectional theory and new materialist theory.

Dorothy Smith's relevance to contemporary feminist social theory coincides with recent retrievals of Marx's materialism (see e.g., Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2019; Gunnarsson, Martinez Dy, and van Ingen 2016). Although scholars in feminist epistemology, theory, and methodology have challenged the dualist distinctions between objectivism and constructivism in different ways, Smith's challenge is rooted in a particular materialist understanding of human beings, the social, and the world. Focusing on this dimension of Smith's theory shows what still distinguishes her work from many other feminist sociologies, and it highlights her continued theoretical and methodological relevance.

Smith drew her materialist position from Marx and his phenomenology of the body. The materialist method outlined by Marx ([1932] 1998:42) in *The German Ideology* "set[s] out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real-life process" demonstrates the development from and workings of ideological processes; the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (also central in Smith's social theory), which offers a radical break with mind-body dualities,

[1]University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Corresponding Author:
Rebecca W. B. Lund, Centre for Gender Research, University of Oslo, Postboks 1040 Blindern, Oslo, 0315, Norway.
Email: r.w.b.lund@stk.uio.no

is a development of Marx's early writings on *praxis* (Bernstein 1971).[1] Human beings "are what they do." Their praxis "shapes and is shaped by the complex web of historical institutions and practices within which they function and work" (Bernstein 1971:306). This position, in both its iterations, is founded on a particular understanding of the human being as a specific kind of animal: a physiological being with basic needs and longings expressed in actual activities (Fromm and Marx 1961).

For Smith (2004:449), human beings do not differ from other animals by reference to some "essence" or "being" but through activities and practices, including those of language. Human beings are shaped in the ongoing interaction between natural, historical, and social environments and processes (Fromm and Marx 1961). The understanding and engagement of human beings with both themselves and the world are also shaped in this embodied interaction. The processes do not work *on* humans as external negative and restrictive forces but, rather, direct their energies and activities in an ongoing process of coordination.

In this article, I argue that Smith's Marx-inspired materialism and its associated understanding of language may offer a productive and timely alternative to the feminist social theory of anti-categorical intersectional theory and new materialist theory: productive, for instance, by pointing to how we might insist on a practice of explorative inquiry starting from embodied experience rather than abstract(ing) theory (Smith 2009) and timely because the materialist starting point enables us to see human beings as part of nature and nature as part of humans in a manner that makes visible the "crisis of care" and "crisis of ecology" produced under contemporary conditions of "cannibal capitalism" (Fraser 2022). Smith's nonreductionist and nonpositivist realism poses a challenge to the dualism between objectivism and constructionism, and it provides a basis for caring for both humans and nature— what Nancy Fraser (2014) calls the "hidden abode" of capitalism.

SMITH'S MATERIALISM AND UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE

Smith (2004:446) reads Marx as offering an epistemological "groundwork" for a positive empirical social science. Throughout her scholarship, she was particularly inspired by *The German Ideology* and its well-known critique of the idealist tradition of treating society and history as a product of ideas. Thinking, contemplation, the production of ideas, abstractions, categories, and modes of social differentiation should instead be treated as a product of "sensuous human activities" under specific sociohistorical conditions (Smith 2004:449). Over time, of course, some of these abstractions may become ideological practices of reasoning expressed most clearly in the working experiences of the ruling class and the intelligentsia: that is, the experience of interpreting actual human relations and activities as expressions of the "categories and reasoning of the political economy" (Smith 2004:452). Thus, while ideological categories emerge from the "real world," "real life," and "real social relations," the process of reasoning that follows results in the supplanting and invisibility of lived actualities. Ultimately, the product of human activities, such as scientific research and theory, becomes alien and perhaps even opposed to people's own best interests. However, as Smith (2004:455, 458) writes in her reading of Marx, these ideological processes may be challenged

> by uncovering the social relations reflected in the "thought and ideas."…This is an epistemology that constructs a deep connection between the categories through which we know the world as social scientists and the social relations organizing our everyday experiences…the social relations reflected in the categories should be the objects of inquiry.

Beginning with humans' material activities as the source of their social existence, Smith developed a social ontology in which social life was made up of people's ongoing coordination of material activities.[2] Language is key in this coordination process. However, Smith refers to a particular understanding of language that differs from dominant understandings of language associated with Saussure and post-Saussurian language theory (Moi 2017), drawing on Bakhtin (1981, 1986), Luria (1961), Mead (1934), Volosinov (1973), and later a particular reading of Foucault's concept of discourse[3] (see Smith 2005). Language, in my reading of Smith, shares the epistemic underpinnings of Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy, which perceives language as a practice and an expression of a "way of life"; language is embodied and carries intentions and motivations (Moi 2017). In a Merleau-Pontyian sense, experience, intention, and interpretation have an existence beyond language, which supports the "sense of and response to relevance" (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015:71; see also Aarseth 2024). It is our "being-in-the-world," in an embodied, sensuous and prelinguistic sense, that allows each of us to make sense of the world and finally "check our beliefs" at a conceptual level (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015:71). Smith (1996:194) points to this through her notion of the "actual" and the "actualities of everyday life":

> Truth and knowledge are grounded in the foundational moments in which the social comes into being through language and through the sensory ground which human organisms share. Through these *together*, individual experience is hooked up to a world in common and is radically and forever transmuted.

Insisting that any word and utterance must be understood in its specific context and asking what work an utterance does or what it points us toward permit us to insist that some interpretations are in fact more accurate than others. The speaker/writer knows what they want the listener/reader to hear/read; knowing this is to refer to a world in common. With any utterance, there is an expectation of interpretive possibilities, even as this exchange of utterances fails at times because experiences, interpretive repertoires, and positions in social relations may differ:

> Experience is a method of talk, a language game, in which what is not yet spoken struggles dialogically to appropriate language sedimented with meaning before the moment in which she speaks. It is through and through saturated with social relations, including the social relations of discourse, in which what is being spoken of is embedded as well as those of which the moment of speaking is part. Experience gives direct access to the social character of people's worlds; it is in *how* people talk, which categories they use, the relations implicitly posited between them, and what is taken for granted in their talk, as well as what they can talk about. (Smith 1997:394)

Language enables us to describe objects, activities, relations, and the values and meaning attached to these within a specific context. Yet a key point in Smith's thinking is that language, in social relations, also produces a powerful organizing of our material everyday world. Language enables the coordination of human consciousness and activities across time and space in ways that are sometimes objectifying, reifying, and alienating. Smith (2005) develops this in her work on institutions, which, she argues, are maintained to a large extent through materially replicable texts, as existing at local and translocal levels. The local level is the concrete forms of life, involving concrete others and concrete texts, and refers to a world we hold in common: for instance, university teaching at a specific department with a specific local history and culture, involving specific colleagues and students with whom we

engage in direct interaction and coordination. At the same time, these concrete activities are hooked into translocal processes that shape our local practices: pedagogical principles and institutional discourses, standards and regulations with regard to course planning and student learning requirements, and so forth. Some of these translocal relations can be a form of ruling relations that do not originate yet must be interpreted and enacted in a specific local setting where people are held accountable to them.[4] People thus navigate between their material bodily being in the world and the textual realities that human activities in language produce (see McCoy 2021; Smith 1990, 2005). People's lives, experiences, and locations in social relations mean there will be disagreement, different readings and senses of relevance. However, the view of social coordination as happening through language and embodied senses leaves the door open for continued and ongoing dialogue and for the possibility of agreeing on what is a relevant response.[5] The dialogue is enabled by the dynamic existing between first, humans sharing a world in common through their bodily being and second, the differences generated by bodies being shaped and engendered differently through their position in social relations. To Smith, telling the truth or the untruth is a dialogical process that implies difference rather than eradicates it.

THE 1992 SYMPOSIUM: STANDPOINT, DIVERSITY, AND THE COMPLEXITY OF SUPPRESSION

In her contribution to the 1992 symposium, Collins (1992:73) celebrated Smith's radical critique of sociological practice and theory as an approach for targeting "the social organization of objectified knowledge" as "part of the relations of ruling for contemporary capitalism" and patriarchy. Smith offered an "alternative sociology," a feminist sociology of knowledge, that would "explore the social from the site of women's experiences...in which the problematic of the everyday world becomes a focus of investigation" (Collins 1992:74). Collins, however, emphasized what she perceived as some limitations in Smith's work in its potential for "challenging" and providing "an alternative" to "white male sociology."

First, Collins (1992:78) argued that Smith's overestimation of "women" and underestimation of "diversity created by race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and age" made her unable to see "alternative traditions" and "resistance" alive within marginalized groups to conventional forms of sociological knowing. Second, Collins critiqued Smith for not having escaped the language of ruling and the "rules" of the professional practice of sociology herself. In her response to Collins, Smith (1992:90) emphasized that her goal was not to discredit relations of ruling from an outsider position of resistance but to "examine how they are put together with concepts, knowledge, facticity, as socially organized practices." Rather than focus on "oppositional cultures and positions" to escape the language of objectified knowledge, Smith (1992:91, 95–96) suggests the way forward is to explore "how things work, including language not as terms but as actual practice...[and] how we may be *implicated* in those dominant discourses" because that is how we produce and reproduce them. Smith (1992:96) is first and foremost concerned with understanding "*what* we are confronted with" and ultimately what makes transformation so difficult. Understanding the "text-mediated organization of power"—"increasing knowledge of how textuality operates in the organization of power and of how concepts and ideology enter directly into the organization of ruling, replicating organizational controls across multiple sites" (Smith 1992:97)—is *one* aspect of building navigational knowledge that can be used for furthering social justice and change in capitalist society.

Smith suggests the standpoint of women is a methodological starting point for inquiry and *not* a theory. Here she differs significantly from Harding (1992) and from Collins (1989)

herself. To Smith, investigation of ruling relations could, in principle, start from anyone's experience: be they people of color, indigenous, queer, trans, men, members of the ruling class, and so on. For this reason, Smith (2005) later abandons the standpoint of women altogether, replacing it with the standpoint of people (see also DeVault 1996). The starting point is always contextually and empirically justified, not automatically or theoretically so. Smith (1992:91) wrote: "My notion of standpoint does not privilege a knower....It shifts the ground of knowing, the place where inquiry begins" to the actual sites of embodied living. This differs from starting inquiry from a category, such as gender, race, class, and thereby from text-mediated discourse:

> What I've called the standpoint of women locates us in bodily sites...a lived world in which both theory and practice go on, in which theory is itself a practice, and in which the divide between the two can itself be brought under examination....Concepts, beliefs, ideas, knowledge, and so on (what Marxists know as consciousness)...are integral to the concerting and coordinating of people's activities. (Smith 1992:92)

Embodied experience, Smith argues, cannot be captured in a category. It "does not break down into experience as a woman or as a person of color." Smith (1992:91, emphasis added) asks, critically:

> Are we really to be stuck with Althusser's condemnation of the subject to lasting dependency on being interpellated by "ideological state apparatus"? Of course, no one is citing Althusser these days, but [even] Haraway is following the same path from discourse to subjectivity, from discursive category to identity. *I want to go another way.*

Smith suggests an alternative to poststructuralist feminism, standpoint feminist theory, and the intellectual activism and intersectional theory of Collins (Smith 1996, 1997). Smith, like Bourdieu, insists on making social relations—as these become established through the ongoing coordination of activities—the focus of explorative analysis rather than an explanation in itself (Widerberg 2021).

Having outlined my reading of Smith's materialism and its implications for her understanding of language, I suggest we may better understand the critique of and alternative to Collins's reading of Smith back in 1992. This outline should also provide some support as I turn to exploring Smith's productive alternative to recent developments in feminist social theory—specifically, new materialism and anti-categorical intersectionality. There is still some way to go in feminist social theory to reach the "other way" that Smith points to.

DEVELOPMENTS IN FEMINIST THEORY SINCE 1992: NEW MATERIALISM

The "linguistic turn" in feminist social theory was to a large extent shaped by the growing influence of post-Saussurian or poststructuralist understandings of power and language throughout the 1990s (e.g., Butler 1990, 1993; Flax 1987). Materialism and the understandings of language connected to it were for a long time considered "outdated" and essentializing and, as a result, marginalized in feminist social theory.[6] However, heated debates in feminist theory about poststructuralism's overemphasis on discourse and power and its lack of consideration of the body and materiality gave way to a "material turn" at the turn of the millennium (see Hemmings 2011). This turn is often associated with the umbrella term "new

materialism," which builds from poststructuralist understandings of power, language, and performativity but extends such theories to address entanglements of meaning and matter by considering "advances in the natural sciences" (Coole and Frost 2010:5; see also Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Fox 2016).

Broadly speaking, new materialists argue that the materialisms of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud were shaped by Cartesian-Newtonian mechanical materialism dominant in the nineteenth century. This mechanical materialism—which posits an anthropocentric dualism between stable predictable dead matter and agentic human mind/spirit—normatively justified human superiority, domination, exploitation, and expropriation of nature (see e.g., Coole and Frost 2010).[7] This, new materialists argue, does not suffice for understanding the "elusive," "immaterial," and "complex" understandings of matter and nature associated with contemporary physics, biology, and technology, including biotechnology, nor helps us respond to urgent political and ethical questions of our time, such as climate change, ecological crisis, geopolitics, and the political economy. They call for a posthuman ontology of matter: a vitalist materialism in which matter is perceived as having agency in the production of history, politics, and the social (Coole and Frost 2010:5). Granting agency to matter is thus an ontological endeavor with ethical and political implications.

A key feminist thinker in this tradition, Barad (2007), through a framework of "agential realism," recasts relationships and interactions between nature and culture, science and politics, and natural and social sciences as one of "intra-action" and "entanglement." The world and all the agents who inhabit it are connected in complex ongoing processes, networks, and assemblages. They cannot be separated into distinct entities or agencies that *inter*act: "[A]gency does not precede but emerges through *intra*-action" (Barad 2007:33).[8] Matter, just like text, discourse, and identity, is fluid and dynamic, always in a process of becoming:

> [M]atter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity…"matter" refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization. (Barad 2007:151)

Famously, Barad (2015:315) suggests that hitherto antinaturalistic "political imaginaries" of queer and trans theory—dedicated to the possibilities of liberation, justice, and inclusion enabled by deconstructing discourses of "naturalness" and biological sex and ultimately changing nature and matter through science and technology (see Klitgaard 2022)—may find an alliance with nature by considering the "the none-essentialist nature of nature…the radically deconstructive, queer and trans nature of nature." New materialism, at least in the form developed by Barad, offers new possibilities for reconceptualizing and transvaluating nature in modes that can counter queer- and transphobic politics. In a recent article published in *Sociological Theory*, Crawley, Whitlock and Earles (2021:128) argue that the new materialism of Barad, Black queer theories' nonessentialism and anti-foundationalism, and Smith's (2005) institutional ethnography are complementary in that Smith's "ethnomethodological sensibility" and "interpretive sociology" attend to both "discursive and material productions of reality," foreground "people's (relational) activities of engaging texts," and engage "local and extra-local power," grounding the fluidity and relational practices of identity, power, agency, and historical situatedness in empirical investigations.

I have a great deal of sympathy for the ambition of challenging nature-culture dichotomies, foregrounding the relational and the historically situated, and the ethical commitment to radical democratization. However, while I recognize the reasons why agential realism could be perceived as having an affinity with Smith's project, Barad's materialism in many

ways counters, rather than complements, the materialism of Smith. The vitalist ontology and assumptions of fluidity, intraaction, and distributed agency may suffer some of the same problems associated with idealist reasoning that Marx and Smith were deeply critical of. *Matter* or *nature* in Barad's (and other new materialists') thinking is extremely broad—including the universe, natural laws, natural forces, habitats, wilderness, nonhuman animals, organisms, human bodies, and so forth. Despite this broadness, clear statements about what nature and matter are and are not are made. They are all anti-essential, agentic, dynamic, and meaning creating, and they cannot be separated as more or less "passive" entities that humans can "discover," "save," "destroy," "regulate," or "visit" (Halberg 2022:77). They cannot be separated from human discourse, society, and culture. This seems a highly metaphysical and generalized understanding of matter and nature. Wittgenstein would say that *matter* and *nature*, as words, have "gone on holiday"; they have become so generalized, they have lost their relevance in everyday use (Halberg 2022:76). In a Smithian sense, these words have become disconnected from actual practices and concrete experiences; they no longer support the activity of reaching socially coordinated clarity about the world in which we live. Such clarity would involve pointing to empirical differences and similarities across natural phenomenon and matters. It would include the possibility that some matters, social relations, and institutions are relatively stable and separable.

Marx-inspired materialism is indeed anthropocentric, but it is not clear why that automatically implies rigid hierarchies or dichotomies between nature-culture, human and nonhuman species (see Dickens 2004). The claim that Marx's materialism is mechanical and justifies treating matter and nonhuman species as dead resources to be freely exploited and expropriated at will is not a reasonable reading of Marx. I would argue that it constitutes a strawman in new materialist critiques of historical materialism (see Dickens 2004; Saito 2022). Even as Marx-inspired materialism certainly does imply a difference between human-nonhuman species/organisms in terms of their practices and activities and a difference between natural laws, natural forces, and human society, humans and other organisms are able to act on, even counter and make use of, natural forces such as sun, wind, and water. Yet concrete manifestations of natural laws, such as volcano eruptions, earthquakes, and extreme weather, are something humans and other organisms have very little (if any) control of. In this sense, natural laws and societal laws do seem to be distinguishable and separate spheres (Halberg 2022:77). Recognizing differences enables us to see that human-nonhumans and society-nature engage and coordinate with each other in a multitude of ways, and this may be recognizable as a form of intraacting and sometimes as interacting (see Gunnarsson 2017). Differences are produced through activities and practices in response to specific environments. Indeed, perhaps the very recognition of these differences is a prerequisite for progressive political struggles; for humans taking moral and political responsibility for the ecological destruction their activities have produced and the resulting conditions of life.

Taking such a Marx-inspired materialist position, institutional ethnographers are productively engaging with questions of ecological destruction and sustainability. For instance, there is work on the UN's global environmental governance of biodiversity and climate change, exploring how indigenous people coordinate between abstracted extra-local reform logics and their local embodied experiences of living in and with nature (Eastwood 2006, 2021) or the environmental and sociocultural consequences of government privatization of water resources from the standpoint of rural and indigenous communities in Chile (Suarez-Delucchi 2020).

I would add that a Marx-inspired materialism does not necessarily result in a queer or transphobic approach to nature and therefore politics. Smith (2009) herself articulates that biological sex is ontologically prior to sociocultural hegemonic gender systems, but she

emphasizes that neither can be reduced to the other. Deep structures and dominant tendencies in nature produce very "broad and inclusive" clusters of so-called male and female properties, but this need not preclude accounting for biological complexities, transformations, exceptions, and variability. It is not an either/or but a both/and position (Martinez Dy 2021:120). This understanding of biology is compatible with individuals moving between such clusters over a lifetime and changing their biological sex. But it is a change that must be understood as an approximation: a transformation fulfilled through the meanings and values ascribed to change and variations within human social relations. This requires that we engage in the work of challenging hegemonic understandings of gender that, with reference to biology and sexual difference, have been used to justify sexist, racist, classist, transphobic, and queerphobic institutions and politics (Martinez Dy 2021). Smith's social theory and its material basis have been fruitfully used for exploring the social organization of queer embodied experiences of engaging with dominant institutions, discourses, and ideologies (see Smith 1990, [1988] 2014). Ultimately, it provides a set of tools and practices for developing navigational knowledge that can be used in trans and queer communities and liberation movements for countering and developing alternatives to gendered ruling relations.

DEVELOPMENTS IN FEMINIST THEORY SINCE 1992: ANTI-CATEGORICAL INTERSECTIONALITY

Another key development in feminist social theory since 1992 has been the success of intersectionality. Collins's (1989) own work was from the outset concerned with identifying Black American women's historical position as "outsiders-within" and with identifying the epistemically privileged capacity of Black feminists to unmask "interlocking forms of oppression." Later, she would embrace intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991) for theorizing social inequality (see Collins 1998, 2019). Intersectionality has since achieved "paradigmatic status" in feminist studies (see Carbin and Edenheim 2013; Hoffart 2023; Nash 2019) and been celebrated as "the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, have made so far" (McCall 2005:1771). The wide attraction to intersectionality across epistemic, ontological, and political divisions in feminist research is driven by a desire to take seriously and understand particularity and difference. However, the interpretations and responses to intersectionality vary considerably (McCall 2005; Nash 2019), with some feminist scholars suggesting it is exactly the "ambiguity and open-endedness," or lack of clarity, about its ontological and epistemic foundations that allowed intersectionality to achieve paradigmatic status (Davis 2008:67).

Leslie McCall distinguishes between three approaches to intersectionality, which vary according to how they use categories for exploring social life. First, the *anti-categorical* approach to studying intersectionality deconstructs categories with the purpose of capturing the "irreducible complexity" of "subjects and structures" (McCall 2005:1773). Second, the *intercategorical* approach involves the "provisional" adoption of analytic categories to map "relationships of inequality" (McCall 2005:1773). Third, the *intracategorical* approach takes a middle-ground stance toward categories—embracing both the instability and stability of structures and subjectivities—by unpacking the "complexity of lived experience" within a specific social group (McCall 2005:1774).

The anti-categorical approach has been embraced by some poststructuralists and new materialist feminists, who synthesize it with Barad's concept of intraaction (see Lykke 2010).[9] The approach seems to offer a response and solution to the critique of intersectionality as an "Althusserian hangover," raised by Brown (1997:86–87) three decades ago:

> [S]ubjects of gender, class, nationality, race, sexuality and so forth, are created through different histories, different mechanisms and sites of power, different discursive formations and different regulatory schemes…we are not simply oppressed but *produced*…through formations that do not honor distinct categories.

Brown's critique of additive categories of oppression and the anti-categorical, anti-essentialist deconstruction of such categories would, at first glance, seem to have affinities with Smith and the critique she, in her 1992 discussion with Collins, presented of the Althusserian heritage in feminist theory.

However, there is a significant difference between these positions. Anti-categorical intersectionality implies a view of language as an abstracted system of clearly demarcated categories, words, and concepts existing independently of people's actual use of them in particular contexts. This view of language is a prerequisite for concluding there is no meaning in language and that any claim to meaning should therefore be deconstructed (see Moi 2009, 2017). Smith's approach, instead, suggests starting from embodied experience and exploring whether and, if so, how social categories, concepts, words, and discourses of gender, class, race, and so forth are enacted in particular contexts. This implies that people with reference to a world in common are often "quite sure about meaning" and which words, concepts, or categories seem relevant for describing a phenomenon (Moi 2017:71). This kind of ordinary certainty does not exclude "mistakes and misunderstandings, as well as pure puzzlement," which will require social coordination (Moi 2017:71). Much like feminist scholars of governmentality, Smith is interested in investigating historical origins and ideological practices of categories. But her rooting in Marxist materialism and dialogical language theory makes her return to embodied activities and experience, a world in common beyond the discourses, texts, and technologies:

> Concepts, ideology and ideological practices are integral parts of sociohistorical processes. Through them people grasp in abstraction the real relations of their own lives. Yet while they express and reflect actual social relations, ideological practices render invisible the actualities of people's activities in which those relations arise and by which they are ordered. (Smith 1990:36)

Treating "ideological practices" critically involves going beyond ideology and exploring the actual social relations people simultaneously express and make invisible (Smith 2009). Smith's (1996) critique of poststructuralism is, among other things, that it positions an individuated subject as produced by discourses but its theories make invisible how this actually happens. Exploring how it happens means explicating what is done, how it is done, why it is done in that way, how one learned to do in that way, and ultimately, how it is socially coordinated. Language is a practice entangled with a number of other human practices: Word and world are connected. Knowing words in particular ways is "growing into a world, into a form of life" (Moi 2017:78). The view of language implied in deconstruction and the insistence on anti-essentialism connected to it are abstracted into processes of inclusion and exclusion enabled by the exclusion of all the ordinary, everyday, embodied practices that language is part of. Of course, through complex processes, some concepts and categories become disconnected from everyday lives and work in reified objectifying ways through ideology and discourse; yet they have an organizing effect only when brought into life in concrete settings and definite relations. Class, race, and gender work as significant elements of ruling, activated in the ongoing coordination and organizing of social relations: but this may operate in very different ways in diverging contexts. Despite rejecting Althusserian and Saussurian structuralism, anti-categorical intersectionality meets similar problems.

Smith's thinking and method of inquiry, institutional ethnography, thus involves an intersectional sensitivity that bears some affinities with the intracategorical approach to intersectionality but which I argue would be highly critical of anti-categorical approaches. Which categories appear relevant and to what extent are empirical rather than theoretical questions. Smith's social theory offers an approach for exploring how gendered, raced, and classed social relations become established in historical processes and work through the ongoing social coordination of embodied activities in specific settings. Social relations and whether or not they intersect in particular ways are the focus of exploration rather than explanations in themselves.

ORCID ID

Rebecca W. B. Lund   iD   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7068-6090

NOTES

1. A key inspiration for the practice-theoretical tradition was Lukács's (1923) development of the epistemological implications of Marxian theory. This epistemology was further developed by members of the early Frankfurt School (see Aarseth 2024), in Merleau Ponty's phenomenology and in Bourdieu's practice-theory (see Dreyfus and Taylor 2015). Smith (2004) suggests a different yet in many ways related path through her interest in the epistemological and methodological contribution of Marx.

2. This focus on "real-life human activities" and actual "coordination" also insists on the possibility of telling the truth. However, unlike positivist paradigms, the subject and object are not disconnected: "[B]oth subject and object are in history . . . the relationship between knower and know arise in the same historical development" (Smith 2004:454).

3. Smith's later work, focusing on governance and the effects of new public management, has many affinities with Foucauldian governmentality studies (see DeVault 2021; Griffith and Smith 2014), which I think at times has resulted in some theoretical and conceptual traveling and interpretations of Smith's writings that downplay its materialist foundation.

4. Exploring people's "everyday talk" and active engagement with text as "approaching, recognizing, orienting and coordinating" Smith (2005:60, 103) was inspired by ethnomethodological conversational analysis. The extra- or translocal dimension of textually mediated coordination is present in people's everyday lives, holding them accountable in different ways, but cannot be explored with many ethnomethodological or ethnographic observational approaches (pp. 103–19).

5. The fact that this is a dialogue means this can and may very well be altered and realtered over time.

6. In Smith's (1992) response to Charles Lemert's contribution to the 1992 symposium and her later article, "Telling the Truth after Postmodernism" (Smith 1996), she offers a strong critique of the poststructuralist individuated subject, separation of language from intention, rejection of experience, a world in common beyond discourse, and the local histories of people's embodied everyday activities and actualities.

7. Some scholars have also suggested reinterpreting Marx as a vitalist and monist, terms usually associated with the work of Spinoza and Deleuze (see e.g., Cheah 2008).

8. It is worth noting that John Dewey (1949), who also developed a concept of intraaction, restricts its use to an epistemic one. Barad uses it in a much broader onto-epistemic sense (see Hammerström 2015).

9. This approach to intersectionality has been particularly popular in European feminist theorizing (Hoffart 2023).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Rebecca W. B. Lund, PhD, currently works as a postdoctoral researcher and project leader at the Centre of Gender Research, University of Oslo, Norway. She is currently the vice president for the International Sociological Association standing working group of Institutional Ethnography, has acted as coordinator for the Nordic network of Institutional Ethnography, and has written extensively on institutional ethnography. She teaches courses in feminist social theory, feminist epistemology, and feminist methodology. Her research interests revolve around sociology of knowledge, academic work critical theory, epistemology and epistemic injustice, psychosocial theory, ecological thinking, gender-race-class, and sustainability.