Intersectionality in Theory and Practice: From Conceptual Issues to Practical Examples in the Political Science and International Studies Classroom

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Abstract:

Recently, various fields, including Political Science and International Studies, have embraced insights from the literature on intersectionality. With its origins in feminist studies, this literature explores how numerous variables such as linguistic differences, ethnicity, gender or national identity combine to determine an individual’s fate in a global context. How can the insights from this rich literature be applied to the contemporary Political Science and International Studies classrooms? Are they likely to change the ways in which fundamental political concepts such as power, rights, security, freedom and democracy are conceptualized and taught? This paper attempts to apply the theoretical insights from the literature on intersectionality to “real world” situations in the classroom, thus demonstrating the ways in which this literature can enrich teaching. For example, intersectional approaches to the study of legal documents, such as international treaties, constitutions or administrative decisions mandates that the institutionalized framework connecting “real” people, concepts and events are explored. It is argued that intersectional approaches offer valuable insights into the study of social movements (including feminisms) and their exclusions, as well as civil rights and human rights.
The presentation will focus on one project within an international interdisciplinary project started at Georgia Gwinnett College. In practice, classrooms at Georgia Gwinnett College (and elsewhere in the USA) are becoming increasingly diverse. Gwinnett County is home to one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the United States.

There is a growing realization in different fields that it is necessary to find ways to analyze relations between global issues, such as immigration, and local realities. Research suggests that immigrant high school students have complex and even contradictory transnational identifications, and that traditional pedagogical methods in lower level undergraduate government courses (based on memorizing facts on constitutions, etc) may be inadequate. Taking these realities into account, this project focuses on the following question: How to create a “transformative classroom” (James A. Banks’s term) which fosters global awareness and helps to understand the changing power structures better? Theoretically, the project is grounded in the intersectionality literature which explores teaching strategies that address how complex variables such as global developments, linguistic differences, ethnicity, gender or national identity combine to determine an individual’s fate in a global context. Drawing on the intersectionality literature, the presentation will focus on an overview of specific strategies to create a transformative classroom used in introductory undergraduate courses. I am currently developing several in-class projects for my introductory political science classes. The goal of these projects is to come up with culturally sensitive ways to study controversial topics, such as immigration and anti-discrimination policies.

This paper consists of two parts. The first part is a brief overview of the interdisciplinary literature on intersectionality. The second part highlights the relevance of this literature to teaching political science and international studies classes.

**Overview of the Literature on Intersectionality**

In the words of Julianne Melveaux (2002), “intersectionality is a big word to talk about the small ways in which we live, and the limited tools of analysis we use to describe the details that define our living. In other words, the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life: We are used to using one or two things to explain our reality, when four or five factors might influence our space.” Pioneered in feminist studies and often used to analyze inequality and discrimination, the concept of intersectionality helps to re-imagine discrimination as “traffic” through an intersection. It may flow in one direction, but it also may flow in another. If there is an “accident” (that is, if discrimination occurs), it can be caused by several cars or all of them.

Probably one of the most important achievements of intersectionality literature (which is inseparable from the writings of feminists) is that an analysis of discrimination which singles out one identity trait cannot adequately account for various intersecting aspects of identity, including race and sex. Using the concept of intersectionality for the study of oppression and discrimination allows the deconstruction of categories that may have been taken for granted, challenges hierarchies and reveals oppressions that were previously unseen or have been ignored.
As a paradigm and a theoretical lens, intersectionality has attracted scholarly attention since the early 1990s (Collins 1998). It is commonly understood as an approach/paradigm to study and analyze the disempowerment of marginalized groups. Its goal is to capture the consequences of the interaction between several modes of subordination (Cole 2009; Crenshaw 1994; Culp 1997; Damaske 2009; Grabham et al. 2009; Hancock 2007; Kantola and Nousiainen 2009; among others). Studies related to intersectionality address the ways in which racism, patriarchy, economic inequalities and other hierarchies create lasting unequal structures (e.g., Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993; Eberhardt and Fiske 1998; Moghaddam 1998; Sharp et al. 2007; Shih and Sanchez 2009; Squires 2008; among others).

The paradigm has been applied to study political institutions (Hawkesworth 2003), legal issues (Grabham et al. 2009), ethnic relations (Hurtado and Sinha 2008), discrimination in places of employment and institutions (Damaske 2009) and gender relations (Yuval-Davis 2006). There is a growing literature examining the ways in which the European Union (EU) has recently attempted to institutionalize intersectionality in its policies addressing various expressions of inequality in political institutions, the workplace and educational settings (Lombardo and Verloo 2009; Kantola and Nousiainen 2009; Pruegl and Thiel 2009; among others).

There is a significant number of studies documenting what it is like to “live through intersectionality” in everyday life experiences. This approach is often embraced by feminist scholars who dwell on the pedagogical choices that teachers make. One goal of those whose teaching is informed by writings on intersectionality is to challenge the preconceived ideas about different population groups and cultures (Berger and Guidroz 2009).

As a methodology, intersectionality (also known as “an intersectional methodology”) is described as consisting of four distinct components or stages. The first stage is data collection; it involves documenting and describing various inequalities or modes of subordination. The second stage is contextual analysis. It may involve conducting case studies and describing the cultural or social context of the modes of subordination. The third stage is a review of policies and systems of implementation to address issues related to diversity and modes of subordination. These policies can be those that are adopted by international institutions and national governments (for example, the EU and/or national governments; see Kantola and Nousiainen 2009; Pruegl and Thiel 2009), or social units and educational institutions (Damaske 2009; Fair 2009; Bryan 2009), among others. The fourth stage refers to the implementation of the intersectional policy initiatives that can be proposed by both governmental and non-governmental actors (Center for Women’s Global Leadership 2009).

Specific methodological approaches to the study of intersectionality can be divided into three broad approaches (McCall 50-51). The first approach attempts to reject and to deconstruct analytical categories to capture the complexity of social life and to avoid using fixed categories—“simplifying social fictions”—that lead to the production and re-creation of new inequalities. Leslie McCall calls this approach the “anti-categorical complexity” approach, and...
its origins are in feminist literature which started with demands to include women’s experiences into the study of social realities.

The second approach, or intra-categorical complexity, to use McCall’s terminology, is the approach with which intersectionality studies started. Similarly to the first approach, it sets out to question and problematize boundaries and boundary-making. Authors using this approach tend to focus on “particular social groups at neglected points of intersection,” those whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditional group identities. The goal is to reveal the complexities of lived experiences in such groups. To be specific, the intra-categorical approach was embraced and used by those who criticized hegemonic Western feminist theorists, including feminists of color, who argued that lived experiences, especially in locations outside of the West, could not fit into any one single “master”/hegemonic category. However, unlike those who have fully embraced the first approach (post-structuralists), the representatives of the intra-categorical approach did not fully reject the existence of categories, arguing for the need to conceptualize and define the intersections of categories.

In research, the representatives of the second approach tend to use case studies exploring one cultural group, using ethnographic studies (“thick” description). This methodology also highlights the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods—quantitative research can use categories without questioning them. (Examples of quantitative methods that use categories without questioning them include the construction of data sets, impersonally administered questionnaires, where there is a wall of separation between the author and the subject and where the goal is to construct “true” empirical knowledge; this kind of separation would not be acceptable to those who use an intra-categorical approach.)

Those who embrace intra-categorical complexity are likely to use qualitative approaches to conduct research. Adopting an intra-categorical complexity lens means that there is an acknowledgment that reality may be patterned in very complex ways; however, the goal is to determine and describe the source of complexity and to theorize about it.

The last approach outlined by Leslie McCall is an inter-categorical approach which attempts to explore “the nature of the relationships of social groups and, importantly, how they are changing” (McCall 59). This comparative approach tends to focus on many groups, and it uses categories strategically. This approach starts with an acknowledgment that there are long standing relationships of inequality among social groups, and that these relationships should be the focus of analysis.

Using the inter-categorical approach, McCall examined the sources of different dimensions of wage inequalities in several regions of the United States. This examination included comparisons of inequality between men and women, between those who have college education and those who do not, and inequalities among different ethnic groups. The second step in applying the inter-categorical complexity approach was to integrate this information into “a configuration of inequality,” thus trying to understand the economic structure that supports such conditions as well as predict anti-inequality politics that are likely to be practiced when such conditions exist. Applying this approach allows the identification of different patterns of racial, gender and class inequality across different regions. Thus, for example, one city can exhibit relatively low levels of class and racial wage inequality among employed men but higher gender wage inequality and class inequality among employed women. Another city may exhibit the
opposite structure of inequality, where class and racial inequality, not gender inequality, matter most.

Although an important contribution to identity studies and understanding the construction of inequalities (the creation of stable categories leads to demarcation which leads to exclusion and inequality), intersectionality approaches have been criticized for their limits in theory-producing power (especially the anti-categorical complexity approach). Given its sensitivity to complexity, research practice following the intersectionality paradigm also poses many unique challenges, such as the broader applicability of the findings. The critics of intersectionality approaches have pointed out that the intra-categorical complexity approach argues that it is detrimental to ignore differences within identity categories. But how can the ends of many subgroups be determined? Furthermore, the critics of the intra-categorical approach have argued that the multidimensionality of identity, a concept embraced by this approach, may in fact be a universal experience. Taking these criticisms into account, applying the principles of intersectionality in practice implies a movement away from merely problematizing identity categories to a deeper understanding of the principles of anti-discrimination.

The Application of the Principles of Intersectionality in Political Science and in the Teaching of Political Science and International Studies

Although the field of intersectionality studies is interdisciplinary, many studies—such as Nira Yuval Davis’s work on nations and nationalism (e.g., focusing on the role of gender in the context of Israeli nationalism), Kimberlé Crenshaw’s examination of the overlapping of several systems of oppression (gender, race, class) in her study of feminist and anti-racist movements, and work on feminist movements outside of the Western world—can (and do) enrich political science classrooms, especially those which take women’s studies/feminist perspectives into consideration. However, if we examine the textbooks written for introductory level political science classes, the treatment of concepts such as gender, race and class is likely to be based on the categorical or (rarely) the inter-categorical approach described above.

This is not surprising. Applying a categorical approach to the study of race, gender, and class (these concepts are usually covered in chapters focusing on civil rights) makes the narrative more coherent and easier to understand. In addition, leading advocacy groups, both in and outside of the United States, tend to base their identities on “unitary, rather than complex, identity category” to make their political points clearer (Goldberg 124). In courts, simpler identity claims are easier to resolve. According to Nira Yuval-Davis, the policy-makers, even if they are aware of intersectional perspectives, simply do not know what to do about them; it is much more practical and easier to simplify identity categories, to “flatten” them without trying to acknowledge social separations and positioning in different places.

One of the most important insights from the literature on intersectionality is that it is important to avoid applying “mechanically” an additive approach to intersectional divisions. This is especially true of recent recurring debates in the literature about how to interpret intersectionality (that is, whether one should embrace an “additive” approach, according to which different oppressions would be seen as “adding up,” e.g., the triple oppression of gender, race, class, or the “constitutive” approach, according to which different axes of identity are seen
as interacting and constituting each other) In the words of Nira Yuval-Davis, it is important to recognize that “not all women identify being women as their most important social grouping, let alone that they are all feminists,” and that this “might avoid exercising some crude and counterproductive tokenistic identity politics” (Berger and Guidroz 2009: 66).

In a political science and international studies classrooms, intersectionality-inspired awareness may help to avoid crude and counterproductive discussions, especially about sensitive topics such as illegal immigration, women’s issues and ethnic politics and help to deconstruct simplistic divisions into “us” and “them”. The goal of applying such perspectives is to transform a mechanistic and often simplistic understanding of identity politics into more subtle perspectives.

Leading intersectionality theorists, such as Nira Yuval-Davis, argue that it is possible and useful to apply insights from this literature not only when studying discrimination, but, perhaps even more importantly, when studying various constructions of collectivities, boundaries and difference as well as relations among collectivities and among nations. In addition, intersectional perspectives can be useful when studying specific government policies which tend “to homogenize and reify members of racialized collectivities and their boundaries.” Studying how political activists embrace intersectionality (perhaps going against popular expectations)—creating politically active entities open to various identity groups—is another fertile area for application of intersectionality approaches (Berger and Guidroz 2009: 72).

According to Michelle Fine, it is crucial to teach students to build in intersectionality into research designs. For example, in a research design constructed to understand community experiences of violence, applying an inter-categorical approach (that is, posing the same question to white men, black men, Latinos, white women, etc) yielded very different stories and definitions of violence—within the same zip code. (For women, domestic violence was important; white men told stories about men of color committing crimes; black and Latino men told detailed stories about police violence.) Such investigations can enrich empirical research (instead of relying merely on police records and/or shelter statistics).

My place of employment—Georgia Gwinnett College—appears to be the ideal venue to test intersectionality and its insights. Gwinnett County is home to one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the United States. In addition, the college’s classrooms include non-traditionals (students over 25), veterans, and those who are the first in their families to attend college. According to a survey, as of August 30 (before the start of the fall semester in 2012), approximately 24% of the student body is black, 8% Asian, 4% Hispanic/Latino, and 48% white. In 2013, GGC became known as a “majority-minority” college.

A group of faculty members, called GGC’s intersectionality group, prepared a series of events which included guest presentations by the consuls of the countries associated with prominent immigrant groups in the area (e.g., the Consul of Mexico gave an opening speech for Hispanic History Month). Several years ago, a faculty panel discussed the impact of the controversial Senate Bill 1070 in Arizona.

I attempted to incorporate several activities in my introductory political science and international studies classes focusing on the concept of diversity and taking the insights of the intersectionality literature into account. My “bread and butter” course is introduction to US
government. I teach at least three sections each semester, using the textbook *Essentials of American Government: Roots and Reform* by Karen O’Connor, Larry J. Sabato and Alixandra B. Yanus. One attractive feature of this textbook is the section “Join the Debate” which includes a short introduction to a potentially controversial issue and an outline of arguments in favor of a thesis about this issue and against that thesis. Such exercises foster students’ critical thinking skills and increase student engagement in the classroom. In the 2009 edition of the textbook, the first chapter, “The Political Landscape,” made a reference to Samuel Huntington’s book “Who Are We,” as well as his theory of Hispaznation which asserts that the US “melting pot” has been successful at least partially because historically the new immigrants absorbed the “fundamental values” and political principles identified in the Declaration of Independence. The issue of language is brought up in this section as well—does bilingualism in the Hispanic community imply that there are “competing sources” of political and social identity? The 2011 edition of this textbook (I am using it in my class) includes a section “Should Immigrants Be Assimilated into American Political Culture?”, and it raises similar questions about multiculturalism and the creation of “cultural enclaves” to the previous editions.

The most recent edition (2014) also touches upon the issue of immigration by presenting it as a national security issue (p. 55), discussing Arizona v. United States case, a national integration issue, arguing that “unlike other groups that have come before, many Hispanics have resisted American cultural assimilation” (p. 13), and briefly mentioning the detention facilities for immigrants (p. 14).

Huntington’s thesis, as well as its presentation by the authors of the textbook (2011 and earlier editions), establish a clear category—“they” (i.e., immigrants, many of whom do not speak English; it is very tempting for many students to jump to the conclusion that these are illegal immigrants). The examination of Huntington’s thesis presents an opportunity to employ the anti-categorical approach from the intersectionality literature to deconstruct “otherness” as well as “us v. them” dichotomies present in similar debates. As outlined above, the application of the anti-categorical approach suggests that creation of a dangerous “immigrant” category. Huntington suggests that there is “a political agenda within part of the Hispanic community to ‘reclaim’ the lands ceded to the United States after both the Texas war for independence and the Mexican-American war”). This sounds like a dangerous “simplifying social fiction.”

One way to deconstruct this “otherness” in the discussion of immigration in general and Huntington’s theory in particular is to focus on the individual level, introducing individual stories of immigrants. Here a collection of stories from StoryCorps, a national nonprofit organization “dedicated to recording, preserving, and sharing the stories of Americans from all backgrounds and beliefs,” or asking the students to interview an immigrant family, may be helpful. (In the past, I used Sylvia Mendez’s story about Mendez v. Westminster, in the section of the course discussing civil rights.)

Following the insights from the literature on intersectionality, one of the key goals of this activity is to make sure that there is a realization that nobody is just an immigrant; that there are many other identities, such as gender identity (which is likely to cross many lines, including ethnic lines) and social class. This realization, based on the disaggregation of the “immigrant” grouping, makes categories more complex, thus stereotyping becomes less likely.
Once the “immigrant” category is disaggregated, discussions of immigration reform and controversial legislation (and related Supreme Court decision), such as SB 1070 or revoking of the fourteenth amendment (to prevent “anchor babies” from having US citizenship), may become less polarized. I usually bring up issues related to immigration when I discuss Chapter 2, “The Constitution,” drawing the students’ attention to the importance of the fourteenth amendment, due process, which applies to everyone who is on the soil of the United States (thus also introducing the principle of *jus soli* v. *jus sanguinis* and the Supremacy clause). The discussion of subsequent chapters—civil liberties and especially civil rights (with references to human rights)—is a fertile ground for the application of the intra-categorical and inter-categorical approaches to intersectionality. The intra-categorical complexity approach argues that it is detrimental to ignore differences within identity categories; the inter-categorical approach encourages students to identify the sources of different inequalities in different regions. I use John Bowe’s book *Nobodies* (Random House 2008). Bowe analyzes cases of what he calls “slavery” in the United States—the lives of Mexican migrant workers in Florida, Indian workers in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Chinese factory workers on Saipan, an island in the Pacific. Analyzing and critiquing Bowe’s argument allows the lives of migrant workers from Mexico to be compared with those from other countries and introduces the economic and global dimension (Bowe treats immigration as a global phenomenon) into the equation. I start the discussion of Bowe’s argument with several very basic questions, such as “Do you agree with his argument (that is, that the cases represent slavery)? Why or why not? Are you persuaded by the factual evidence presented in this argument?” I later analyze the cases presented in the book.

One last remaining exercise in the course (to be introduced towards the end of the semester) is an examination of the current immigration debate and current immigration policies. My hope is that the exercises described above, drawing on the anti-categorical and inter-categorical intersectionality approaches, will help students to understand the claims of marginalized groups and their positions and thus start imagining what a civil-rights-friendly environment looks like.

Similar assignments (e.g., examining arguments similar to Huntington’s and Bowe’s and deconstructing the categories of “otherness”) can be introduced in other political science classes, such as Current Global Issues. Having introduced the leading theories of nationalism (primordialism and constructivism), in the past I used the Scottish documentary “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being” (2007) to apply the anti-categorical approach to the study of intersectionality. This documentary focuses on the commercial world of Asian skin lightening; it traces an ambitious small skin lightening company to sell its product to different ethnic groups. This documentary explores the intersections of various identities—socioeconomic, racial, gender, and post-colonial. This was my first attempt to apply theoretical insights from intersectionality in Current Global Issues class, and I tried to link it to the study (and deconstruction) of primordialism. Here are some student responses to the documentary:

“The Asians were trying to lighten their skin and change their physical appearance to fit into British nationalism which makes it very primordial. In a truly constructivist or civil nationalism your skin tone would not matter.”

“It represents ethnic nationalism because if these dark Indian women don’t get their skin bleached, then they are looked down upon and won’t be married.”
“The theory of primordialism because based on the skin color the Asians determine their success in life. It is their birth right to be citizens of the community that believes in that. They fully believe that they do not have a choice on being born the skin color they are which is of a darker tone.”

“I think that the documentary proves that primordialism is a big part of a national identity, as the British Indians wanted to be more fair-skinned as to fit in with ethnic British people.”

“I really think that people who are influenced by what the media is portraying (being whiter and superior) need to re-educate themselves, and challenge such stupid assumption. Constructivism?”

“I believe that this would have to do with ethnic nationalism and primordialism, because it has to do with their race and what they were born into.”

“My reaction was slightly sad. The culture should support self-confidence with whatever skin tone one is born with. Primordialism would support the documentary because there was a large emphasis placed on lighter skin being more accepted.”

Concluding Thoughts

Intersectionality is not a simple or straightforward idea; the literature on intersectionality is diverse and complex, with internal tensions and disagreements. One somewhat controversial aspect of this literature (and pedagogy) is its transformative component—it’s advocacy of social change. According to Bell Hooks (1994), “to commit ourselves to the work of transforming the academy so that it will be a place where cultural diversity informs every aspect of our learning, we must embrace struggle and sacrifice” (p. 33). For Hooks, education can (and should) be conceived as “the practice of freedom”; learning (and education)—as “a counter-hegemonic” act.

As someone who was looking for pedagogical approaches to foster a nuanced understanding of controversial political issues, I found out that the literature on intersectionality has helped me to work toward that goal. It appears that the documentary “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being” and the exercises drawing on the writings of Samuel Huntington and John Bowe described above are useful in making the first step advocated by the literature on intersectionality—deconstructing, challenging, or disaggregating the categories of race, ethnic belonging, gender, etc., thus shying away from simplistic categories. Combining several intersectionality approaches—the anti-categorical approach as the first step and the inter-categorical approach (comparative case studies) as the second step—help to achieve the goal of better understanding and capturing the complexity of immigration.

Bibliography


