

Reflections and Results from the Intersections: Teaching and Learning the Praxis of Intersectionality in the Psychology Classroom

Jen Wallin-Ruschman

Alyssa Price

Cassidy Richey

Katie Carns

The College of Idaho

Abstract

This article bridges multiple ways of knowing to explore the experience of an undergraduate psychology class focused on intersectionality. Drawing on feminist pedagogy, intersectionality, and critical consciousness literatures, we, the instructor and students together work to understand the experiences of the course and to offer our lessons learned. We present a detailed structure of the course, *Experiences of Intersectionality*, results of a qualitative analysis of students' written course reflections, and instructor reflections. Three themes were extracted from the data: Vulnerability and Privilege, "Small Slaps in the Face," and Empathy and Action. The discussion of the findings includes reflections from the course instructor and applications to praxis, particularly for educators.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Feminist Pedagogy; Critical Consciousness; Course Based Research; Social Justice

Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) wrote “the real work of advancing intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry lies in building a base of undergraduate and graduate students” (p. 47). They highlighted the synergy between intersectionality as both inquiry and practice. Here intersectionality is defined as a theory of understanding experiences of how intersecting identity categories impact individuals as they move through a matrix of domination (Hill Collins, 1990) of social institutions.

Within the realm of higher education, intersectionality often thrives in fields that are rooted within praxis (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016) including public health, education, social work, and criminal justice. Psychology, on the other hand, has been slower to integrate intersectionality into inquiry and practice in the field. This may stem from the field’s focus on singular categories of diversity (Shin, Ezeofor, Welchh, Smith, & Goodrich, 2016), lack of praxis, the focus on the individual, and the methodological preference for quantification and experimentation over and above the qualitative methods often used to study intersectionality (Greenwood, 2017). Nevertheless, psychologists committed to social justice need to find ways to integrate intersectionality into theory, research, and teaching.

This article explores connections between critical consciousness and intersectionality literatures. Then, discusses the development of an undergraduate psychology class: *Experiences of Intersectionality*. Next, the paper turns to the participatory qualitative research project completed following the course. All 12 students in the course chose to have their final written course reflections included as a part of the data analysis process. Three students also elected to participate in data analysis and writing this manuscript. Together, we try to understand students’ experiences in the course, including areas of growth, tension, and dissonance. The discussion includes the instructor’s reflection and discussion. The paper concludes with applying our findings to teaching intersectionality in psychology and identifying challenges for moving forward in diverse classrooms.

As Lichty and Palamaro-Munsell (2017) argued, we often do not know how students are taking in information or responding to classes. In courses that teach social justice content and utilize aspects of critical and feminist pedagogies, the possibility for psychological harm is ever present (Lichty & Palamaro-Munsell, 2017). While engaging in critical reflective practice to understand one’s role and impacts as an instructor is important, coupling this with student reflections offers the possibility of enhanced understanding. In short, even informal analysis of students’ experiences can help extend the examination of intersectional pedagogy and critical consciousness development from intent to understanding of impact.

Intersectionality and Critical Consciousness

Although intersectionality has its roots within Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1991) and has evolved particularly within Women’s and Gender studies, there are tools within the field of psychology that can offer unique lenses to intersectionality and potential novel teaching strategies. Critical consciousness involves the ability to recognize systems of oppression and domination and acting to counter these systems (Freire, 1970/2000; Jemal, 2017). Critical consciousness may prove helpful in conceptualizing psychology’s contributions to intersectional theory and in framing a praxis for training students to use intersectionality as a lens, action lever, and practice tool in a range of settings.

While critical consciousness and intersectionality are core guiding principles to those engaged in social justice, they have been poorly integrated in academic literature. Critical consciousness suffers from a lack of integration of intersectional thinking. Freire’s (1970/2000) conceptualization of critical consciousness dichotomized the world into oppressed and oppressor groupings. This is at odds with intersectional theory which acknowledges the complex matrix of identities individuals hold, some of which grant privilege and others marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991). While there have been calls to more fully integrate intersectionality in critical consciousness research (e.g., Jemal, 2017; Shin et al., 2016), theorizing and work in this area is limited. Many models of critical consciousness development and research on critical consciousness continue to focus

on singular, primarily oppressed, identities (e.g., Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2014; Jemal, 2017). Critical consciousness and intersectionality share a focus of shifting the blame of inequities from the individual onto social structures. However, critical consciousness has been understudied in privileged populations and has not fully accounted for the impact of intersectionality on development (Jemal, 2017; Wallin-Ruschman, 2018). Understanding how these concepts can be mutually informing may provide new avenues for advances in social justice research, action, and teaching.

Aspects of critical consciousness theory also may be helpful in developing strategies to teach and practice intersectionality in the classroom. While some intersectional scholars have argued for the centrality of social action as a component of intersectional pedagogy (Case, 2017), the mechanisms through which structural awareness of injustice leads to engagement in critical action are more developed in the critical consciousness literature (Jemal, 2017). Critical consciousness scholars have suggested that critical efficacy/motivation (Diemer et al., 2014), opportunities for action (Summers-Effler, 2002), exposure to role models (Summers-Effler, 2002), emotions (Wallin-Ruschman, 2018), and relationality (Wallin-Ruschman, 2018) may all play a role in moving individuals towards critical action.

The course discussed in this paper, *Experiences of Intersectionality*, utilized aspects of critical consciousness theory, and intersectional and feminist pedagogies as guiding principles in its development. Throughout the course and research process, the role of relationships and community were central themes. Relationships can serve as a form of critical action, such as in coalition building. They also can enhance conceptual aspects of intersectionality and critical consciousness by discouraging binary thinking and encouraging the examination of interconnections (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

The Course: Experiences of Intersectionality

With the above guiding principles in mind, I (Jen) developed and taught *Experiences of Intersectionality* as an undergraduate psychology seminar that met for two and a half hours every day for three weeks at a small Liberal Arts college in the Western United States. The college is in a mid-size town in a politically conservative state. The county is 70% White (not Hispanic or Latinx) and 26% Hispanic or Latinx (U.S. Census, 2018). The college is somewhat more diverse with a student body that was 13% international students and 30% students of color at the time the course was taught. The class was distinct from the broader undergraduate psychology curriculum that primarily focuses on quantitative methods and social, cognitive, developmental, and biological psychologies.

I (Jen) the instructor am a cisgender, heterosexual White woman. The majority of the 12 students in this class were White, cisgender women ($n = 7$) who identify with a range of social class backgrounds. We collected information on the class from open-ended demographic forms in which all identifiers, including racial and national, were indicated by the students themselves. The class also included two White men, a Jewish woman, a Black man, a Latino man, and an African man. Students had a range of disability and mental health identities (e.g., anxiety, able-bodied, depression, ADHD). All students were undergraduates between 19 and 22 years old and identified as cisgender and heterosexual.

Classroom Community

Throughout the term, I (Jen) paid special attention to developing the classroom community. We sat in a circle and often engaged in daily check-ins to get to know each other. We also began the term by co-creating expectations for our classroom community. As a class, we committed to practices that would allow us to engage in dialogue around difficult issues. While we discussed challenging stories and experiences, we also ate and laughed together during the course. Early in the semester, I (Jen) discussed the difficulty in learning about privilege and oppression and we talked about how areas of resistance would likely arise (Rivera, 2017). I asked

students to attend to their bodily reactions (e.g., raising heart rates, stomach tightness) and note how these might help guide them through areas of defensiveness so they could stay open to learning and growth, even when their previous socialization and experiences were challenged.

We spent most classroom time in free-flowing discussions. While some members of the classroom community participated more, most students participated at least once daily. White women tended to participate most in discussions. As the instructor, I was an active participant and often shared my experiences and stories connected to class content while also offering questions for discussion.

I (Jen) constructed the class to address intersectionality through research and experiential knowledge across multiple media sources. Case and Lewis (2017) suggested that valuing multiple ways of knowing within dialogue can enhance critical consciousness development in the classroom. We practiced this in our classroom by including both personal narratives and statistical evidence in understanding experiences of intersectionality and intersectional theory. Assigned course materials included empirical research articles, podcasts, poetry, and videos.

Class Structure, Readings, and Activities

I (Jen) assigned two primary texts, *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader* (Grzanka, 2014) and *Race, Gender, Sexuality, & Social Class: Dimensions of Inequality and Identity, 2nd Edition* (Ferguson, 2016). Our course was heavy on race and gender content, but I made a deliberate effort to incorporate less discussed areas of intersection, particularly disability and class. I developed a website for the course which included descriptions of all assignments, a list of assigned readings, media clips, and additional resources.

When learning about intersectionality students can get “stuck” at the individual level (Rios, Bowling, & Harris, 2017), which is antithetical to intersectional theory which stresses the importance of understanding the structural and systemic nature of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991). Cole (2009) noted this individualizing tendency was particularly prevalent among psychologists and I feared this would be compounded by the fact that students would enter the course with a background in a traditional psychology curriculum that was highly focused on the individual. To counter this, I focused the course on teaching intersection through future “helping” professions. I designed the course around various social institutions to avoid becoming overly focused on the individual level. I also utilized this focus to frame the final action component of the course. I asked students to apply their understanding of intersectional theory by developing a website aimed at educating a specific career field (e.g., nurses, coaches, counselors) about implementing intersectional theory into professional practice. Finally, I hoped focusing on students’ future professions would make the content seem more applicable to each student and frame the process of continual growth necessary for critical consciousness development.

Following Grzanka’s (2017) advice that intersectionality courses move from the complexities of intersectionality to covering specific areas or issues, our course began with foundational readings on intersectionality [e.g., portions of Hill Collins (1990) *Black Feminist Thought* and *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (1979)]. We had one class session discussing the role of identity in intersectionality and then transitioned to talking about specific sites and settings to understand intersectionality in different contexts.

Throughout the course, I (Jen) incorporated additional types of media (e.g., podcasts and videos). This included the early viewing of the TED talk – *The Urgency of Intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 2016), which students continued to reference throughout the term. We then moved to reading about and discussing specific institutions. Around this time, we spent an entire class playing *C’est La Vie: The Game of Social Life*, an experiential classroom activity focused on building empathy and awareness, which assigns specific identities to students that become the base for them to move through various life decisions (e.g., where to live, attend school; Bramesfeld & Good, 2016). We also utilized the *identity signs* activity (Bolger, 2014) in which large signs representing various identities (e.g., gender, race, religious affiliation) are hung around the room and students are asked

a series of questions (e.g., The part of my identity that garners me the most privilege is ____.) and offered the opportunity to move to one of the signs. Students were welcomed to skip any questions, and no one was ever asked specifically to share. Some students chose not to participate when some questions were posed. Overall, students seemed to appreciate the opportunity to discuss aspects of their identity, particularly those that were not necessarily seen (e.g., religion, class, disability). Students that outwardly appeared dissimilar discovered areas of previously unknown connection. However, because of the high level of vulnerability and sharing, it is recommended that this activity should be handled with extreme caution and may not be appropriate in some settings.

Assignments

Many assignments in the class were drawn from those outlined in *Intersectional Pedagogy* (Case, 2017). Early in the term, students completed the *Intersectionality PhotoVoice Project* (see Case & Lewis, 2017) which had students take intersectionality focused pictures, write accompanying descriptions, and present their work to the class. The assignment helped students apply their early understanding of intersectional theory to their lived experience and begin to build from their individual experience to structural and systematic understandings of marginalization and privilege.

We then transitioned into the portion of the course that focused on applying intersectional theory to specific institutions (e.g., family, education, science & health, law & politics, work, culture & sport, activism & resistance). A weakness of many courses focused on intersectionality is that they do not move beyond the individual level (Rios et al., 2017). To attempt to avoid this, I (Jen) designed the course to focus more on the application of intersectional theory to institutions instead of individuals. For the last half of the term, a portion of each class session had students pair up, chose an institution, and complete a section facilitation assignment that asked them to lead part of a class period by preparing activities (e.g., a game, a scavenger hunt) and discussion questions related to how intersectionality could be understood in that specific institution. Rios et al. (2017) suggested that student-led discussions help students bridge and apply complex intersectional concepts across domains and levels of analysis. These student-led sessions were instrumental in moving discussions away from the dynamic of students asking the teacher questions and the teacher responding and instead moving to a more communal discussion with less hierarchy. Student led class sessions also helped facilitate the process of dialogue that Freire (1970/2000) believed was essential for critical consciousness development.

The culminating assignment had students work alone or in pairs to create a website, using WIX, focused on applying intersectional theory to a professional group of their choice (e.g., counselor, nurse, teacher). Given the short time frame of this class, a website seemed the ideal way for students to apply their knowledge¹. This assignment was designed with four goals in mind: 1) offer an opportunity to synthesize and think creatively about intersectionality, 2) challenge students to apply intersectional theory using ecological analysis, 3) create a shareable and actionable final project, and 4) learn a marketable skill. We spent time in class talking about education as a form of critical action, including its limitations. This is not the first project designed to apply action teaching principles to teaching intersectionality; for other similar intersectionality and public education projects, see Case and Lewis (2017) and Case and Rios (2017).

¹ Example websites created by two student co-authors:

<https://alyssacase9.wixsite.com/website-intersect/the-oppression-domination-matrix>
<https://cassidyrichey.wixsite.com/mysite-1/post/the-importance-of-language>

Method

Reflexivity. My (Jen) education as a community psychologist included training in participatory, community-based, and action research methodologies. However, I consider myself a teacher first and foremost. My work in the undergraduate classroom constitutes my primary site of both social action and research. Practicing both social action and participatory research in an undergraduate educational setting provides unique challenges and benefits.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) involves a collaboration between the community and researcher that contains elements of popular education, social action, and community-based research (Brydon-Miller, 2001). PAR inquiry sees “all knowledge generation as a political endeavor” (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 83) and acknowledges that no research is neutral or context-free. The values and orientation of PAR align with those of the class discussed in this article and the subsequent research project provided opportunities to extend the learning that occurred in the classroom. The very act of engaging in PAR has the capacity to enhance critical consciousness and help faculty and students “contend with the implications of their identities and positionality” (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 86). Further, PAR is rooted in a relational approach to research (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009) that reflects the focus of the content and practices of the course as outlined above.

In reality, the level of collaboration, control, and commitment of community members varies between projects labeled as PAR (Balcazar et al., 2004). While most literature on PAR focuses on researchers collaborating with community organizations, there is a growing movement among teacher-scholar-activists to turn PAR inward to explore classroom practice (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009). Like many PAR projects, the current study falls short of meeting all the ideal conditions and practices of PAR. The processes and methods of PAR do not completely transfer to the undergraduate classroom. Ideally, PAR involves collaboration between the researcher and community at each stage of a study - development, implementation, and dissemination. In reality, the community is often left out of this first stage. Our study has the same weakness because of the short time frame of the course, three weeks. Further, adding the student-teacher dynamic complicates the power sharing that should exist in PAR. In the context of the classroom, there is no way to completely remove the hierarchy. These practical and ethical constraints motivated the design of this project. Finally, the “action” resulting from this project did not reach the level of transformative change advocated in PAR. Rather, the action in the project was limited to education and individual critical consciousness development. While the project was designed from the start as a PAR project, the action ideals of this methodology were not achieved.

Research Process and Ethical Considerations

I (Jen) obtained IRB approval before the beginning of the term. On the first day of class, I told students that I was interested in conducting a participatory research project in which they had the opportunity to join. I stressed the voluntary nature of the project and we discussed the project multiple times throughout the term. At each stage, I told students they could withdraw at any time without penalty and I offered to discontinue or change the project if students desired. Ultimately all 12 students in the class chose to have their written final course reflections included as data for the project and none expressed a desire to discontinue or alter the project. Although I invited all students to be involved in data analysis and preparing this manuscript, only three students (all White women) expressed interest. I de-identified all the students’ reflections before analysis and I talked with the student researchers about the importance of research ethics and their responsibility to the participants, their classmates. We acknowledged that although I had de-identified the reflections, they might realize the identity of a participant. I stressed the importance of maintaining confidentiality and not sharing outside of the group the content of the reflections. The method in which we report demographics throughout this manuscript is purposefully vague to further try to protect the identity of all participants.

Analysis

A couple of months after completion of the course the authors met and discussed the process we would use to code the data. All coders read Braun and Clarke's (2006) article on thematic content analysis as we utilized collaborative thematic content analysis to develop our findings. Thematic content analysis was used because it applies to a range of research questions and is a relatively accessible method of data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was an important consideration when working with undergraduate students with limited time and resources available to learn more complicated qualitative data analysis techniques. All students had taken multiple classes with the instructor that included coverage of implicit biases. Coders were also encouraged to develop reflexivity by considering how their identities impacted both their experiences in the course and how they understood the data. We acknowledge a severe limitation of our data is that we were all cisgender, heterosexual, White women. We strove to keep this limitation at the forefront of our minds and discussed it every time we met to talk about our analysis process and corresponding findings.

We followed a slightly modified version of the process laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006), specifically making alternations to allow for collaboration. All coders read all reflections at least two times to familiarize themselves with the data. Coders were encouraged to read over the data in Dedoose (2018) - an online software used to organize and code qualitative data - and to use the memoing function to record personal reactions, possible biases, and early analytic thoughts. Then everyone coded all the data for the first time. Following this initial pass, coders were instructed to then look over their codebook and combine codes or create sub-codes, if applicable, and re-code the data a second time. We then met and followed the engaged codebook development process outlined by Flicker and Nixon (2015). First, each coder wrote all the individual codes on post-it notes, this was done so students would not be prematurely impacted by the findings of others. We then worked to collate, create hierarchy, and define codes to build a combined codebook, talking through any areas of disagreement or division as they arose. For example, if one of the coders believed a topic was broad enough to become a theme, but another coder believed it should be considered a sub-theme, they would present why they believed the topic should be placed in a respective category. Discussion continued until there was consensus. Overall, the codes that students wrote on the post-it notes were quite similar and there were no substantial areas of disagreement. As for the process of being participant researchers, the students expressed that while many of the responses were similar, there were some surprising differences in interpretations of mood or discussions expressed by their classmates in the final course reflections. This was often rooted in the respondent's own intersecting identities so the process of analyzing the data furthered the intersectional awareness of the student researchers. I (Jen) offered insight on the process of qualitative data analysis throughout these discussions but the student researchers drove the data analysis process.

Using the collectively created codebook we went back through another round of coding in Dedoose. We then met again and discussed if the codes were capturing the data. The codebook seemed to be capturing the data well and the students lead a discussion of the inductively developed themes. Continuing to follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework we did this by collating the codes into visual clusters which we began to develop into potential themes. Students then went and re-read all data excerpts with these themes in mind. The themes we identified seemed to capture important patterns of responses within the data. We stayed at the level of semantic themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) meaning we did not try to read beyond the students' written words. We also spent substantial time discussing the limitations of our analysis given our similar social locations. Our positionality meant that we may have had a shared experience in the class that may not have been representative of other students. The lens through which we experienced the course and analyzed the data was through that of cisgender White women. We have tried to account for this by developing reflexivity and undergoing member

checks. We sent out the early analytic themes to the entire class, and also multiple drafts of the manuscript as it developed, but we never received any feedback.

Results

In this section, we present an overview of the qualitative findings from our analysis of student course reflections, including illustrative quotes. We discuss three themes from our qualitative data analysis: Vulnerability and Privilege, “Small Slaps in the Face,” and Empathy and Action.

Vulnerability and Privilege

In classroom discussion on the last day of class and in their written reflections some students wrote about other students’ lack of participation, including an unwillingness to partake in discussions about aspects of their identities. Students interpreted this as a struggle to be vulnerable with the outcome being controlled or guarded discussions, limited dialogue, and leaving fellow students in the dark about important components of intersectionality. Elizabeth, a White woman, wrote, “Although the class is filled with individuals with a multitude of identities, they are not always comfortable sharing their deepest insights; they aren’t always willing to become vulnerable.”

In their reflections, students noted that the representation across some intersections was limited in the course. Troy, a man of color, expressed “The only thing I could have hoped for more in this class was a better spread of intersections represented in the class body.” Overrepresentation of White, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied students, not only created frustration for students but, more importantly, shifted extra responsibility to those with underrepresented and marginalized identities. Some class members expressed the pressure of being the only representative of their identities or intersections, Troy continued:

I also found some of the discussions to be very difficult being the sole representative of [specific racial group] in a class full of Caucasian people. I felt as if some of the things I was saying weren’t really computing because they weren’t relatable.

For this student, class discussions may have been less helpful to his development.

Other students also wrote about how the class community and discussion facilitated growth. They connected the process of self-reflection with vulnerability, empathy, and developing plans for engaging in social action. One of the most pronounced patterns in the data, across intersections, was becoming more aware of privilege, which was mentioned in various forms in nine of the 12 reflections. Megan wrote “...that I have been one of those blind individuals. One who has been blind to my own privileges, one being the fact that I was born white, one who had been feeding the problem.” Further, Michael, a man of color wrote, “I was able to unravel my own intersections which helped me understand my own privilege and oppression.” In some cases students associated an increase in awareness of privilege to plans to engage in social action. For example, Miriam, a Jewish woman, wrote: “I can now also recognize my own privileges and see how I can use those privileges to help bring change,” and Sarah, a White woman, wrote “I wondered where the line stood. I asked myself, how do I use my privileged voice as a tool towards those with disadvantages in our society, but not speak so loudly that I drown out their own voices?... This class helped me so much on how to navigate thoughts of equality towards equity.”

Conversely, other students experienced a more negative impact on their identity awareness. Greg, a man of color wrote:

In this course, I became more aware of my disadvantages and my privileges. But more so my disadvantages. I feel that in a way, it is good that I am aware of it because now I know where it is actually my right to let myself resist or speak up. But I also feel that I could do just fine without knowing or thinking about

them. Unfortunately, me knowing all the ways society is being unfair to me by expecting me to not be different will not lift the burden on me from trying to change myself to fit more and assimilate.

Developing students' awareness of systems of injustice may add a psychological burden and potential vulnerability that students may not want. The added stress of such awareness may also be harmful to some students. Coupling raising awareness with education about action and opportunities to work towards change is essential, but potentially insufficient.

“Small Slaps in the Face”

Seven students labeled the content or discussions of the course “controversial” or hard to talk about. In their final course reflections, students wrote about experiencing challenges to their previous socialization and belief systems. For example, Amanda, a White woman who reflected on the course's effect on her belief system shared, “I had to go through a learning curve in this class in order to understand that I am not immune to intersectionality.” She continues:

Learning about intersectionality was an amazing opportunity. I will not lie though; the class was difficult. The class was constantly challenging the belief system I had grown up with and using a combination of facts and personal stories to do it.

While this was a goal of the course, it is worth noting the psychological and emotional toll that learning about such concepts can have on students. The disruption of a belief system can be disorienting. Therefore, the creation of a safe space in the classroom as well as in the assignments allowed for students to acknowledge and begin to work through these reactions.

This class fostered thinking and discussion that brought to light situations and circumstances to which many students previously felt blinded. Megan, a White woman, wrote “When I think back on this... course I think about the many realizations that I had, most like small slaps in the face.” This quote, like others, coupled growing awareness with discomfort and even pain. Some students used identity to understand others. Elizabeth, a White woman commented, “I have learned through this course that I do not have to disregard my identities in order to be empathetic to others' experiences.” Learning to negotiate previous experiences and ways of knowing with the content of the course was an area of dissonance, but also an opportunity for growth for students.

Empathy and Action

In the data analyzed for this project, multiple students wrote about developing empathy and understanding of others. Interestingly, unlike awareness of privilege, the development of empathy was not an overtly stated goal or outcome of the class, yet students attributed this area of growth to multiple different aspects of the course. Some wrote about the importance of dialogue as discussed in the first theme. Aaron, a White man, wrote on the topic:

I was able to view my identities specifically in relation to others, one strong example of this was the divide I saw in males and females. Certain discussions, such as walking home alone, brought to light subjects that I, as a man, hadn't really considered or never noticed while the woman in the group all had varying degrees of experience on.

Others discussed activities they perceived as building empathy with other students in the class. Sarah, a White woman wrote:

Although intersectionality is more than just identity, this [the identity signs activity] was a good exercise to bring the class together and show that everyone has had different experiences. Otherwise, society has trained all of our minds to make assumptions about each person, and to even create negative stereotypes.

Still other students noted the role of the PhotoVoice project in enhancing empathy. Megan, a White woman, noted:

My thinking has changed dramatically in the sense that from now on I will try to understand someone's background and intersections before just assuming that they are a horrible individual who made wrong choices in life. For example, the PhotoVoice project allowed us students the opportunity to open up and get to know one another better on a deeper level. It was interesting to learn more about the people you have class with, because it allows the opportunity to understand who they are and what thought process they come from.

While two students critiqued the course for not focusing enough on action and solutions, multiple students did note planned action as an outcome of the course. Many students synthesized multiple components of the course in coming to an understanding of the necessity of action. When reflecting on the course, Miriam, a Jewish woman, connected empathy, privilege, action, and the content of the course:

...I am able to look at people as individuals and understand that we are all going through different changes in our lives. I feel that I am going to be a more caring and compassionate individual since taking this class. I can now also recognize my own privileges and see how I can use those privileges to help bring change...

Sarah, a White woman, wrote about the necessity for action following education:

By the end of the class, I thought it was valuable to go over what actions to take once being educated on intersectional matters. The point of the class isn't to make you question your privilege and the ways that you support oppressive institutions. It's supposed to make you aware so you can be an active ally in your interpersonal interactions, your community and within the psychology field itself.

Some students reported understanding that equality is not enough, equity and action are required to counter oppressive structures. They were able to apply this to their future professions, not just short-term interpersonal action. Michael, a man of color, wrote:

This course has helped me with my life because it has taught me to fight for equity. We all want equality but that's not what people deserve, they deserve more. I plan on being in the medical field and it showed me to treat everyone fairly and to provide equal opportunity to all of those who I can do so to. I've learned to be empathetic for those with intersections because of the oppression they face from others. I know that I can't do much about the people who oppress them, but what I can do is advocate change and do my best to treat them right?

Discussion

The results of our qualitative analysis suggest some areas in which the course succeeded in developing intersectional awareness and critical consciousness. We also identified limitations of the course and some unintended consequences. The development of an understanding of the role of privilege and empathy seemed to be positive outcomes of the course, although the course seemed to fail in fully avoiding the individualizing tendency common in some intersectionality work (Rios et al., 2017). In this discussion section, I (Jen) combine the results of the participatory qualitative data analysis conducted by students with my own reflections on teaching the course.

In the course reflections, students wrote about in-class activities and discussions as being the most impactful aspects of the course. Allowing ample room for dialogue and community building early and throughout the term seems an important outcome of our findings. While check-ins and other relational

techniques are often seen as too time-consuming, allowing space to develop relationships in the class, particularly across difference, is also part of the content. Case and Lewis (2017) similarly found that utilization of aspects of critical feminist pedagogy, particularly dialogue, was foundational to students developing critical consciousness. However, feelings of community and solidarity may be lessened or absent for members of the group that have more oppressed identities, particularly if they are part of the minority group in the classroom (Wallin-Ruschman, 2018). Like Lichty and Palamaro-Munsell (2017) have found, it is a constant “struggle to achieve my goals of disrupting dominant narratives while attending to the diverse body of students before me” (p. 6). Understanding how to create the optimal learning environment for students with diverse identities and socialization experiences continues to be a challenge in teaching intersectionality.

In the course, many of Naples’s (2013) dimensions of feminist praxis were foundational “placing in dialogue situated knowledge’s generated in multiple social locations” (p. 661) and allowing space for emotions. Using situated knowledge, collaboration, and dialogue were all important in allowing students to develop empathy and an understanding of intersectionality. As a teacher, I believe encouraging students to acknowledge emotions may help them avoid defensive reactions that are common when learning about social injustices. Such defensive reactions may stifle the development of critical reflection and engagement in critical action necessary for critical consciousness. That said, the emotion of privileged students in learning about marginalization for the first time may be harmful to students who have been living through this reality.

Importantly, understanding and empathy alone are not sufficient end goals of critical consciousness and intersectional awareness. Intersectional pedagogy must lead to critical social action (Case, 2017). Education about action options does not necessarily help students deal with the psychological burden of increasing their awareness of injustice, as it does not often provide specific, accessible, and ongoing avenues for critical action. Further, some individuals may be in a position where they are limited in their ability to engage in action. As an instructor, I worry that without these outlets, students may suffer from the negative burdens of developing critical consciousness or intersectional awareness. Alternatively, lacking avenues for action, students may not sustain their gains in critical consciousness and intersectional awareness following completion of the course, particularly if these thought patterns are counter to those they grew up with or at odds with their primary community or support system (Wallin-Ruschman, 2018).

Through classes designed to enhance critical consciousness and intersectional awareness, students can gain an ecological frame for understanding nuanced intersections of privilege and marginalization, which better positions them to engage in acts of resistance and critical action at multiple levels. Using the relative safety of the classroom to learn and exercise these skills may help future clinical or other service providers to gain confidence and expertise to utilize these practices in their future professions. Many social justice education classes conclude with an action assignment or project. However, it is not known if these experiences lead to long-term or sustained engagement with social change efforts. Although we cannot claim with certainty, it seems unlikely that students that took *Experiences of Intersectionality* will continue such involvement when they are not firmly rooted in a community of practice for critical action. In future iterations of the course, I (Jen) will focus on teaching the importance of community and sustaining action, likely using Adrienne Maree Brown’s *Emergent Strategy* (2017).

The complexity of intersectionality and breadth of application in the class discussed in this article, not surprisingly, created difficulties in teaching and learning. Ideally, students would come into a course with thorough knowledge and vocabulary for a range of oppressions and privileges. For students in psychology, this is often not the case. Rooting intersectionality within psychological theories that counter the field’s dominant focus on the individual (e.g., Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model) may decrease the possibility that intersectionality becomes primarily about identity. As an instructor, I (Jen) often face privileged students who initially claim that intersectionality ‘does not apply to me.’ This misconception is problematic and represents a harmful

misunderstanding of intersectional theory that continues the tendency to acknowledge marginalization, but not privilege.

The make-up of our class created further challenges, including expectations of vulnerability in the space. White women were the majority in the class and participated most in class discussion. The two White men and three men of color in the class participated less than the women. However, there was a desire for the men of color to share their experiences, while this was not a shared expectation by the White men. This problematic expectation of emotional labor on the part of already oppressed individuals is all too common in classrooms and activist spaces. Negotiating guidelines for meaningful dialogue is particularly difficult, but also immensely important in diverse learning communities. Ideally, an individual's privilege is challenged in a way that minimizes or allows spaces for defensiveness but, more essentially, space is opened for marginalized individuals to share and learn without their experiences being attacked or being put in the position to educate others. Navigating this borderland constitutes my (Jen) biggest challenge in teaching this course. However, diverse learning communities provide immense opportunities for learning and increasing both critical consciousness and intersectional awareness for students, faculty, and future service providers. Therefore, as instructors we must continue to develop our understanding of our success and our failures if we wish to use education as a site of social change work.

This study was imbued with several other limitations. Educators understand the process of development of critical consciousness and intersectional awareness differs based on an individual's social location. While we have tried with the presentation of our results to account for how positionality impacted experiences in the course, we did not have enough diversity of intersections to fully analyze this aspect of the data. We were also limited in reporting primarily on race and gender as intersections due to limited representation from other groups in the class and the content that students choose to write about in their final reflections. Further, by using written reflections from the course, we lost the ability to probe for additional information, such as we might have gained in an interview. We also are limited to students' interpretations of the class at its completion and do not know what longer-term impacts (if any) students experienced.

Teaching intersectionality in a space occupied by a high number of privileged students risked creating more harm for those with already marginalized identities. I (Jen) am aware that students may have not shared all the negative reactions or damages the class created. The power imbalance of the classroom and my privileged identity makes it hard to know what I do not know about the impact of my classroom. Future research specifically on the negative implications or reactions to such classes, particularly for marginalized students is needed.

For those of us that teach at the intersection of psychology and social justice, the content of our courses is often deeply personal. The primary strength of the current study is the integration of both faculty and student voices into understanding the experiences of the course and outcomes. As an instructor, I often do not know how students are reacting to or taking in the content of my courses. Students cannot take in knowledge about intersectional theory, privilege, or oppression if they are too defensive or traumatized from their own lived experiences. The current study started with the aim to investigate, with students, the impact of a course focused on experiences of intersectionality and application of this theory to various social institutions. This is a small and imperfect step in moving towards a deeper and shared understanding of the role of the psychology classroom in developing critical consciousness and intersectional awareness.

Corresponding Author

Correspondence relating to this article should be addressed to Jen Wallin-Ruschman, Department of Psychology, The College of Idaho, Caldwell, ID 83605, United States. Email: jwallinruschman@collegeofidaho.edu.

References

- Balcazar, F., Taylor, R., Kielhofner, G., Tamley, K., Benziger, T., Carlin, N., & Johnson, S. (2004). Participatory action research: General principles and a study with a chronic health condition In L. Jason (Ed.), *Participatory community research: Theories and methods in action* (pp. 17-35). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10726-001>
- Bramesfeld, K. D., & Good, A. (2016). C'est La Vie! The game of social life: Using an intersectionality approach to teach about privilege and structural inequality. *Teaching of Psychology*, 43, 294-304. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0098628316662758>
- Bolger, M. (2014). Identity signs. Retrieved from <https://thesafezoneproject.com/activities/identity-signs/identity-signs-2-0/>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brown, A. (2017). *Emergent strategy : Shaping change, changing worlds*. Chico, CA: AK Press.
- Brydon-Miller, M. (2001). Education, research, and action: Theory and methods of participatory action research. In D. L. Toleman & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), *From subjects to subjectives: A handbook of interpretive and participatory methods* (pp. 76-89). New York and London: New York University Press.
- Brydon-Miller, M., & Maguire, P. (2009). Participatory action research: Contributions to the development of practitioner inquiry in education. *Educational Action Research*, 17(1), 79-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790802667469>
- Case, K. A. (2017). Toward an intersectional pedagogy model: Engaged learning for social justice. In K. A. Case (Ed.), *Intersectional pedagogy: Complicating identity and social justice* (pp. 1-24). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Case, K. A., & Lewis, M. (2017). Teaching intersectional LGBT psychology in racially diverse settings. In K. A. Case (Ed.), *Intersectional pedagogy: Complicating identity and social justice* (pp. 129-149). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Case, K. A., & Rios, D. (2017). Infusing intersectionality: Complicating the psychology of women course. In K. A. Case (Ed.), *Intersectional pedagogy: Complicating identity and social justice* (pp. 82-109). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cole, B. (2009). Gender, narratives and intersectionality: Can personal experience approaches to research contribute to “undoing gender”? *International Review of Education*, 55(5-6), 561-578. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11159-009-9140-5>
- Combahee river collective: A black feminist statement. (1979). *Off Our Backs*, 9(6), 6-8.
- Diemer, M., Rapa, L., Park, C., & Perry, J. (2017). Development and validation of the critical consciousness scale. *Youth & Society*, 49(4), 461-483.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Dedoose. (2018). *Version 8.0.35, web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data*. Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC www.dedoose.com
- Ferguson, S. J., (Ed.). (2015). *Race, gender, sexuality, & social class: Dimensions of inequality (2nd ed.)*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

- Flicker, S., & Nixon, S. (2015). The depict model for participatory qualitative health promotion research analysis piloted in Canada, Zambia, and South Africa. *Health Promotion International*, 30(3), 616-24. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dat093>
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Greenwood, R. (2017). Intersectionality foundations and disciplinary adaptations: Highways and Byways. In K. A. Case (Ed.), *Intersectional pedagogy: Complicating identity and social justice* (pp. 27-45). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Grzanka, P. (2014). *Intersectionality: A foundations and frontiers reader*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Grzanka, P. (2017). Undoing the psychology of gender: Intersectional feminism and social science pedagogy. In K. A. Case (Ed.), *Intersectional pedagogy: Complicating identity and social justice* (pp. 63-81). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hill Collins, P. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Hill Collins, P., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Jemal, A. (2017). Critical consciousness: A critique and critical analysis of the literature. *The Urban Review*, 4(4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11256-017-0411-3>
- Lichty, L., & Palamaro-Munsell, E. (2017). Pursuing an ethical, socially just classroom: Searching for community psychology pedagogy. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 60(3-4), 316-326. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12199>
- Naples, N. (2013). Sustaining democracy: Localization, globalization, and feminist praxis. *Sociological Forum*, 28(4), 657-681. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sof.12054>
- Rios, D., Bowling, M., & Harris, J.P. (2017). Decentering student “uniqueness” in lessons about intersectionality. In K. A. Case (Ed.), *Intersectional pedagogy: Complicating identity and social justice* (pp. 194-213). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rivera, D. P. (2017). Revealing hidden intersections of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity: Teaching about multiple oppressed identities. In K. A. Case (Ed.), *Intersectional pedagogy: Complicating identity and social justice* (pp. 173-193). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Shin, R. Q., Ezeofor, I., Smith, L. C., Welch, J. C., & Goldrich, K. M. (2016). The development and validation of the contemporary critical consciousness measure. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 63, 210–223. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cou0000137>
- Summers-Effler, E. (2002). The micro potential for social change: Emotion, consciousness, and social movement formation. *Sociological Theory*, 20(1), 41-60.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2018). QuickFacts: Canyon County, Idaho. *United States Census Bureau*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/canyoncountyidaho/AGE295218>
- Wallin-Ruschman, J. (2018). “I thought it was just knowledge but it’s definitely a lot of guts”: Exploring emotional and relational dimensions of critical consciousness development. *The Urban Review*, 50(1), 3-22.