

Intersectionality as a theoretical-methodological contribution in research with/for/about children and infancy in intercultural contexts

L'intersezionalità come contributo teorico-metodologico nella ricerca con/per/sui bambini e l'infanzia nei contesti interculturali

Flávio Santiago
Doctorate
Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora – Brazil

Artur Oriel Pereira
PhD candidate
Universidade de São Paulo – Brazil

Daniela Carolina Ernst
PhD candidate
University of São Paulo – Brazil

Abstract

In Brazil, childhood is built on a racist, sexist, and classist history, and studies on it are intricately woven into this reality (Arroyo, 2018). In this context, intersectional Black feminist epistemology has been conquering political and academic spaces by promoting debates to understand the mechanisms of exclusion and social inequalities. Based on this, this essay seeks to discuss intersectionality as a theoretical-methodological approach to analyze race and gender relations in childhood research with/for/about children in intercultural contexts, articulating it in the discussions of Afro-Brazilian (Bairros, 2008; Carneiro, 2011; Gomes, 2019; Gonzalez, 1983; Silva, 1998) and African-American (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2002; Davis, 2016; hooks, 2018; 2020) researchers, considering the lives of children and the ways of producing research. Works carried out based on an intersectional perspective (Pereira, 2020; Santiago, 2019) help researchers and point out that in the relationships established in the daily life of early childhood education, situations referring not only to the subordination of children to adults, but also to racism, sexism, and class oppression emerge, and analyzing experiences in this space from just one of these poles is insufficient.

Keywords: intersectionality, black feminism, research, childhood, education.

Sommario

In Brasile, l'infanzia è costruita su una storia razzista, sessista e classista e gli studi su di essa sono intricati in questa realtà (Arroyo, 2018). In questo contesto, l'epistemologia femminista nera intersezionale ha conquistato spazi politici e accademici promuovendo dibattiti per comprendere i meccanismi di esclusione e le disuguaglianze sociali. Sulla base di ciò, questo saggio cerca di discutere l'intersezionalità come approccio teorico-metodologico per analizzare le relazioni razziali e di genere nella ricerca sull'infanzia con/per/sui bambini in contesti interculturali, articolandosi nelle discussioni di ricercatori afro-brasiliani (Bairros, 2008; Carneiro, 2011; Gomes, 2019; Gonzalez, 1983; Silva, 1998) e afro-americani (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2002; Davis, 2016; hooks, 2018; 2020), tenendo conto della vita dei bambini e dei modi di produrre ricerca. Il lavoro svolto da una prospettiva intersezionale (Pereira, 2020; Santiago, 2019) aiuta i ricercatori e sottolinea che nelle relazioni che si stabiliscono nella vita quotidiana dell'educazione della prima infanzia emergono situazioni che fanno riferimento non solo alla subordinazione dei bambini agli adulti, ma anche al razzismo, al sessismo e all'oppressione di classe, ed è insufficiente analizzare le esperienze in questo spazio da uno solo di questi poli.

Parole chiave: intersezionalità, femminismo nero, ricerca, infanzia, educazione.

Introduction

The experiences that mark the histories of Black and non-Black people in Brazil are distinct, and experiences between subjects differ due to the remnants of slavery. Childhood is part of history, and the construction of childhood is a historical production. In Brazil, such production is built on a racist, sexist, and classist history, and childhood studies are intricately woven into this reality (Arroyo, 2018). As Mellino (2019) points out, in Latin America there is a reflection on race and racism which is very different to that found in Europe, due to colonial conflict permeating its reality. The debate focuses on how this mechanism affects the lives of Black people and creates social hierarchies, and this is not directly related to intercultural issues.

In this perspective, the meaning of the term race varies in different and peculiar ways according to different cultural contexts. In this work, we do not use the concept of race in a reduced sense, linked to social groups with similar biological characteristics, generally transmitted by heredity and which are visible – such as skin color and type of hair – among other phenotypic aspects, whether they are superior or inferior to each other. Here, we move away from the biological determinism that permeates the term and we re-dimension it from a political perspective, conceptualizing race in a sociological sense, constituted historically and culturally and based on concrete relations between social groups in each society (Gomes, 1995). As Alanen (2016) points out, academic studies that discuss the issues listed above have begun to develop their analyses based on intersectional perspectives, in some cases extending beyond their origins in feminism to explore different areas of research, such as disability and human rights studies. However, regarding social studies of childhood, this perspective has yet to build a solid basis. Taking a critical perspective is more necessary than ever today, particularly when talking about diversity. It is a way to restore the complexity of the present and not reproduce univocal and ethnocentric narratives (Pescarmona and Gozzelino, 2023).

Thus, with a view to the experiences of children regarding racism and sexism in Brazilian society and the ways of producing research in this context, we seek to discuss intersectionality as a theoretical-methodological contribution for analyzing race and gender relations in childhood research with/for/about children in intercultural contexts. This is an essay based on discussions by Afro-Brazilian (Bairros, 2008; Carneiro, 2011; Gomes, 2019; Gonzalez, 1983; Silva, 1998) and African-American researchers (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2002, Davis, 2016; hooks, 2018, 2020). Note that analyzing the intersections between social markers of difference is a well-developed discussion and is also a challenge from a political point of view, since we need to understand the processes that involve differentiations between subjects in various social and cultural spaces. From this perspective, Mohanty (2012) states that differences build intersections that distance themselves from universal ideas, pointing to singular lived experiences. With singularities in mind, based on Larrosa (2004), we understand this essay as an experimental way of thinking, a piece of writing that makes it possible to problematize itself. In this way, we argue that the experience/meaning of the text written as an essay is essential to establish possibilities for training and, therefore, for transforming subjects. It might be due to the effects that can be perceived in ourselves and in those who kindly read our writing when they come across a text that makes them feel, build, share, learn, take risks; in short, rehearse. In an essay, the author brings concepts closer or further apart to give meaning to reality. This approximation or distancing can be done to

break or confirm a pattern of understanding. The concept therefore enters into the movement of reality and the author's thinking (Meneghetti, 2011).

When we look at the starting points for interpretations throughout the text, we are not only dealing with individual experiences, but we are also trying to highlight the social position that people occupy in society, in power relations, and which significantly interfere in the processes of humanization (Pereira, 2018). In this sense, work based on the intersectional approach helps researchers concerned with issues involving children's lives and childhood. As different studies carried out in Brazil have shown (Pereira, 2020; Santiago, 2019), in the relationships established in the daily life of early childhood education, situations emerge referring not only to the subordination of children to adults, but also to racism, sexism, and class oppression. Thus, analyzing experiences in this space from just one of these poles is insufficient.

1. Black feminist epistemology and intersectionality

The Black feminist movement has been developed by Black women activists for over a century. Political struggles with an academic perspective that questions the process by which science is produced is one example (Gonzalez, 1983). These productions revolutionize the way in which the movement itself constructs its political agenda and shares its experiences. It is an epistemological and political field linked to emancipatory struggles (Bairros, 2008).

According to Carneiro (2011), the agendas shed light on the differences in political discussions and practices. A double perception is created, both in the affirmation of new political subjects and in the demand to recognize diversity and the existing inequalities among subjects. No intervention, as hooks (2018) points out, has changed the political agenda of feminism more than recognizing the reality of racism in the lives of Black women and girls; while only gender was prioritized, White women took center stage in discussions and agendas, and experiences were not exchanged according to social differences. In this way, «the struggle of black women is committed to recovering their histories, recreating in their potential the attempt to seek changes that allow for new relational experiences of power in society» (Moreira, 2011, p. 12). The concept of intersectionality does not have its academic origins in Brazil, but in the United States, and gained popularity at the *World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance* in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. Crenshaw (2002), a pioneer in the legal field, explains that the intersections between race and gender effectively contribute to structuring the lives of Black women and Black men, above all with racist and sexist practices, remembering that these are not the only markers that are intersected.

When Black women demanded a new way of looking at gender relations, they taught us that the oppressions established by sexist and patriarchal systems are elements that should not be thought of in isolation – life is not just about one social facet. Markers such as class, race, and age also directly influence experiences and the ways in which subjects establish their relationships in society, making it essential to think of the social context in an intersectional way. «Black Brazilian feminists, then, inaugurated a debate in the country in which it is possible to articulate different forms of domination and positions of inequality activated in regulatory discourses» (Oliveira, 2018, p. 35). Intersectionality, as Santiago (2020, p. 6) points out, aims to highlight how «historically contingent relations specific to a given situation construct ways of life and legitimize processes of hierarchization»; in this

way, «racism cannot be explained by separating it from other social relations» (Mellino, 2019, p. 117). In particular, in this article, the Black feminist gaze provides us with support to problematize and question some of the teaching actions and children's play observed during the fieldwork, enabling us to interpret the data obtained through new lenses that favor thinking about intersecting processes and their historical correlations.

Therefore, to visualize social processes, we start with the intersectional analysis proposed by Crenshaw, which allows us to understand the dynamics of the interaction between different axes, «the way in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create basic inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes and others» (2002, p. 177). As a process of discovery, Davis (2016) points out that intersectional analysis alerts us to the realization that the world around us is more complicated and contradictory than we might have anticipated. His approach emerges as a contribution that enables us to question, investigate and disclose the various forms of oppression that act on subjects and society concomitantly. It is an approach that broadens the understanding that oppressions do not act in isolation, but multiply and generate other situations; they do not only add to each other, nor do they only intensify with others that already exist, but they reinforce each other (Crenshaw, 2002; Davis, 2016). The search for an understanding of the intersections between race, gender, social class, and age often assumes an accumulative model between markers, which expects a linear association between them and falls short of understanding the complexity and contradictions surrounding the dynamics of gender, race, and class. These categories are not reducible to one another; «the intersection of these relationships can lead to interruptions, discontinuities, alterations or increases in the original impact of the dynamics of race, class, or gender in a given social or institutional context» (Rosemberg, 1996, p. 59).

Although studies on intersectionality have emerged in different areas of knowledge, research related to children in this area is incipient (Konstantoni and Emejulu, 2017); that is, it has not yet been consolidated as a topic of analysis debated with the necessary rigor in the field, possibly due to its origin and discussion in feminist studies. Thus, there is a lack of a more comprehensive and critical discussion of the theories, methods, and practices of intersectionality in the field of childhood studies and children's experiences. For Ianniciello (2015), intersectional feminist perspectives are a possibility for understanding intercultural contexts since they are based on recognizing the subjective position as an analytical starting point, with all its variants of gender, class, race, and geography, producing knowledge in which the consideration of embodied singularity, of minority subjectivity, becomes a critical instance in relation to the idea of the subject. Based on these assumptions, it is essential to analyze the hierarchies produced and reproduced in people's different situations and experiences, including when we think about the lives of children and their childhoods (Santiago, 2020).

2. Intersectional studies with/for/about children in intercultural contexts

Regarding the complexities surrounding social relations in the Brazilian intercultural context, Bastide (1971, p. 15), who carried out fundamental research in Brazil, states: «if even in contrast there is harmony, the whole also persists in the reconciliation of antagonisms». The forces of antagonism exist within the forces of adaptation, accommodation, and assimilation, just as the forces of accommodation exist within the forces

in conflict and in the play of contrasts. Thus, while studying Brazil, the sociologist no longer knows which system of concepts to use. All notions researchers learnt in Europe or North America cannot be employed here. The old mixes with the new. Historical epochs become entangled in each other. The same terms such as social class or historical dialectics do not have the same meaning, they do not cover the same concrete realities. Instead of rigid concepts, it would be necessary to discover notions that are somewhat liquid, capable of describing phenomena of fusion, boiling, and interpretation, notions that are modeled on a living reality that is in perpetual transformation. The sociologist who wants to understand Brazil often needs to become a poet (Bastide, 1971).

This idea of a poetic dive to which the sociologist refers points to analyzing reality with a language suited to its interpretation – more flexible, creative, equally new – and especially to combining strategies for understanding Brazilian society in its complexity, in other words, a perspective that allows for experience, in which the sociological narrative becomes effective. In addition, dealing with the breakdown of the idea of a single childhood necessarily involves analyzing the racial, gender, class, and age relations that permeate children's social experiences (Pereira, 2020).

Notably, in Brazilian society, the disadvantage experienced by the Black population is rooted in slavery, in the religious and scientific elaboration of Black people's inferiority, but it is maintained by the exclusion of this population in the new socio-economic cycles established after the abolition of slavery, by the ideology of racism and by the practices that perpetuate racial inequality. In this context, the rejection of black skin-color and other phenotypic traits of the discriminated racial group are presented as tools to legitimize their place in society (Gomes, 1995). Also, the intercultural perspective in Brazil involves a broad process of coexistence between different people, which goes beyond the establishment of «a place of one's own, a place of one's own that is different from that of another subject, that is, each social subject or group thus has, through recognized difference, a hierarchically demarcated place of its own» (Gusmão, 2017, p. 80).

Interculturality as a political action has its gains and challenges. In the Brazilian context, it contributes to an understanding of identities, of the diverse cultures that make up the country, of plural childhoods; to the deconstruction of the circumscribed places that position children, women, men, Indigenous peoples, and Black populations; and to help to build education for ethnic-racial relations. Problematizing childhood from this perspective allows for different understandings of social practices, realizing that they are crossed by inequalities in the distribution of power, resources, and rights between adults and children. Thinking about childhood from an intercultural perspective means realizing the particularities of each class, family, community, historical, social, political, cultural, linguistic, and geographical context, since they all have a direct impact on the construction of childhood and the experience of being a child. Note that children's participation in this process needs to be understood as an action between children's relationships with adults, since this relational dynamic gives rise to children's protagonist role, which is essential for producing skills and knowledge (Wyness, 2012).

Every child is a child of a geographical point, of a culture, so that for every child in the place, there is also a social place for children, designated by adults who shape their limits and possibilities, their experiences and their lives. At the same time, every child is a child within certain places within the locality, as this same adult world allocates different portions of physical spaces for the materialization of their childhoods (Lopes and Vasconcellos,

2005). In other words, a pluralist perspective of childhood is an evocation of locality, «the universality of being is broken up by the territory in which it is born and inhabits» (Lopes, 2021, p. 45). Thinking of children outside of their encounters with issues of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomics and race is impossible. Also, note that childhood is a field of political dispute in which projects for the future and social reproduction are being contested in the very definition of childhood (Llobet and Solar, 2023).

People who set out to research with/for/about children must address the realities of childhood in a world that is radically plural in cultural, linguistic, philosophical, spiritual, environmental, and geographical terms. Childhood is not a universal experience, but is constructed differently, expressing differences (Santiago, 2020). The meaning of childhood is thus crossed by the dimensions of space and time which, when combined with the social group, produce different cultural arrangements and different ways of being a child, symbolic traits carried throughout life. Each social group not only creates cultural dimensions that make it possible for a child's subjectivity to emerge, but also designates the existence of physical spaces that materialize this condition (Lopes and Vasconcellos, 2005). In this sense, bringing intersectionality into childhood studies is not a simple process, free of challenges, since intersectional analyses also cross disciplinary boundaries. As Konstantoni and Emejulu (2017) point out, intersectionality is not just a framework for analyzing complex interactions within and between social identities and political institutions but is understood as a counter-hegemonic praxis that seeks to challenge and displace the hegemony that constructs life based on abstract generalizations of humanity.

Intersectional discrimination is particularly difficult to identify in contexts where economic, cultural, and social forces silently mold the background in such a way as to place women in a position where they end up being affected by other systems of subordination. Since it is so common as to seem a fact of life, natural or at least immutable, this (structural) background is often invisible. Thus, only the most immediate aspect of discrimination is perceived, while the structure that puts women in the position of *receiving* such subordination remains obscured (Crenshaw, 2002, p. 176). The crucial question for childhood studies is how to articulate intersectionality in this interdisciplinary field in a way that recognizes and values the intellectual history and work of Black women, the main protagonists in the management of Black feminist epistemology, while preserving the integrity of the radical praxis of intersectionality in the emancipatory production of knowledge and collective action for social justice, as well as the perception of a concrete childhood. This reinforces the thesis that childhood is a variable in social analysis that can never be completely separated from other variables such as class, gender or race, and ethnicity (Prout and James, 2010).

Childhood is not apart from social, economic, political, and cultural production, and this is due to this historical production being permeated by ethnic, racial, gender, and class issues, and children are part of its production. Children do not enter social class when they become young or adult; children are already born into class, race, and gender segregation. This whole reality is deeply imprinted in our history. Every child suffers from this history as soon as they are born or before they are born (Arroyo, 2018). Note that not everything in the adult world has the same meaning for children, which is why it is crucial to be vigilant and not let our stereotypes limit the experience of the world for boys and girls. This way of thinking about childhood makes it possible to broaden our view of children, specifying the multiple relationships they establish with the world; among them are their racial, gender, and social class belonging, making it clear that girls and boys are creatures and creators of history and

culture (Santiago and Faria, 2021). A risk that we run in our research projects in contexts of high sociocultural complexity may be that of losing contact with the concreteness of everyday experiences and the relationship with their social markers of difference (Zoletto, 2023).

When we carry out research with/for/about children, it is essential to keep our adult eyes and ears alert: often they do not allow us to masterfully capture what boys and girls do in concrete terms (Santiago, 2019); sometimes we can interpret a hug in an adult way, falling into the trap of interpreting childhood «as a period of time of generalized incapacity and/or preparation for the acquisition of abilities to come» (Miguel, 2015, p. 39). Therefore, it is with the perspective presented throughout this article, which makes it possible to analyze the complexities imposed by adult, capitalist, racist, and sexist systems of domination, that we use intersectionality as a theoretical-methodological contribution, like a living and changing kaleidoscope (Pereira, 2020), articulated in the operationalization of research with/for/about children and childhood in intercultural contexts.

Conclusion

Childhood should not be thought of abstractly. Conceptualizing it in an intersectional way is essential, to understand the genesis of the transformation of differences into elements to justify the inequalities created by the capitalist system, which privileges a standard of society and subject and undoubtedly excludes the young citizen (Benjamin, 1984). Firstly, we would like to emphasize that work based on an intersectional perspective can help research with children since, as various studies carried out in Brazil have shown (Pereira, 2020; Santiago, 2019), the relationships established in nurseries, pre-schools, and schools reveal issues relating not only to the subordination of children to adults, but also to racism, sexism, and class oppression. Although we see some works discussing the importance of intersectional studies, we still see little research dealing with the genesis of intersectionality, and we must always highlight that black feminist epistemology is a great ally for understanding the oppressions and silences that black people suffer in society, in the sense of deconstructing and overturning socially naturalized patterns that position and segregate, and which, most of the time, are subtle processes that we do not recognize.

As Carneiro states, revealing the silences and mechanisms of oppression, the struggle of black women has been blackening society: «the struggle of black women against gender and racial oppression has been drawing new contours for feminist and anti-racist political action, enriching both the discussion of the racial issue and the gender issue in Brazilian society» (Carneiro, 2003, p. 3). In this regard, it is important to resume the contribution of feminist thought in criticizing the policies of patriarchal domination and in adding the critiques of race and class to gender issues (hooks, 2020), until then invisible in feminist discussions about domination. Regarding racism and sexism, Davis (2016) explains that from the point of view of organizations, both systems of oppression are based on institutional arrangements that produce structural forms of hierarchization and segregation. From a relational point of view, they are linked to attitudes, but also to the identity and subjectivity of people – both those who belong to social groups with a higher incidence of racism and sexism, and those who can be attributed to minority groups, as well as individual actions and collective social interactions (Collins, 2000). Gender is not always a marker for analyzing certain forms of violence and the fact of being a girl or a woman is not always considered in some situations. Violence against a particular ethnic group, for example, can hide problems that are specific

to them and thus not be debated to the right extent. Femicide is often the result of this chain of violence (Burgio, 2023). Crenshaw called this situation under-inclusion, precisely due to issues relating to black women being under-included in these cases. «In short, in under-inclusive approaches to discrimination, difference renders a set of problems invisible, whereas in over-inclusive approaches, difference itself is invisible» (Crenshaw, 2002, p. 176). Hence the importance of taking an intersectional approach to prevent certain issues from being rendered invisible, compromising not only the analysis of a problem, but the actions that can be taken to tackle it. Racism and gender violence in Brazil are so deeply rooted in our society that they are part of power structures, becoming invisible. Therefore, as Silva (1998, p. 20) states, «we want to make ourselves seen and known as we are, until we feel represented in the statistics, suppressing the oppressions that are imposed on us». Childhood studies can therefore contribute to the debate from an intersectional perspective, emphasizing the importance of understanding how racialization and racism shape children's experiences. They can also explore how race intersects with other forms of difference, such as gender and class, to create different life opportunities for children around the world.

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Short Bio

Flávio Santiago

Researcher at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. PhD of Educational Sciences, Pedagogue and Geographer. His field of research is related to childhood social studies with an emphasis on the area of childhood geography, intersecting with diversity and difference.

Ricercatore presso l’Università Federale di Juiz de Fora. Dottore in scienze dell’educazione, pedagogo e geografo. I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano gli studi sociali sull’infanzia con un’enfasi sull’area della geografia infantile, intersecandosi con diversità e differenza.

Artur Oriel Pereira

PhD candidate in Sciences (FFLCH/USP), focusing on studies on migration and refuge, childhood, intercultural and anti-racist education, intersectionality, decoloniality. Master in Education (FE/UNICAMP), specialist in sociopsychology (FESPSP), researcher at the Research Group Arab, African, Asian and South American themes, narratives, and representations of diasporic communities (USP/CNPq) and at the Brazil Africa Research Support Center (USP/CNPq).

Dottorando in Scienze (FFLCH/USP), il suo focus sono gli studi su migrazione e asilo, infanzia, educazione interculturale e antirazzista, intersezionalità, decolonialità. Master in Educazione (FE/UNICAMP), specialista in sociopsicologia (FESPSP), ricercatore presso il Gruppo di ricerca Temi, narrazioni e rappresentazioni delle comunità diasporiche arabe, africane, asiatiche e sudamericane (USP/CNPq) e presso il Centro di supporto alla ricerca sull’Africa del Brasile (USP/CNPq).

Daniela Carolina Ernst

PhD candidate in Sciences (USP), master in Science Teaching (UFFS), researcher at the Interdisciplinary Group of Studies and Research in Education (GIEPE-IFFarroupilha).

Dottoranda in Scienze (USP), master in Insegnamento delle Scienze (UFFS), ricercatrice presso il Gruppo Interdisciplinare di Studi e Ricerche in Educazione (GIEPE-IFFarroupilha).