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WHAT IS THE APPEAL OF INTERSECTIONALITY?

Intersectionality encourages researchers, policy makers and social change leaders to:

- Move beyond single identities or group-specific concerns, which are ineffective in explaining the nuances of human lives; in this way, important information about the unfair impacts of politics and policies is less likely to ‘fall through the cracks.’
- Explore new research and policy approaches to understand the connections between structures that shape diverse populations.
- For example, in Canada increased diversity is driven by immigration trends and intercultural unions. By 2031, 29-32% of Canadians could belong to a visible minority group, and 30% will have a mother tongue that is neither English nor French (Statistics Canada, 2010b, p. 1).
- According to the most recent Census data (Statistics Canada, 2011, p. 4), Canada is home to people of more than 200 different ethnic origins and *increasing numbers are identifying with multiple ethnicities*.
- Beyond Canada, there are similar trends of increasingly diverse populations (e.g., across religion, culture, ethnicity, race, language, etc.), creating new and complex challenges in all areas of public policy (In Diversity, 2010; Hedetoft, 2006; Thorud et al., 2014).
- Generate new and more complete information to better understand the origins, root causes and characteristics of social issues. This can be accomplished by studying existing data or by producing new data.
- Enable more effective and efficient responses than a ‘one-size fits all’ approach for solving persistent and growing social inequities.

Why is this important?

- “Seven out of ten people in the world today live in countries where inequality has increased over the past three decades,” (Lagarde, 2014, n.p.).
- WEF’s Global Outlook report warns that inequality is undermining social stability and “threatening security on a global scale” (World Economic Forum, 2013, p. 12a).

In Canada:

- The Conference Board of Canada (2011) reports that between the mid-1990s and the late 2000s Canada had the fourth largest increase in income inequality. Canada has slipped to “below the average” in measures of equality, and ranks 12th out of 17 peer countries (n.p.).

- One in seven Canadian children lives in poverty. Aboriginal people are the fastest growing group in Canada, but one in four First Nations children lives in poverty. Immigrants and newcomers face child poverty rates more than 2.5 times higher than the general population (Campaign 2000, 2012).
- Health inequalities in Canada are widespread and show up in numerous indicators of health, such as life expectancy, infant mortality, disease incidence, mortality, and injuries at every stage of the life course (Bryant et al., 2011).
- The life expectancy for First Nations people is five to seven years less than among non-Aboriginal Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2010a; Assembly of First Nations, 2011).

PRINCIPLES OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Researchers, policy makers, decision makers, and activists often seek direction on how to apply intersectionality to their work. A good starting point is to think about the key principles, presented below, that encompass the aims and objectives of intersectionality that have been previously published as constituting an intersectionality-based policy analysis framework (IBPA) (Hankivsky et al., 2012, pp. 35-38). Taken together, however, these principles provide a framework that can guide the 'doing' of intersectionality-informed work not only in policy but also research, activism and practice.¹

Intersecting Categories

From an intersectionality perspective, human lives cannot be reduced to single categories, and policy analysis cannot assume that any one social category is most important for understanding people's needs and experiences. Nor does intersectionality promote an additive approach – e.g., examining the collective impact of gender, 'race,' sexuality, age and class – as the sum of their independent effects (e.g., gender+class+race) (Hancock, 2007). Instead, intersectionality conceptualizes social categories as interacting with and co-constituting one another to create unique social locations that vary according to time and place. These intersections and their effects are what matters in an intersectional analysis (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2009).

Multi-level Analysis

Intersectionality is concerned with understanding the effects between and across various levels in society, including macro (global and national-level institutions and policies), meso or intermediate (provincial and regional-level institutions and policies), and micro levels (community-level, grassroots institutions and policies as well as the individual or 'self'). Attending to this *multi-level* dimension of intersectionality also requires addressing processes of inequity and differentiation across levels of structure, identity and representation (Dhamoon & Hankivsky, 2011; Winker & Degele, 2011). The significance of and relationships between these various levels of structure and social location are not predetermined. Rather, they reveal themselves through the process of intersectional research and discovery.

Power

Attention to power highlights that: i) power operates at discursive and structural levels to exclude some types of knowledge and experience (Foucault, 1977); ii) power shapes subject positions and categories (e.g., 'race') (e.g. racialization and racism); and iii) these processes operate together to shape experiences of privilege and penalty between groups and within them (Collins, 2000). From an intersectional perspective, power is relational. A person can simultaneously experience both power and oppression in varying contexts, at varying times (Collins, 1990). These relations of power include experiences of *power over* others, but also that of *power with* others (power that involves people working together) (Guinier & Torres, 2003). In recognizing the shifting intersections in which power operates, intersectionality moves beyond what Martinez (1993) terms the "Oppression Olympics," which occur when groups compete for the title of 'most oppressed' in order to gain political support, economic resources, and recognition. Intersectionality rejects an additive model of oppression that leaves the systems that create power differentials unchanged (Hancock, 2007). Within an intersectionality-based policy analysis (or IBPA), the focus is not just on domination or marginalization, but on the intersecting processes by which power and inequity are produced, reproduced and actively resisted (Dhamoon, 2011).

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Reflexivity

One way that intersectionality pays attention to power is through reflexivity. Reflexivity acknowledges the importance of power at the micro level of the self and our relationships with others, as well as at the macro levels of society. Reflexive practice recognizes multiple truths and a diversity of perspectives, while giving extra space to voices typically excluded from policy 'expert' roles (Bolzan, Heycox, & Hughes, 2001). Practicing reflexivity requires researchers, policy makers and stakeholders to commit to ongoing dialogue about "tacit, personal, professional or organizational knowledges" and their influences on policy (Parken, 2010, p. 85). Reflexivity can help transform policy when the people involved bring critical self-awareness, role-awareness, interrogation of power and privilege, and the questioning of assumptions and 'truths' to their work (Clark, 2012). For example, reflexive practices should help people consider their individual connections to colonization and facilitate questioning about policy and practices that accompanied the colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Blackstock, 2005).

Time and Space

Intersectionality emphasizes the importance of time and space in any analysis. How we experience and understand time and space depends on when and where we live and interact (Warf, 2008). It is within these dimensions of time and space that different kinds of knowledge are situated, our understandings of the world are constructed, and the social orders of meaning are made (Saraga, 1998). Moreover, privileges and disadvantages, including intersecting identities and the processes that determine their value, change over time and place (Hulko, 2009). Thus, time and space are not static, fixed or objective dimensions and/or processes, but are fluid, changeable and experienced through our interpretations, senses and feelings, which are, in turn, heavily conditioned by our social position/location, among other factors (Tuan, 1977).

The Diversity of Knowledges

Intersectionality is concerned with epistemologies (theories of knowledge) and power, and in particular, with the relationship between power and knowledge production. Including the

perspectives and worldviews of people who are typically marginalized or excluded in the production of knowledge can disrupt forces of power that are activated through the production of knowledge (Dhamoon, 2011). For example, the inclusion, in policy analysis, of traditional knowledges held by colonized peoples can shift dominant colonial or racialized discourses and can thus have decolonizing effects (Fredericks, Adams, & Edwards, 2011). Given the focus in intersectionality-based policy analysis on addressing inequities and power, knowledge generated through an IBPA can and should include the perspectives and knowledges of peoples who are typically excluded in policy analysis. IBPA expands understandings of what is typically constituted as “evidence” by recognizing a diversity of knowledge, paradigms and theoretical perspectives, such as knowledge generated from qualitative or quantitative research; empirical or interpretive data; and Indigenous knowledges. Users of the IBPA Framework must consider how power favours certain knowledge traditions to the exclusion of others, and reflect on both the way that diverse knowledges traditions are taken up in policy analysis and the implications this uptake has for different groups of people.

Social Justice

Intersectionality strongly emphasizes social justice (Grace, 2011). Approaches to social justice differ based in whether they focus on the redistribution of goods (Rawls, 1971) or on social processes (Young, 1990); however, all approaches share a concern with achieving equity (Sen, 2006). Theories of social justice frequently challenge inequities at their source and require people to question social and power relations. For example, according to Potts and Brown (2005) social justice is about: “transforming the way resources and relationships are produced and distributed so that all can live dignified lives in a way that is ecologically sustainable. It is also about creating new ways of thinking and being and not only criticizing the status quo” (p. 284). A social justice approach to health equity has the potential to transform social structures, which is essential in addressing the root causes of inequities (Farmer, 2005).

Equity

Closely tied to the social justice principle of intersectionality, equity is concerned with fairness. As expressed by Braveman and Gruskin (2003), equity in public policy exists when social systems are designed to equalize outcomes between more and less advantaged groups. The term *equity* is not to be confused with *equality*. For example, where *inequality* may refer to any measurable difference in outcomes of interest, *inequities* exist where those differences are unfair or unjust. This principle should be familiar to many people who work on policy; sex and gender based analysis (SGBA), which asks analysts to consider policy through a gender equity lens, is commonly applied to many areas of Canadian policy (Hankivsky et al., 2012). The IBPA Framework extends this practice by prompting analysts to consider policy issues through an intersectional lens, looking not only at gender equity, but also at the impacts of the intersections of multiple positions of privilege and oppression.

Finally, resistance and resilience have recently been added as key principles of intersectionality-based analyses (see Hunting et al., forthcoming):

Resistance and Resilience

Though not principles within IBPA, consideration of resistance and resilience is integral to intersectionality because these can disrupt power and oppression. Even from so-called ‘marginalized’ spaces and locations, oppressive values, norms and practices can be challenged. One mechanism of resistance from subordinated groups has been to use collective actions to destabilize dominant ideologies. Conversely, policies and discourses

that label groups of people as inherently marginalized or vulnerable undermine the reality that there are no 'pure victims or oppressors' (Collins 1990; Dhamoon & Hankivsky 2011). Categorical policy approaches obscure similarities between groups and their shared relationships to power. It also prevents coalitional work by reinforcing conceptions of difference based upon specific categories.

FOR EDUCATORS

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION GUIDELINES: PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING ACROSS RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

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 Concept Areas

Power dynamics in the classroom; Relationships of personal identity/background to structural systems of inequality; Critical reflection on social hierarchies in the classroom and in the society; Promoting respectful dialogue

Type of Exercise

Class Discussion; Pedagogical Pondering

Brief Description

To promote an environment that challenges race, class, gender, sexuality and other social inequalities and that facilitates learning about them, I introduce classroom discussion guidelines on the first day of all of my classes. By asking students to consider the ways these hierarchies may play out in their own lives —and thus in the class —I explicitly call on students to begin thinking about these hierarchies not as abstract notions or deficits that shape others' lives, but rather as social relations of power and control that variously shape all of our interactions in every setting.

Explanation

- In my classes, I try to foster an environment where we experience social justice: All students are shown respect.
- Race, class, gender and other power dynamics do not inhibit learning.
- All students participate in the class and think critically by learning to appreciate multiple realities and perspectives and the ways that they are shaped by differences of power and privilege.

In the early 1980's, to help achieve this climate, I developed a set of what I then called "Ground Rules" to guide classroom discussion. And I have used them in all of my classes since: sociology of gender; social statistics; seminar in race, class, gender and sexuality; seminar in women's studies; and sociology of race and ethnic relations. To be discussed on the first day of class, the guidelines ask students to make several assumptions and commitments *for the purposes of the class*:

- Acknowledge that racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist and that we all have misinformation about groups as a consequence.
- Approach this class — and the misinformation we all have — not by blaming others but by taking responsibility for learning about other groups and combating misinformation, and for treating each other with respect.
- Acknowledge that people in the class and the groups we study are always doing the best they can.

To begin from this set of assumptions is a challenge because we all have multiple experiences with inequality and beliefs about groups that might contradict these assumptions. Nonetheless, it is in attempting to make these assumptions for purposes of the class that we may become aware of some of our own preconceptions about inequalities and thus be in a better position to discuss them. In short, our reactions to the guidelines and the discussion that they generate may provide us with the best opportunity to uncover, to understand, and perhaps to challenge the ways that social inequalities play out in our own lives and in the society around us. The classroom environment I attempt to create using these guidelines is consistent with the content I seek to convey — about the nature of powerful, pervasive, and persistent systems of race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies (for a detailed discussion of the conceptual framework I use, see Weber, 1998, 2001; Weber and Dillaway, 2002).

Although I had begun using them in my classes, I first distributed these guidelines, as I now refer to them, to faculty colleagues in a handout at a 1984 session on "Promoting Positive Race, Class, and Gender Dynamics in the Classroom" at the annual curriculum transformation workshop sponsored by the Center for Research on Women (CROW) at the University of Memphis. Each year as the CROW's national curriculum workshops grew in size and visibility, I continued to conduct sessions on classroom dynamics and to distribute the guidelines. Faculty and students from across the country and a wide spectrum of schools — from community colleges to research universities — began to use these guidelines and their own adaptations of them (cf. McKinney and Gershick 1999). The guidelines were also used in research working groups, were adapted for use with first through third grades, and were used as a model for empowering Social Work students (Raske, 1999). In short, they took on a life of their own, becoming a kind of underground document that swept across the country — sometimes with my name attached, other times not.

As the neoconservative backlash against multiculturalism and attempts to address race, class, and gender in university curricula reached full bloom in the late 1980's, people were both increasingly interested in how to deal in respectful and effective ways with these issues in the classroom and increasingly coming under attack for doing so. In 1990, because the guidelines had become so widespread that people wanted a reference to legitimate their use of them and to learn about how I had been using them, I published these guidelines in a *Women's Studies Quarterly* article (Weber Cannon, 1990). The guidelines presented below are slightly modified from the ones published in 1990.

Quite the opposite of the argument leveled by conservative critics of classroom guidelines (e.g., Bartlett, 2002; Sommers, 1995) — that such rules stifle discussion, dialogue, and academic freedom, I have found that we all benefit from working with these assumptions in our classes. Over twenty years of using them, only a handful of students have dropped my classes because they felt uncomfortable with the guidelines, primarily because the students were unable to commit to working under the assumption that “people are always doing the best that they can.” Students have learned to judge themselves harshly (e.g., “I could have worked harder on that paper, done better in that course.”), to judge others similarly, and to see those judgments as the end point of critical social analysis. By this logic, once you find individuals or groups to *blame* for their social location (e.g., place in the hierarchies of income, education, wealth, occupation, health), there is no need to think about the social ranking process any further. You have your explanation: they brought it on themselves. This logic denies both the presence of different starting points for individuals and social groups and the nature of social structures that systematically and powerfully operate to advantage some individuals and groups while harming others. It is the dominant ideological stance that is employed to “justify” — that is, to normalize and to sanction — hierarchical systems of race, class, gender, sexuality and other forms of oppression. When we allow this kind of logic to hold sway in our classes, we can never reach the point of even beginning to see or to understand the systemic, pervasive, persistent and powerful nature of race, class, gender, and sexuality systems.

So instead of shutting down discussion, I have found that using these guidelines for classroom discussion enables the conversation to open up for all students, but especially for students from oppressed groups — students of color, women, working class, and gay and lesbian students. I believe this change occurs primarily because the guidelines acknowledge the historical fact and current reality that society at large as well as our classrooms have been sites of oppression where people have been silenced, denied, and mistreated because of their location in race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies. Students from more privileged backgrounds are also sometimes relieved that the framework not only does not hold them personally responsible for broad systems of oppression that have persisted for decades but also encourages them to take personal responsibility for their current speech and actions.

Still, some students may have difficulty making these commitments. I remind them that they are merely asked to commit to these guidelines *for this class* and that they may learn much about themselves by paying close attention to what is happening — in the class, in the readings — when they feel they cannot make or continue with a particular assumption. In such a case, I encourage them to speak about their concerns.

I use these guidelines in conjunction with a set of other teaching techniques designed to elicit maximal participation in multiple venues from all of the students in a class:

- Classroom introductions — where students get to know each other beyond stereotypical images by introducing themselves in many ways to their classmates telling: their racial/ethnic background, their scholarly areas of interest, their skills and knowledge that would be especially useful to their classmates when working together, their work/family histories
- Journals — where they are asked to reflect on the dynamics as well as the substance of the class (ungraded)
- Group projects — where they work together to produce a group project and receive group as well as individual evaluations
- Peer evaluations — where they work on each other's writing based on peer editing techniques which are taught in class
- Small group discussions — where they analyze the material and where the group composition is changed frequently

When these techniques are used in conjunction with the guidelines, my classrooms have often been places where there is a high level of participation, where my students get to know each other well, and where multiple realities are revealed in respectful and enlightening ways. The guidelines are not, however, a panacea but only a framework that facilitates communication across difference. I still must be vigilant and use my power to structure the class and to intervene in ways that help us to achieve these goals.

One final note on politics and guidelines. The current political climate is one in which some conservative, dominant culture, political forces on college campuses and beyond actively work to discourage open and honest discussion and scholarly engagement about race, ethnicity, class, gender, nation and other systemic structures of inequality. They do so by shifting attention from these structures and the groups that have historically suffered unfair treatment within them and to “conservative” students who are portrayed as “victims” of liberal faculty who are a “grave threat to freedom and conscience” because they demand “ideological orthodoxy...on pain of lowered grade” (correspondence from Alan Kors, President, Foundation for Independent Rights in Education (FIRE) to President Andrew Sorensen, University of South Carolina, regarding my use of these guidelines). In 2002, I, and the guidelines I developed, became a target of FIRE for allegedly doing just that. I knew that the furor they created was not about what was going on in my classes because I was never contacted by anyone from the organization.

The student who sent my guidelines to the FIRE organization (a fact I did not learn until after grades were submitted) never voiced a single complaint about these issues during the semester and received an A in the class—a grade which is not typically seen as either “lower” or “painful.” I was not even the sole teacher in the class—it was team taught by three professors.

Yet, as the letter from Alan Kors went on to say, “We will be raising these questions as publicly as possible.” And they did—in conservative media organizations such as the *Washington Times* and The O’Reilly Factor, and anywhere else that would give them attention including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. While the misrepresentation of these guidelines and my work was difficult to endure, the outcome was a solid affirmation of the validity of this work and of a faculty’s right—even encouragement—to do it. The ASA Council unanimously passed the following resolution:

The ASA Council wishes to affirm the academic freedom of all faculty to develop strategies or guidelines to encourage open and civil classroom debate. We support the discussion and dialogue of controversial issues that are inherent to the study of inequality and other core subjects.

Myra Marx Ferree, writing for Sociologists for Women and Society (SWS)’s Committee on Academic Freedom, in a letter to USC administrators and to FIRE stated:

These sorts of guidelines for discussion seem to accord very well with the ideals of a liberal arts education and to prevent intimidation by others in the course of discussion... We urge you to affirm the positive value of the cooperative and unthreatening climate that Prof. Weber seeks to create in her classroom, and to support the variety of ways, including the guidelines she has developed, that individual faculty use to realize this important goal.

President Andrew Sorensen, University of South Carolina, wrote to FIRE,

As designed and utilized, the Guidelines do not violate University policy, AAUP policies on the rights of students, or the United States Constitution.

The FIRE organization has ceased its efforts to have me change these guidelines or to stop using them.

Assigned Readings and Necessary Materials

No assigned readings or materials. I include the citations to publications about the guidelines (including this article) on the guidelines handout, put them on reserve, and ask students if they would be interested in reading and discussing these as a group. I also discuss the political controversy that has periodically arisen over the guidelines. If they express an interest in discussing it further, I have them read the *Chronicle* article, the ASA resolution (and *Footnotes* article), letters from the conservative organization (FIRE) that initiated the most recent controversy, and letters of support from SWS, the President of the University of South Carolina, some students, and others. For copies of these letters, email me at weberL@sc.edu.

Reading References

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Instructions for Students

GUIDELINES FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

To be discussed on the first day of class, the guidelines ask all students to make several assumptions for purposes of the class.

1. Acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist.¹
2. Acknowledge that one mechanism of institutionalized racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, etc., is that we are all systematically taught misinformation about our own group and about members of other groups. This is true for everyone, regardless of our group(s).
3. Agree not to blame ourselves or others for the misinformation we have learned but to accept responsibility for not repeating misinformation after we have learned otherwise.
4. Assume that people both the people we study — and the members of the class, always do the best they can.
5. Actively pursue information about our own groups and those of others.
6. Share information about our groups with other members of the class and never demean, devalue, or in any way “put down” people for their experiences.
7. Agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls that prohibit group cooperation and group gain.
8. Create a safe atmosphere for open discussion. If you wish to make comments that you do not want repeated outside the classroom, you can preface your remarks with a request that the class agree not to repeat the remarks.

¹Many other institutionalized forms of oppression could be listed here. A more complete list might include age, ethnicity, disability, gender, race, class, religion, color, national origin, sexual orientation, and physical appearance. The major focus is on the four oppressions listed; however, analogies can fairly easily be made to other forms.

NOTE: These guidelines were developed by Lynn Weber, and published in *Women's Studies Quarterly* 18 (Spring/Summer 1990):126-134. A discussion and revised version was published in “Empowering Students Through Classroom Discussion Guidelines,” in Marybeth C. Stalp and Julie Childers, eds., *Teaching Sociological Concepts and the Sociology of Gender*, Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association Teaching Resources Center, 2000, and 2005 (2nd Edition).