



Module – Intersectionality

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1. Why teach this module?

Identities are complex. In school, as elsewhere, the most diverse horizons of experience and life stories come together. In the spirit of an inclusive practice of teaching, it is the responsibility of a teacher - in schools and elsewhere - to get to know the different life circumstances and experiences of learners and to deal with them sensitively. In academia, the last thirty years produced a huge body of literature tackling these questions through the paradigm of *intersectionality*. In this respect, this approach needs to be included when examining one's own as well as other's specific experiences. What this means and what role it can play in teaching situations is outlined in the following.

2. Ethnographic Entry Points

According to a definition that summarizes the different approaches around the term, intersectionality can be understood as: "Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self ... are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other" (Collins & Bilge 2016: 2).

In everyday life, we use a variety of categories, so-called axes here - be it gender, origin, physical impairments or class - by which affiliations are defined and which often lead to discrimination. A prominent representative of the term, the American jurist Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes intersectionality by using the metaphor of a road junction. If we see discrimination as a traffic accident, it is often the case that the accident was not only caused from one direction, but that several axes played a role here. People are affected by very different experiences of discrimination, for example, a white heterosexual man will perceive his social environment differently than a woman in a wheelchair. To understand different experiences means to be sensitive to differing and intersecting perspectives.

Consequently, and with another apt metaphor, Lisa Anderson-Levy describes in an interview the main challenge within this approach as analytically juggling to "keep the balls in the air at the same time"¹ (2018) in order to do justice to the complexity of the experienced reality for many humans.

¹ See: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/teaching-race-with-lisa-anderson-levy-intersectionality-paradigm-shifts-and-the-ubiquity-of-whiteness> .



3. Ways of understanding

We begin with a brief sketch of the historical precursors of the intersectionality paradigm (Frances Beal 1969, Combahee River Collective 1977), and then move on to the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), an early protagonist around the intersectionality approach. What does her work add? We then examine: Sabine Strasser's research on multiple identities and affiliations in the context of migration and gender (2008); constructions of minority and majority groups and tensions within minority groups (Eisenberg & Spinner-Halev 2005); and the complexity of belonging and intersectionality in a globalizing world (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011). This will form the basis to prepare participants for the methodological exercise? Further described below.

Approaches to intersectionality are useful for discussing and understanding:

- The situatedness and relativity of positioning: For example, a person or group can simultaneously take on a hegemonic position as a white person with good income from a rich industrial country and at the same time, a minority position as a lesbian woman with marginalized status in an academic environment).
- How culturalisation of gender or social class may lead to contradicting subject positions. For example, a child facing challenges in school, due to his/her social background or to mainstream gender attribution may experience that people (mis)interpret these as originating in cultural differences.

4. Suggested Exercises

In intersectional education projects with young people or adults, the starting point is often an autobiographical investigation to encourage reflection on different forms of power and discrimination. The realities of life as well as the needs and interests of the participants serve as a basis for self-observation. In this way, intersectional approaches in education enable critical reflection on processes of identity and belonging, on how individuals navigate the social constraints and possibilities of self-identification within existing power configurations.

We begin with an examination of the participants' own biographies as a reflective exercise to uncover the forms of power structures and discrimination that can be experienced. This is followed by peer-group interviews with other participants, which consider the relative positions of interviewer and respondent in the interview process. The last exercise (if time and conditions allow) involves conducting interviews with other students or their family members. We practice the analysis of narrative-based biographical interviews by identifying and describing social categories and examining the processes that produced them. Our aim is to create critical awareness of the power and overlapping of social categories and to highlight the complexity of the social arenas in which people must move around in the every-day lives.

The narrative-based biographical interview has proven to be a useful method to grasp these processes and individual positions. Starting with a generative question to stimulate the narrative, the interview proceeds with a narrative exploration to "complete" and dive deeper into the narrative by focusing on especially important or unclear segments (*immanent inquiry*). The final phase of the interview aims to balance the narrative by asking further questions about the causes or reasons for



particular events or by exploring the respondent's general or specific view of selected issues (*exmanent inquiry*). It is essential that the narrative is not interrupted by questions, directional interventions or evaluations. To practice of actively listening is central to this. Exploring life stories, life stages or specific life themes with the interviewees makes it possible to recognize processes of identity formation and development in connection with biographical experiences and to interpret or analyze these as an expression of individual intersectional positions. The biographical approach allows for reconstructing personal processes of change and transformation over the life span.

5. Learning Prospects

- Participants are introduced to the basics of the intersectional approach and other (anthropological) theories regarding classification and categorization to utilize them in their educational setting
- Participants are familiarized with the basics of narrative approaches, including life story interviews and other qualitative research methods to sensitize themselves towards the interrelation between personal biographies and societal influences
- Participants are able to analyze and reflect on their own and others' life stories with regard to different forms of power and discrimination
- Participants are able to reflect on the way power relations affect pedagogical institutions and practices and their own role in potentially generating, perpetuating or attenuating social inequalities as educators

6. Literature

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality (Key Concepts)*. New York: Polity.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine*. <https://philpapers.org/archive/CREDTI.pdf> (07.03.2020 18:36).

Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). *The politics of belonging: intersectional contestations*. London: Sage

Strasser, S. (2008). *We will not integrate! Multiple belongings, political activism and Anthropology in Austria*. In: Armbruster, Heidi/Lærke, Anna (Hg.) *Taking Sides. Ethics, Politics and Fieldwork in Anthropology*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books. 175-197.

Further Readings

The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977).

[https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition Readings.pdf](https://americanstudies.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Keyword%20Coalition%20Readings.pdf)
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