Lesson Plan: An Introduction to Intersectionality

Topic/Question

What is intersectionality, and how does it play a role in a woman of color’s everyday life?

Age Group

Middle school students and up

Time

40 minutes – 1 ½ hours

Materials

Handouts with the provided (or other) narratives from women of color and a highlighter or pen for each group of 2-5 students

Description

This activity is one that discusses the rather intricate and multidimensional subject of intersectionality. This activity is intended to help students understand the intense oppression that women of color face. Additionally, this activity helps students understand that all individuals, in general, who identify as having more than one oppressed and denigrated social identity face more obstacles than others.

Kimberle Crenshaw, an African American woman philosopher, who first coined the term intersectionality, provides the following analogy:

“Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. 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 an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. . . . But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.”

Crenshaw’s point is that many women’s issues are observed in isolation—that is, the issues are not analyzed in terms of the woman’s race, or in other words, the issues are only analyzed in terms of the white woman’s perspective. However, the women’s issues that inflict a woman of color could actually be a race issue. Because women of color are discriminated against both for the color of their skin and for being a woman, there is no telling whether a woman of color is being discriminated against because of race or because of gender. While this may not

seem like a problem to some—some may say discrimination is discrimination—it is a problem legally, politically, and socially. It is also an issue because women of color are being discriminated against more than men of color and more than white women, yet because there is no clear marker that indicates whether the discrimination is stemming from racism or from misogyny, it can be difficult for women of color to get the support they need.

With that being said, the intent of this exercise is to provide students with excerpts from different women of color (of different races and ethnicities) to help provide an understanding as to how, and to what extent, intersectionality affects women of color. Below I have inserted some excerpts/narratives from Latinas, African American women, an Indian woman, and an Asian American woman. I realize that there are more excerpts listed under both Latinas and African American women, however, because of their cultures and unique situations, Asian American women and Indian Women do not have as many published work providing insights into the worlds of these women. I am also aware that there are far more lived experiences to document from women of other ethnicities, however, since the topic of intersectionality is rather complicated in and of itself, the four races for which I have provided excerpts provide the students with a more basic introduction to intersectionality.

Begin the activity by breaking the class up into groups of 2-5 students. Provide each group with a handout that includes a list of excerpts from Latinas. Have the groups work together for about 5-10 minutes and point out (with a highlighter or pen) the unique characteristics, concerns, or obstacles that Latinas/Chicanas face. When they are finished, as a class discuss what phrases the students took note of that provided information about the unique situated-ness or positionality of Latinas/Chicanas. You will do this again for the excerpts provided by African American women, Indian woman, and Asian American woman.

Once the students are able to understand some of the ways each woman of color uniquely faces compounded forms of oppression, it is helpful to even further illustrate that by comparing the lives of these women of color to the lives of white women and to the lives of men of color. If the students are responding well to the activity and seem to understand the issue, this is the point where the instructor can provide more examples of intersectionality. These additional examples can include women of other ethnicities, or the instructor can introduce additional intersectional social identities that are also oppressed (e.g. homosexuals, bisexuals, poor people, transgenders, transsexuals).

Latina/Chicana women:

Words of a Salvadoran woman named Margarita:

1. "I was used sexually as a child, and my husband knew this when he married me, so he considered me someone worthless, someone he could do any-thing with. When I didn't want to be intimate with him he would beat me and say horrible things to me, and would say I was no good as a wife. I had forgotten most of what happened to me when I was little, and when I left my husband to come to this country I thought I could be free of all that stuff for good. I did well until one night when a man broke into my room and tried to
rape me. Now I am terrified all the time. I can't sleep, and now I remember a lot of things I never wanted to know. I am afraid at night, and afraid to go out of the house.”

2. “But there were momentos de rebeldia. These rebellious moments came when I listened and centered the experiencias of my students. I remember one time when a group of girls were talking about the telenovelas (Spanish soap operas). They were discussing how cool it would be if their kids would look like one of the protagonists who was blonde and had blue eyes. I couldn't help but think back to when I was growing up in Nicaragua and one of my uncles-in-law would joke all the time about me being "brown." Now, even though I am light skinned, I do tan easily and have black hair and dark eyes. His daughters, on the other hand, have hazel eyes and dirty blonde hair. Somehow to him I was less than his daughters because of my morena look.

Hearing my students' discussion, I interrupted them and asked, ‘Why do you want your kids to have blonde hair with blue eyes?’ Without any hesitation one answered, ‘Because they are more beautiful.’ Pain and sorrow shot through my body. I thought to myself, ‘Colonization has taught us well to hate ourselves - our brown, black skin, our brown eyes, our bodies.’ I knew I could not allow my third graders to leave that year with those colonizing thoughts about themselves, their bodies.”

3. “The arriving Latina college student often assumes that "feminism" is not relevant to her life or social situation. Latina undergraduates may hold the stereotypical views - common among Anglos as well - that "feminists" are "radical," "anti-family," and engaged in "male-bashing." But more seriously, Latina students who do demonstrate interest in women's issues may feel as alienated from Women's Studies courses as they do from other mainstream courses that fail to take their life experiences, culture, or perspectives into account. Indeed, the complexity of Latinas' social positioning means that their concerns are neglected not only in Women's Studies, but also in most Latino Studies and Latin American Studies courses.”

African American women:

1. “Blacks have long been portrayed as more sexual, more earthy, more gratification-oriented. These sexualized images of race intersect with norms of women’s sexuality, norms that are used to distinguish good women from bad, the madonnas from the whores. Thus Black women are essentially prepackaged as bad women within cultural narratives about good women who can be raped and bad women who cannot…If these sexual images form even part of the cultural imagery of Black women, then the very

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representation of a Black female body at least suggests certain narratives that may make Black women’s rape either less believable or less important.”

2. The following are excerpts from the article, “Everyday Perspectives on Feminism: African American Women Speak Out”:

Diane says, “Basically [feminism is] a White thing. All the officers [of the organizations] are White. The spokespersons are White. I know what feminism means, but it's how it's handled . . . It's a horse of a different color. For them it's who gets the most power. Like they jumped in on the Anita Hill thing. But what about all the housekeepers who work in White people's homes. It's an everyday thing for them to be harassed and it's their White men, the men of these so called White feminists, who are still doing it.”

Milly states, “Yeah. We're different from them. White women don't think they're suppose to work. They don't think they're suppose to do this kind of work (housekeeping). They have maids and people to do their dirty things. They have to be cute and feminine.”

Mae express, “I don't have anyone to lean on. I don't ever get to lean on anyone. Everyone gets to lean on me. We have to be strong because of our place in society. We do what we have to do to survive and then we break down and cry later. This outside . . . this veneer . . . doesn't mean that there isn't a little girl crying her eyes out on the inside. But if there's no one there . . . you have to take care of your own needs. And that's what people see . . . that façade.”

3. "I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me, before I lost the right to me, before I knew that the burden of beauty—or lack of it—for an entire race of people could be tied up with my hair and me.”

Indian women:

1. “We were placed in a line of girls who were marching into the dining room. These were Indian girls, in stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses. The small girls wore sleeved aprons and shingled hair. As I walked noiselessly in my soft moccasins, I felt like sinking to the floor, for my blanket had been stripped from my shoulders. I looked hard at the Indian girls, who seemed not to care that they were even more immodestly dressed than I, in their tightly fitting clothes. While we marched in, the boys entered at an opposite door. I watched for the three young braves who came in our party. I spied them in the rear ranks, looking as uncomfortable as I felt…Late in the morning, my friend Judéwin gave

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7 Ibid, 89-90.
8 Ibid, 91.
me a terrible warning. Judéwin knew a few words of English, and she had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!...I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair. I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.”

Asian American women

1. “Asian American women have lived in racially segregated internal colonies such as Chinatown, Little Tokyo, and Little Saigon. They have experienced social isolation, ghettoization, poverty, and few opportunities for personal growth and emancipation… Limited resources and lack of access to information, transportation, and social services have made them rely on their families for support and protection… The labor force participation of Asian American women is much higher than that of white and black women, but many of them have worked in the secondary labor market sector, which is characterized by long working hours, low pay, and low prestige. Although their educational levels are relatively high, 70 percent are concentrated in clerical, service, and blue-collar work, and are facing tremendous underemployment… The financial burdens on many Asian American women pressure them to continue struggling for economic survival for the good of their families, sacrificing their own interests, and suppressing their feelings and frustrations even in the face of gender and racial discrimination.”

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