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Always Already Intersectional: Introducing Intersectionality in Large Lecture Courses

Nicole Hentrich and Annemarie Navar-Gill



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Always Already Intersectional: Introducing Intersectionality in Large Lecture Courses

Nicole Hentrich, University of Michigan, Department of Communication Studies
Annemarie Navar-Gill, University of Michigan, Department of Communication Studies

Overview

Identity is a central concern of media studies. When we first discuss this critical topic in our introductory undergraduate lecture classes, we tend to break it down into discrete dimensions like “race” and “femininity.” However, in the real world, our students do not experience these identities—whether their own or those of others—discreetly, but rather in multiple, intersecting ways. This unit provides a framework for teaching identity intersectionally from the start. We provide lecture notes and in-class activities with a flexible timeline that is adaptable to different class sizes and numbers of weeks. The unit uses intersectional identity as an intuitive springboard for teaching students complex theoretical concepts including ideology, discourse, power, and representation that are essential for the critical study of media.

Rationale

Ensuring that students are equipped to critically engage with texts, audiences, and industries is a key outcome of our courses. When identity is covered in introductory courses, different categories are often parsed and taught separately (class, race, sexuality, gender and so forth). If intersectionality is taught, it is frequently as an additional consideration to the categories rather than as a framework in and of itself. This is not an approach that fosters a deep understanding of identity as always already being intersectional and therefore does not reflect how identities operate in peoples’ (including our students’) lived experience.

This unit proposes taking a different approach to identity in an introductory media studies course. We have developed an “intersectionality first” framework in which students are introduced to identities as being always already intersectional. This came about through a curriculum redesign of the introductory survey course COMM 101: The Mass Media. This course provides freshman and sophomore students with an overview of critical cultural approaches to communication studies. It is a required course for undergraduates intending to pursue communications as their major and the focus is on fostering critical media literacy.

Developing critical media literacy has become a key instructional imperative in the last two decades. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share’s call to expand literacy education to encompass how media is implicated in social and cultural power relations is essential now more than ever. Part of this literacy requires a willingness to embrace complexity rather than shy away from it. For instructors this may mean amending their expectations. Some might resist the idea of using intersectionality as an initial lens to understand and analyze identity because it is deemed too complex for introductory classes. To not do so, however, fails to reflect the way in which we



experience our identities in the real world. In fact, students appear to grasp the idea quickly and more fully when intersectionality is used to introduce identity because it more intuitively connects to their lived experience.

Our always already intersectional framework encourages students to embrace complexity as well. The tendency in early undergraduate analyses of identity and representation is to fall into the “discrimination Olympics” trap. By this we mean the inclination of students to flatten their analysis of identity in a way that pits categories of difference against each other, and to see almost any text as only ever irredeemably oppressive. A framework that requires students to learn these categories in relation to each other, however, provides the basis for more nuanced understanding of identity. This captures Crenshaw’s assertion that “the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1991, 1245).

A key challenge of introducing intersectionality this early in our students’ academic careers is the fact that these are often lecture-based courses with large enrollment. These courses typically take the form of broad surveys of the field and as such, time and space in the syllabus are limited. We conceptualized these lectures in the context of the introductory survey course we teach, which has an enrollment of 250-350 students each semester. In addition, the lecture is still a central mode of instruction at universities and colleges and this can pose a further stumbling block as our approach requires student reflection and engagement to work. As such, our unit outline focuses on how lectures can be used to effectively frame concepts through questions rather than content, and how active learning strategies can be incorporated into a large lecture course (Bonwell 1991, Eison 2010, Prince 2004). A key component of active learning in the lecture format is incorporating a “change up” (Middendorf & Kalish 1996) to consider the drop off in student attention that occurs over any extended period of time.

General Timeline

This unit is designed to be taught over 4 lecture periods of 1.5 hours each in an introductory media studies survey course. Different lecture arrangements would also work as the unit is structured around four key questions rather than specific content. For instance, in a course more narrowly focused on media and identity, it could be adapted to a longer portion of the term by giving more time to each question. We have provided some suggested media examples but these can be changed based on instructor preference. The key element is the order in which the material is covered, and the use of active learning strategies to “change up” the lecture mode.

For instructors who are less familiar with the concept of intersectionality, the key theoretical texts are “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989) and “Mapping the Margins” (1991), both by Kimberlé Crenshaw. A more contemporary overview is Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall’s (2013) “Toward A Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Application, and Praxis.”



Detailed Lesson Plan

Specific clips and/or additional information about the particular examples cited in these lecture notes can be found in the “Resources” section.

Critical Question #1: How do media stories construct reality?

Learning Goals:

Students will be able to:

- Recognize the concept of identity as always already intersectional
- Describe how media representations of various identity categories are significant because of their role in constructing reality
- Understand the key theoretical terms we will be using as we continue to talk through identity (power, ideology, discourse, representation)

Media Stories Construct Reality

When we analyze media, we often look at how its role in constructing the social world intersects with the way power operates in society.

- Ideology and discourse are two important theories that try to explain how power operates in society.
- One place we see ideologies and discourses operating in/through the media is via representation.
- Discussing how ideology and discourse are at work in our understanding and experience of identities is one of the clearest ways to understand these more abstract concepts.

Identities are Intersectional

This presents the first “change up” in the lecture and is a whole class activity called “What Makes Me, Me?” The instructor should have a series of questions up on the slide and ask students to write down their responses individually. The questions are as follows:

- Write down 3 words that describe your identity
- Which of these (if any) are visible to others?
- Which of these are you most aware of on a day to day basis?
- Which of these affords you the most privilege?
- Which of these do you see best represented in the media?
- Which of these do you think the media gets wrong?

If time is an issue, you can focus on the first 2 questions, as this will still generate rich discussion. After students write down their answers they should discuss their responses with the people around them. Instructors should ask them to focus on patterns or surprises that emerged. Groups should then be invited to share their observations in the full class.

What this think, pair, share activity illustrates to students is that we experience our identities intersectionally rather than through discrete categories. Since we experience identity this way,



using intersectionality as a framework for the rest of the unit equips students to develop more nuanced arguments about media texts and audiences.

After the class discussion, introduce and historicize the term **intersectionality**. Emphasize that it is a concept that comes from the work of legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who used it to explain how Black women are doubly disadvantaged in the legal system. This grounds the term in the real world rather than letting it remain a piece of abstract academic jargon.

Identities as a Site for Understanding Ideology and Discourse

- Explain ideology through representation of intersectional identities
 - Use the “American Dream” as an example of an ideology that operates differently across identities such as class, citizenship, and race. The American Dream is the idea that the United States affords everyone the opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work and determination. However, your individual position as an intersectional subject invariably affects your access to the resources you need to reach the “dream.”
 - To further the American Dream example with more contemporary context, you can discuss news coverage from different sources about DACA, the politically controversial US immigration policy that allows people illegally brought into the country as minors to remain. When news coverage frames “the dreamers,” as they are colloquially called, in various ways such as “illegal immigrants,” “victims of circumstance,” “the full expression of the American Dream” these framings rely on markers like race, education, and socioeconomic status.
- Explain discourse through representation of intersectional identities
 - Use “motherhood” as an example of a discursive formation that is heavily classed, raced, aged, and gendered. Motherhood is understood through the discourses of family, religion, medicine, the law, and others. As such, particular types of bodies and identities are more, or less, able to occupy the subject position of “mother.” Further, discourses around “good motherhood” are pervasive and are another arena where we see particular identities being privileged over others, for instance, when “working mothers” are seen as less devoted to their children. For instructors interested in further reading, see *The Mommy Myth* (2005) by Susan Douglas.
 - For example:
 - *Teen Mom* (age and class): In the original trailer for MTV’s *Teen Mom*, the teen moms are shown struggling to maintain ordinary lives as teenagers after giving birth. The trailer simultaneously frames motherhood through the lens that it is essential to give up personal goals in service of raising your children and offers a stern warning against becoming a mother too young.
 - *Precious* (age, race, class): Like the girls in *Teen Mom*, Precious becomes a mother at a young age, but is clearly treated differently because she is Black. Instructors can choose a clip depending on what they want to highlight: in one of the clips we selected, a social worker comes to



evaluate the environment in Precious’s home, where she lives with her mother, grandmother, and daughter, in the other, Precious is suspended from school for getting pregnant again. The former illustrates the involvement of state mechanisms in cycles of poverty, the latter plays particularly well against the *Teen Mom* example in which the 16-year-old mothers are white and get a TV show.

- *Big Little Lies* (age, class, employment status): In this clip, conflict breaks out between mothers at an affluent Bay Area elementary school when Renata’s child accuses Jane’s of bullying. While the mothers in the scene are predominantly white, wealthy, married, stay-at-home mothers, you can see how both Jane (a young, working-class single mom) and Renata (who has a high powered career) are set apart from the other mothers, as well as how the judgements about their “inappropriate” motherhood play into how the other women take sides in the conflict.
- Return to and clarify the differences between using ideology and discourse as tools for understanding how power operates.
- We see ideologies and discourses about identity operating in media representations of identity.

Students can be assigned a selection of easily accessible, non-academic pieces on intersectionality. Some examples include:

- “Intersectionality Is Not A Label” by Latoya Peterson
- “Intersectionality is Harder than You May Think” by Kovie Biakolo
- “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait” by Kimberlé Crenshaw
- Columbia Law School’s interview with Kimberlé Crenshaw

Critical Question #2: How do media stories produce, maintain, and challenge cultural norms?

Learning Goals:

Students will be able to:

- Explain how identities are socially constructed
- Appreciate that identities have material impact in peoples’ lives
- Analyze media representations and their relation to cultural norms

Cultural Norms and Social Construction

- Pose the question “what is a cultural norm?”
- Ideas of race, gender, class, etc. are socially constructed, even though they are social realities that impact real people’s lives. The media is a key way in which these constructions happen and are upheld.
- Even though these ideas are socially constructed, they have material impact.
- Work through examples of media representations that in turn challenge, reinforce, and then complicate these norms. Some examples to draw from include:



- The ways Black athletes are conceived of as “naturally talented” and white athletes are conceived of as “hardworking” and “intelligent” (intersections of race, gender)
- The use of “enlightened sexism” (Douglas 2010) in advertising such as Carl Junior’s “slutburger” (intersections of gender, race, and class). Enlightened sexism is the idea that it is acceptable to use sexist imagery because of the belief that feminism’s work is done.
- Hard bodied action heroes from the 1980s as examples of hypermasculinity (gender intersecting with sexuality, race, ability). For example films like *Rambo* (1982), *Terminator* (1984) and *Die Hard* (1988) showcase the white, cis-male bodies of Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Bruce Willis, placing emphasis on their physical strength, violence, and aggression. For further reading on this instructors can look at Susan Jefford’s *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1993).
- Race, class, and trans* tensions, in relation to the current women's movement and Black feminisms (Women’s March and #MeToo). There has been a lot of discussion about the whiteness and cisgender nature of, particularly, the Women’s March.

Muddiest Point

This activity functions as a conclusion to lecture and as a formative assessment. It provides a means for instructors to gauge student understanding and then adapt their next lesson, whether it be lecture or a discussion section, accordingly.

- Students should be asked to write down what idea or concept they are most confused about. This can be done in hard copy on a piece of paper or index card, or students could use a Google form or other instructional technology.
- The instructor (or TA) then has a chance to review responses and incorporate them into their next class.

Critical Question #3: Whose stories are centered in media?

Learning Goals:

Students will be able to:

- Recognize how identities intersect to create privileged subject positions
- Appreciate that people can inhabit privileged and marginalized identities simultaneously

Hegemony

- In media, some people are more likely to see their identities reflected than others. The way in which certain types of people are centered in the media while others are marginalized is reflective of the socially constructed norms we discussed in the previous lecture.
- A particularly useful concept for thinking more deeply about this is hegemony. Hegemony is the idea that in society and culture, the dominant group’s ideas, values, and worldview become seen as the accepted cultural norm.



- How does media play a role in what comes to be understood as common sense and natural? Media can play a key role in establishing hegemony, because the stories and identities we see give us a sense of what is “normal.” Dominant groups are more likely to see their stories told, so they are more likely to be seen as “normal.”

Minute Paper

Have students think about a media text they have recently watched. Have them write a “minute paper” addressing the question “what identity or identities were centered in the narrative and how?” Again, this can be done in hard copy, google forms, or in the comment feature of a learning management system (Canvas, Blackboard etc.).

The Complexity of Privileged Subject Positions

- It’s important to think about privileged subject positions intersectionally because we all move through different identities and can be in a hegemonic position in some ways/at some times but not others.
- Introduce intersectional examples of media hegemony. The key point is that it is rarely one identity that is privileged in isolation. Examples may include:
 - *The New Normal* (homonormativity). The show’s representation of queerness is one that is white, cis-gendered, male, upper-middle class, professional, and invested in normative familial arrangements in the form of monogamy, marriage, and having children. So although these men are marginalized by their sexuality, many other aspects of their identities are highly privileged and make them part of a dominant group in society.
 - *#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen* and *#BlackPowerIsForBlackMen* (misogynoir): Misogynoir is misogyny directed toward Black women where race and gender intersect. While white women suffer from sexism and Black men from racism, Black women face a double bind where sexism and racism intersect and doubly disadvantage them. As a digital media example, you can discuss these hashtags, started by prominent Black women writers, on which Black women shared about the ways they are set apart from white women in feminist movements and Black men in anti-racist movements.
 - “USS Callister” episode of *Black Mirror* (fragile/geek masculinity): As some strides have been made toward equality, we’ve seen a significant social phenomenon where members of the most dominant groups feel discriminated against because their dominance has in some ways diminished. For instance, some white, cisgender, heterosexual men—in particular those who feel at a disadvantage *within* that group because they do not fit into hegemonic masculinity—try to reclaim power over others. We’ve included a link to a YouTube video that breaks down this theme across the episode, or you can show a scene from the episode (available on Netflix) and have students discuss it themselves.



Critical Question #4: Whose stories are marginalized?

Learning Goals:

Students will be able to:

- Recognize how identities intersect to create marginalized subject positions
- Consider the role industrial structures play in determining whose stories get told
- Develop reparative narratives to address representational issues in media

Marginalized Identities

- Who doesn't get to speak and who is spoken for? Have students think about what groups they don't see in media. They are likely to come up with Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, the elderly and possibly others.
- But being marginalized is not just about numbers. We can think about marginalization as a lack of complex and nuanced representations of that group. What often happens is rather than having no representation at all, we see simplified complex representations (Alsultany 2013). Examples to show include the "Angry Black Woman" and the "Model Minority."
- The Angry Black Woman can be seen in many contemporary reality shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *Love and Hip Hop*. You could also show the "Stereotology" clip on "Angry Black Women" as an overview.
- The Model Minority typically applies to Asian Americans. The short article and clip from *The Washington Post* clearly explains this stereotype.

Students can be assigned Evelyn Alsultany's article "Arabs and Muslims in the media after 9/11: Representational strategies for a 'Postrace' era" (2013).

Reparative Narratives

- How and where can we see the marginalized being centered?
- What might those representations look like? What makes them reparative? There are a number of interview clips of creators/writers/actors speaking about this. Some examples to draw on are:
 - *Insecure* (Issa Rae)
 - *The Big Sick* (Kumail Nanjiani)
 - *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins)
 - *This Is Us* (Sterling K. Brown's 2018 Golden Globes acceptance speech)
 - *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (Rachel Bloom)

Students can be directed to "Open TV" which is a Chicago-based platform for television that focuses on representation of intersectional identities.

Pitch Activity

After looking at textual and paratextual examples of reparative narratives, have students look back at what they wrote down in lecture one in the "What Makes Me, Me?" activity. If you did not get a chance to discuss the last two points (what aspects does the media do a good job of



representing, and which do they get wrong?) do so now. Ask students to write down a 3 sentence pitch for a TV show or movie that would provide a reparative narrative for the representational issues they highlighted. Invite students to share their ideas.

Teaching Materials

Critical Question #1: How do media stories construct reality?

Kelley, David E. "Somebody's Dead," Season 1, Episode 1 of *Big Little Lies*
Scene discussed in the lesson plan runs from 19:24-25:25 (can choose an excerpt)

MTV's *Teen Mom* Documentary Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEjiM0sESus>

Precious, A Visit from A Social Worker: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh1ZULiQDFg>

Precious, Are You Pregnant Again?: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRYAe1L1iMw>

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Columbia Law School. "Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later." Web. <<http://www.law.columbia.edu/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality>>.

Critical Question #2: How do media stories produce, maintain, and challenge cultural norms?

Carl Junior's "Slutburger" advertisement. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlUvQkW4B1k>

Trailer for *Rambo: First Blood* (1982): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAqLKlxY3Eo>

Trailer for *Die Hard* (1988): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIOX44m8ktc>

Trailer for *Terminator* (1984): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k64P4l2Wmeg>



Burns, Katelyn. "The Women's March Movement Is Trying - But Still Struggling - To Center Trans Voices." *The Establishment*. 3 Nov. 2017. <<https://theestablishment.co/the-womens-march-movement-is-trying-but-still-struggling-to-center-trans-voices-3094667c9f24>>.

Critical Question #3: Whose stories are centered in media?

The New Normal clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wigxvbnf0E>

"Social Media Minds the Intersectional Gap." *MS Magazine Blog*. 16 Aug. 2013. Web. <<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2013/08/16/social-media-minds-the-intersectional-gap/>>.

Black Mirror. "USS Callister: Goodbye Toxic Fanboy:" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EudArMNjbP0>

Critical Question #4: Whose stories are marginalized?

Angry Black Woman Stereotype: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ProEYXRbd2s>

"The Model Minority." *The Washington Post*. 14 April. 2017. Web. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/04/14/asian-americans-used-to-be-portrayed-as-the-villains-how-did-they-become-a-model-minority/?utm_term=.471276dbf940>.

Alsultany, Evelyn. 2013. "Arabs and Muslims in the media after 9/11: Representational strategies for a 'postrace' era." *American Quarterly* 65, no. 1: 161-169.

Sterling K. Brown's 2018 Golden Globes acceptance speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kGJTWzPABA>

Open TV: <http://www.weareo.tv/>



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