

Intersectionality

For Atlantic Fellows Programme, LSE. 2019

Framework

- Unpack taken for granted concepts (the daily job of the academic – trained in critique). Aware it's much harder to generate working concepts
- Draw attention to the historical production of concepts
- To how concepts travel: (eg ISy) began as political call/legal/academic US to UK to NorthA to Scandanavia to Europe to NGOs
- Highlight the significance of the “constitutive other”
- Apply a couple of thought experiments
- Draw attention to the role of abstract universals v concrete universals eg ideas such as modernisation which organise the value of groups
- Draw a distinction between the rhetorical and the theoretical
- Insist on methodological applicability

NB; this is a Anglo (US/UK) perspective – from my position within the feminist debates

- At its most basic, intersectionality is used to refer to an analysis of the workings of **more than one form** of inequality. But beyond that there is little agreement, even though ‘intersectionality’ is used to refer to a discrete category of study, as if it is known.
- The ‘sections’ of intersectionality usually refer to **identity categories** (gender, class, race, sexuality), though sometimes to different types of organisation (experiential, structural, cultural, political).
- Its protean character means that it can be used to mean different things and adapted for different purposes. It has spread into so many areas that it is hard to pin down. Many academic careers made by using it.
- ISY has achieved a **hegemonic centrality** within feminist theorizing, as ‘*the* primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony and exclusivity’ (Nash, 2008, 1, 2, emphasis added). It is often taken to be *the* way to think about issue of ‘difference’.
- To not support intersectionality one is often positioned as backward, not modern, unsophisticated, or worse, racist.
- I speak as someone who is positioned as a practitioner of intersectionality as I’ve conducted research projects on gender, class, sexuality (Formations); race, gender, class (music); sexuality, class, gender (violence); class, gender, race (Reality TV).

But.....

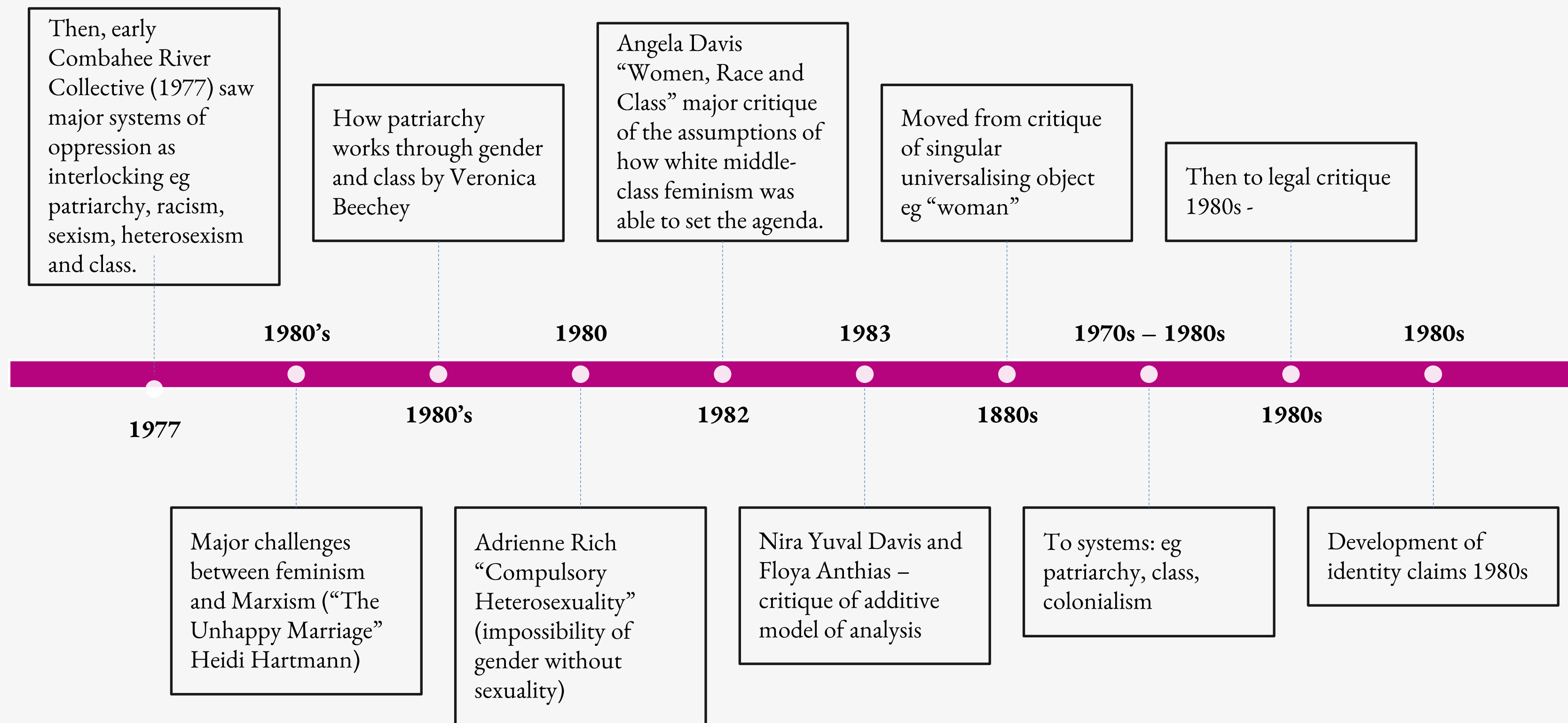
Historical Production

Early feminist work on intersectionality was premised on challenging the categories of objectification eg ‘woman’. ‘Ain’t I a woman’ Sojourner Truth’s statement at the Seneca Falls Convention on Anti-Slavery 1848s is a powerful rhetorical call that both deconstructed the category “woman” as white and feminine:

- *“That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman?”*

A very important rhetorical call for examining a decolonised mind, and de-centering the normative subject of feminism.

Development



Discrimination claims: KC

- Kimberle Crenshaw is usually credited with founding the term (the power of wikipedia?), from an article (1989) in which she examines patterns of legal discrimination against Black women in employment. Crenshaw points out that the category 'female' is considered to be a white woman, hence 'Discrimination against a white female is thus the standard sex discrimination claim' (1989: 145).
- Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989: 149).
- The sections of intersectionality are imagined as discrete categories, cross-cutting in somewhat additive ways. Note, however, that Crenshaw is writing here about the ability of the law to deal with the manifestations of different forms of inequality.

Discrimination claims: KC continued...

- Crenshaw in later articles extends the discussion of intersectionality to characterize people's identities, and their organization within identity politics. At the LSE 2016:
- Across the US, women and girls of color face barriers in completing school, accumulating wealth, and living free from public and private violence. However, the unique challenges facing women and girls of color are largely invisible in dominant discourses of racial and gender justice. This domestic policy is at odds with the united state's women centered global development policy, and reflects a particular vilification of black mothers.
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Expanded Definitions

- In patricia-hill collins's view, the intersectional method needs to take into account four domains of power:
- The structural (laws and institutions),
- The disciplinary (administrative and bureaucratic management),
- The hegemonic (cultural, ideological naturalization of relationships of domination) and
- The inter-personal (everyday interactions influenced by various hierarchies) (collins, 2000: 18, 277–290).

The economic?

- For nira yuval-davis, intersectional analysis must fit within a constitutive approach, one which is non-additive, through which social divisions should be analysed both in their macro and micro dimensions through the application of a four-level analysis framework:
- Organizational analysis, relating to social, political and economic institutions and organizations,
- Intersubjective analysis, to establish the relations of power and affect between concrete actors in informal or institutional situations;
- Experiential analysis, which taps into the subjective experience of individuals, the perceptions they have of themselves and their attitudes towards others; and
- Representational analysis, which refers to the level of the cultural representations of the social divisions present within the society (yuval-davis, 2006: 198).

Working With the End Product: Classifications

- The general gesture is usually taken to try to fit gender, class, race and sexuality together.
- Very often through gender, class, race and sexuality as identity categories (but...they all do not work as identities eg class and gender)
- This means working with the end product of a process (eg sexual difference, capitalism and labour, colonialism and imperialism and heterosexuality)
- As categories are produced through processes, developed and reproduced through the interests of power (eg racism to justify colonialism)
- There is a significant difference between how we live categorisations and how we study them (eg class often a category of lived dis-identification)

As Rita Felski (1997) observed, analysis of difference involves two separate questions:

1. around the significance of forms of difference,
2. around their value.

Not all differences are significant; and not all are valued.

And....how do we analyse them all together?

But.....

Ever More Expanded...

- However the British brand leaders of intersectionality include ALL axis of differentiation:
- We regard the concept of ‘intersectionality’ as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of *differentiation* – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands. (Brah and phoenix 2004)
- The ever increasing number of intersections has been counted by lutz =14 and bunch= 16.
- We have moved from a political call to attend to racism, to challenge normative categorisations, to challenge discrimination within the law & social policy, to understand connections, to everything.
- The problem becomes a methodological one; how on earth do we study all this? If we have all the categories of identity plus every aspect of social life.
- And why on this basis has the term gained so much traction (eg the hegemonic concept)?

The Limits to Identity/Recognition Politics

- Most claims for IS are made within a **politics of recognition**, eg for claims on the state, for having a voice, and therefore making oneself and/or categorical occupation **visible**. Eg KC
- This is where **the history, process and value of classifications becomes significant**.
- What about those who do not want to be seen, known and heard? Because the only way they enter discourse/recognition/identity is to be positioned as **lacking in value** (eg the Black and white working class in Britain)
- Problem when categories are euphamised eg positioned as “Chav”, “skiver” “scrounger” Eg “The poor” is a difficult category (moral history- who want to identify with it?)
- There is a difference between being positioned and positioning oneself
- Attempts to re-signify value (eg Black Civil Rights, Black is Beautiful, lesbian, gay and Queer politics, feminism) really complex; most effective when attuned to capital’s lines of flight.

The Limits to Identity/Recognition Politics continued...

- It depends on the “field” where recognition is demanded (eg Black civil rights could be turned into Blaxploitation films, feminism for new forms of advertising entering new markets, gay men for the pink pound. As Zizek notes multiculturalism was lucrative for an atropic capitalism,
- Or recognition may be “given” as a political distraction: the UK Conservative government offered gay rights as a distraction from the cruelty of austerity politics
- It is never just about visibility, it’s about the value that is attributed to a category of representation through the claim for recognition.
- History/research shows how often forms of recognition politics are simply reproductive and open up new potential value for capital (eg gay men, closes down lesbian spaces) . Need careful consideration of history of category, demand, field and potential capital value.
- And rather than being additive (KC) or mutually constitutive (YD) categories disrupt each other. Or may be antagonistic towards each other: Gay and class have deeply problematic disruptions (eg Peter Cohen). They are complex articulations.

Different Analytics: From Liberal Assimilation to Antagonism Within Each Category

- Huge complexity/history/difference/antagonism within different forms of analysis of one basic category, eg:
- Gender: liberal (claims on state, HR), to radical, revolutionary, PS, trans, etc....
- Race: anti-imperial, multi-cultural, post-race, etc...
- Class: Marxist, stratification, etc...
- Sexuality: liberal, queer, trans, etc...
- How?? Where to start? How to make work together? How to do research?

Thought Experiment 1: Strathern, the Significance of Perspective

Merographic Thinking

- **Perspectives critique: (note not mereographic).** It is a distinct term that the part of one thing may also be part of something else.
- **A Euro-American critique from anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's analysis of “parts, wholes and scales”.**
- She begins with a critique of the idea of the individual, which she argues is a Western, specifically Euro-American trope eg Henri Bergson's analysis of forms of perception which ‘cut out’ a series of figures detached from the whole.

She asks:

- What makes a whole person? How much information do we need to know the whole person what kind of whole? What sort of whole? (eg capitalism or the child?).
- We learn that an object can both be a specific item and contain the world within itself; eg condensing a wider context (think of a museum). Thus an object may make present powers or forces that affect a person's life, whether imagined as the environment, the cosmos, or the community (2004:7)
- **She shows how each totalising perspective is vulnerable to other perspectives that made its own purchase on reality always incomplete (eg the unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism!). To switch from one perspective to another was to switch whole domains of explanation.**
- Parts cannot be equal since perspectives could not be matched.

Strathern 2: It's the Relations!

She asks us to imagine differently through comparison with Melanesian relations: “When a Melanesian looks inside a person (a relation) she or he finds others persons” (Strathern 1992:79).

In that situation there are no pre-existing entities (no individuals). Instead persons **enact their relations** which makes those particular relations actual, rather than potential. There is nothing more than, no less than their relations. We cannot know in advance what the form may take, as our perspective informs how we are part of what we describe.

Relations are the focus. NB relations are now the focus in the domain of anthropology, but in the 17th century used to refer to the field of logical relations, only later coming to describe persons within relations.

For Strathern relations are **circulating through us**. We can only know through sustained ethnographic research.

She shows how our understanding of what is a society, group or individual depends on what perspective is taken on how social relations are understood.

Perspective made through relations is central; the method is ethnography (longitudinal living with to understand relations, not interviews).

Categories are about singular fixity.

Thought Experiment 2: Zizek Logics, Culture Critique

- Zizek (2002 in London Review of Books) argues that the only class are able to mobilise their economic interests in the present are the upper classes of global capitalism who have ensured that their investments have been promoted, supported and legitimated (also David Harvey argument 1993).
- As part of this legitimation, culture has become the smokescreen by which class interests are disguised. Culture becomes something the middle-class **own and protect**. Others have “bad culture”
- He shows how this works through the fight for multicultural tolerance in the US (here as well as in his NLR article 1995) which **opposes liberals to the working-class**. (Tom Frank 2004 “What’s wrong with Kansas/the US makes a similar argument)
- Culture is used to draw the difference between **modernisers and traditionalists** This is made to work through an abstract opposition constructed between different classes.
- Culture is used to draw distinctions between the **deserving and the undeserving** (even the good/bad victim) and reduce even further to individual responsibility:

In the UK, **Peter Mandelson** (then a man of some significance in the Blair government, an architect of New Labour, twice sacked, twice EU commissioner), now a Baron in the House of Lords in his lecture to the *Fabian Society* to launch the *Social Exclusion Unit*.

He takes on the “voice” of those he is representing:

We are people who are used to being represented as problematic. We are the long-term, benefit-claiming, working-class poor, living through another period of cultural contempt. We are losers, no hopers, low life, scroungers. Our culture is yob culture. The importance of welfare provisions to our lives has been denigrated and turned against us: we are welfare dependent and our problems won't be solved by giving us higher benefits. We are perverse in our failure to succeed, dragging our feet over social change, wanting the old jobs back, still having babies instead of careers, stuck in outdated class and gender moulds. We are the 'challenge' that stands out above all others, the 'greatest social crisis of our times. (Mandelson 1997)

- Perverse outdated **culture** is used to draw the distinction between **modern/traditionalists** which is then overlayed into deserving/undeserving, and gets worked through social policy (eg Anti-Social Behaviour Orders ASBO's)
- WC are positioned as not **progressive** compared to the middle class. Our research on RTV shows how profit can now be made from depicting this GAP.
- Trump was able to mobilise this cultural designation of valuelessness with the promise the hope of future re-valuation.

Putting Abstract or Concrete Universals to Use

- The key for Zizek is how certain rhetorical claims can function as either abstract or concrete universals.
- Modernization is an abstract universal notion, whereas a concrete universal would be - class struggle – a particular antagonism.
- To set up a series of equivalences between race, gender and class is to obscure the peculiar logic of class and race struggle, which aims at overcoming, subduing, antagonism
- In the one case, we have a horizontal logic involving mutual recognition among different identities (intersectionality); in the other we have the logic of struggle with an antagonist. Black politics often torn between reform/revolutionary positions.
- But mapped over these is how antagonism is converted into other universals that attribute value.
- It's not helpful to use one perspective if the logic is based on an entirely different one.

The Power of the Modern

And...

The paradox is that populist fundamentalists retain the logic of antagonism (the indignant moral authoritarians, the conservative populists of Tom Frank's study, Trump, UKIP, Marine Le Pen) while the liberal left persists with the logic of the recognition of cultural differences that I've shown elsewhere are organised through a hierarchy of cultural value which always reproduces class divisions through a moral economy (eg *Class, Self, Culture*)

- We need to understanding how abstract universals such as civilisation, modernisation, progress make categories (wholes) and attribute value to them. This may be more useful than working with the categories themselves.
- EG: Donald Trump who defended his use of Twitter. "My use of social media is not Presidential – it's MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL. Make America Great Again!"

Caution and Alternatives?

- So we have to think through our perspectives and how we are located in analysis that is always partial, but which claims wholes.
- Think about the logic of the abstract universals that attribute value.
- Think about the processes that produce categorisations
- And the logics of concrete abstractions (eg antagonism)
- Stuart Hall's theory of articulation may be more helpful than intersectionality; can explore contradiction and antagonism.

Conclusion

- Beware overarching calls to impossibility
- But listen to rhetorical calls to account for the marginalised
- Ask to whom are the rhetorical calls being made (eg via recognition, for visibility?)
- Ask whose interests are being served and whose are not
- Ask if the imperative being claimed is methodologically possible – how could it be achieved?
- Avoid empty gesture politics (Bilge “ornamental ISy politics”)
- Be careful with recognition politics: always think of the value inherent in the category
- Pay attention to perspective chosen (parts/wholes/scales)
- Give consideration to the abstract universals that work through a moral economy and position the undeserving
- Be alert to the different logics of the concrete universals – antagonism is often central

Conclusion continued...

- What are the processes by which power works eg colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism,
- Ask in whose interests?
- Don't punish yourself; almost impossible to "get it right"
- But do feel you should be accountable to answer "call out" re racism, sexism, homophobia, classism.
- Work out the politics for the position/place
- ISy was a good start/question (eg Sojourner Truth questioning the abstract universalising category of woman) – which leads us into very different answers
- How does this work for you?