

Intersectionality and Higher Education:
Theory, Research + Praxis
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CHAPTER NINE

The Tapestry Model

Exploring Social Identities, Privilege, and Oppression from an Intersectional Perspective

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An intersectional perspective requires a shift in how social identities and social oppression are often conceptualized. Instead of a multiple identities or additive approach, which treats different social identities and forms of inequality as separate and independent from each other, an intersectional approach focuses on understanding how different social categories simultaneously interact, shaping people's identities and lived experiences. I have found for myself and others that this shift in perspective is clearer on a theoretical level but more challenging to fully embody in practice. Even when there is an intention to examine situations with an intersectional lens, there is a tendency to default to a single identity/oppression analysis.

As I have tried to fully grasp, apply, and teach about intersectionality. I have searched for ways to conceptualize key aspects of an intersectional approach and highlight its distinctiveness from a multiple identities/additive approach. To this end, I developed the Tapestry Model. The Tapestry Model (TM) uses the metaphor of weaving a tapestry to explicate some of the main tenets of an intersectional framework and other aspects of how people experience social identities within larger systems of structural inequality. In this chapter, I first provide background and context for the TM and then describe how it can be used to illustrate concepts of intersectionality. Next, I suggest additional ways the TM can be used to explore other issues related to identity, privilege, and oppression. The chapter concludes with some ideas for how the TM could be applied in higher education settings.

FROM A MULTIPLE IDENTITIES/ADDITIVE APPROACH TO AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

While intersectional lenses are becoming increasingly popular in exploring social identity, oppression, and social justice, multiple identities or additive perspectives have been most commonly used thus far (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Johnson, 2006). In a multiple identities/additive approach, the primary focus is on examining social identities within various social identity categories (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, religion, nationality), the corresponding forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, gender oppression, heterosexism) and social location being part of dominant and/or subordinated groups. Each social identity/inequality is examined independently without considering its interrelationship with other identities/inequalities. Using a metaphor of a striped cloth to illustrate this perspective, imagine that each stripe represents an individual's different social identity. A multiple identities or additive approach explores the significance of each of the colored stripes. Since the stripes are separate and parallel, this approach does not allow for analyzing how various social identities and experiences of advantage and disadvantage intersect and interact.

The paradigm of intersectionality grew out of the voices of women of color who asserted that their experiences could not be captured by considering sexism or racism alone or separately (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002). As Bowleg (2008) aptly put it in the title of her article, *When Black + Lesbian + Woman ≠ Black Lesbian Woman*, individuals are not simply a sum of their identities. There is a more complex interplay among social identities and experiences of privilege and oppression. Intersectional theory initially focused on the intersection of multiple forms of subordination. It is evolving to also look at how privileged identities and the experiences of privilege intersect with one's other identities and experiences, both privileged and marginalized (Kimmel & Ferber, 2014; Pliner & Banks, 2012).

An intersectional framework can be used to explore social identities, social identity statuses, and/or manifestations of inequality (Anderson & Collins, 2010; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). At the microlevel, it can serve as a lens to analyze the interconnections among personal social identities; at the macrolevel, it can elucidate interconnections among systems of power (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, this volume). Even when an intersectional analysis is focused on the level of the individual, social identities cannot be adequately understood without recognizing that individuals are members of social groups within larger systems of social inequality. People's social locations or positions within these hierarchical oppressive structures affect their access to power, resources, and opportunities, which shapes how they see and experience themselves and the world. Collins (2000) reminded us of the

importance of considering one's personal identity and social position within the matrix of domination or interlocking systems of oppression.

THE TAPESTRY MODEL

The TM explores the ways in which social identities and the experiences of domination and subordination interweave and interplay. The TM can help people examine the intersection of different identities and inequalities at different times and in different contexts. Just as tapestries are woven on the structure of a loom, which shapes what gets created, social identities and lived experiences are also shaped by and embedded in larger societal structures. As I describe the TM, using concepts from intersectional theory, it will be from the viewpoint of individuals weaving their own tapestries, how they reflect on their own identities and realities of being members of privileged and marginalized groups. Later I address when people weave the tapestry to represent others' lives. In developing and teaching about the TM, I use an actual tapestry or picture of one to help visualize these concepts. (See my website for colored pictures of tapestries that can be used for illustration: <http://www.dianegoodman.com>.)

Simultaneously Intersecting Identities

All people have many social identities that may have different social locations. Thus, one's tapestry is made up of different colored threads, each thread reflecting a different social identity and corresponding privilege or oppression. In my personal tapestry, I could choose red threads to represent my gender identity as a female and my experience of sexism, white threads for my racial identity as a White person and my experience of racial privilege, and yellow threads as my age thread as a middle-aged person and experience of age privilege, and so on. The whole tapestry is multicolored, since people always embody all their identities.

Even though theoretically individuals live all their identities simultaneously, intersectional theory focuses on the intersections of particular social categories at a given time (Weber, 2004). Certain identities are in the foreground, while others are in the background. In order to analyze different combinations of intersecting identities, people can consider what happens when certain threads are more closely interwoven in different parts of the tapestry. I refer to these as the *intersecting threads*. As these intersecting threads interweave, they form new colors and designs: *intersectional colors and designs*. If I wanted to examine my experience as a White Woman, I would interweave my red (gender) and White (race) threads. When we look at a tapestry where red and white threads are tightly interwoven, it looks pink. There are not actually pink threads in the tapestry; the pink appearance

comes from the overlapping and intertwining red and white threads. The pink color that is formed reflects the intersection of my gender and race. I am simultaneously White and a Woman; these identities mutually affect each other, and subsequently, I am not just a stripe of red and a stripe of white (as in the striped cloth metaphor). For example, when I walk into a classroom to teach, students see me, make assumptions about me, and respond to me differently than if I were a White man or an Asian Woman. The intersectional colors and designs that would be formed by those individuals' intersectional threads would not look the same as mine. If I wanted to explore this further, I could add in other threads. To reflect the impact of age, or what it is like to be a middle-aged White Woman teaching, I could add my yellow age thread. This would change the pink into a more orange color reflecting the intersection of my gender, race, and age. It is critical to understand not just the significance of each individual social identity or thread but how they simultaneously affect each other or the new intersectional color that appears when they are interwoven. This concept is a central component of intersectionality and a key way the TM can be used to illustrate an intersectional perspective.

As people's identities intersect, so do their experiences of privilege and oppression. The degree of their privilege or marginalization in any given situation cannot be calculated by simply counting up how many identities are from subordinated groups and how many are from dominant groups—it is not additive. Privilege and oppression operate and interact simultaneously. The intersections of identities with different social statuses can increase or mitigate experiences of advantage and disadvantage. The intersectional color that gets created when intersectional threads are interwoven reflects not just the interplay of identities but the interaction among different positions within systems of power.

One of the challenges of capturing intersectionality conceptually is not simply having all of one's identities just blend into one indistinguishable conglomeration. Social identities are both distinct, people have individual social identities (a particular gender, race, age, etc.), *and* they simultaneously interact. Unlike mixing paints or ingredients in baking, intersectional threads retain their form and color as they interweave with other threads to create a new intersectional color.

For example, if a Black women's class identity and status change (going from working class to upper middle class), it does not change her race, being Black, but it does form a new dynamic between her class identity and racial identity; being an upper-middle-class Black Woman creates a different sense of self, life experience, and degree of privilege/oppression than being a working-class Black Woman. Similarly, if a man becomes disabled and now needs to use a wheelchair, it does not change the fact that he is still a man. Yet, it may change how he is treated and experiences himself as man and his male privilege. In his tapestry, the color of his ability thread will change to now reflect his new identity and lived reality as someone with a disability. This new disability thread when interwoven with his

gender identity thread will create a different intersectional color than before—he is now a man with a disability, not an able-bodied man. Similarly, his other color threads, reflecting his other social identities, remain the same, but when combined with this new disability thread will create different intersectional colors than they did previously.

Salience

Context affects how people experience their identities. Salient identities are the ones that are predominant or foregrounded in a particular setting. They have the greatest impact on or relevance to an individual's sense of self and lived experience in a given situation. There also may be times when people are just more conscious of certain identities. Often, an intersectional analysis focuses on salient identities. The Woman in the following passage describes how context affects her experiences of her intersecting identities and forms of discrimination:

As a disabled Lesbian Woman, I have experienced that it is seldom that all aspects discriminate at the same time. The most apparent are being a Woman and disabled, but in a female context the aspect of disability plays a more predominant role than the fact of being a Woman. The fact of being Lesbian plays a secondary role, except in very traditional, religious women's groups. (la Rivière-Zijdel, 2009, p. 33)

She goes on to explain how her experience is different in other contexts:

When the surrounding society is basically white, male and heterosexual, the aspects of ethnicity, sexual orientation and sex intersect. In the disability movement I have experienced discrimination on the intersecting identities of sex and sexual orientation. The disability movement tends to be quite homophobic as disabled people desire to belong as much as possible to the majority norm (i.e. heterosexual)...the disability movement is mostly run by (disabled) men, which has put the women's agenda on a secondary and often tertiary place (i.e. impairment specific first and men second). I discovered a similar process within the LGBT movement that has difficulty with the aspects of being disabled, as the norm is beauty, virility, independence and so on. (la Rivière-Zijdel, 2009, p. 34)

In the tapestry, the colored threads representing the salient identities would be the intersectional threads, interweaving to create new intersectional colors and designs. Consider this story I heard from a low-income Latina at a predominantly White, elite private college about her experience in a sorority. This young Woman felt she could not fully participate in sorority life because of all the costs associated with the various activities. There was no understanding of or support for her financial situation. Moreover, she was derided for spending time with her Latina/o friends who were not in the sorority. She ultimately dropped out of the sorority. From her perspective, the intersection of her gender, ethnicity, and class threads were most salient, and those would be the intersectional threads interwoven in

that part of her tapestry. This does not mean that her other identities (including privileged group identities) were not relevant, but they were not seen by her as having the most impact in this situation.

As the previous examples indicate, the identities that are most salient are often related to feeling oppressed or marginalized. Salience can also be related to simply feeling different, conspicuous, or aware of certain identities in a given context. People may feel conscious of that aspect of themselves even though they do not feel unfairly treated or believe that it makes much difference. For example, the only male in a class of women, or the only person of color in a staff of White people, may feel that their gender or racial identity are salient even though they may be comfortable and well-integrated into the class or department. This may be due to other shared identities such as age or professional status that are intersecting with their gender or race. As a Jew who grew up and lives near New York City with an appearance, cultural style, and lifestyle that reflects this identity (dark hair and complexion, direct and rapid communication style, and access to urban cultural activities), my New York Jewish identity becomes more salient when I do training at predominantly White, rural, Christian Midwestern colleges. I have very positive and constructive experiences there, but I become more conscious of my religious and ethnic identities and geographic location.

Even among salient intersecting identities, not all the salient identities exert the same degree of influence on how individuals experience a particular situation. For an even more nuanced illustration of salience and the interplay of various forms of identity and inequality, the number of threads of each salient identity can be varied to reflect each identity's relative weight. In the previous situation of the Latina in the sorority, the student may feel that her socioeconomic class status had the greatest impact on her experience compared to her gender or race/ethnicity, even though all three were relevant and interplayed. More class threads than race or gender threads could be included in the intersectional threads being interwoven in her tapestry. As a result, the color of her class threads would more strongly affect the intersectional color and design that gets created. Another way the degree of salience can be illustrated is by making the color of a thread more vibrant or increasing the thickness of the thread as its salience grows. Adjusting the number or thickness of the threads or the vibrancy of the color of threads to reflect which identities or forms of oppression have the most influence allows for a more complex consideration of how positions in societal power hierarchies interact and shape our reality in varying contexts.

There may be times when individuals intentionally want to explore the significance of nonsalient identities. Frequently, dominant group identities are less salient, since people fit into the societal norms and do not experience the barriers faced by subordinated groups. It can be valuable to consider how identities people may not often think about still impact how they see and experience the world and

affect and are affected by other social identities. In these cases, people may choose to have nonsalient identity threads included in the combination of intersectional threads being interwoven in the tapestry.

Integration and Tension between Identities

Like a tapestry weaver, most people strive to integrate their social identities into a holistic sense of self with the ability to be resilient. When individuals experience this, the threads are evenly and solidly interwoven, creating a firm and strong tapestry. At times, however, certain identities may be unexplored, disassociated, or devalued. They are not well integrated into one's larger sense of self or with other identities. The part of the tapestry with those social identity threads may be woven very loosely, with gaps and spaces between the threads, and thus be more flimsy. For example, for White people who have not examined what it means to be White, they may not see clearly how their Whiteness is coloring their other identities, interactions, or experiences. Their race thread may not be firmly interwoven with the other colored threads. Or, people with a learning disability may be struggling to acknowledge and deal with their disability, so their disability thread may be more loosely interwoven in their tapestry. In other situations, there may be times when "identities collide" (Oslander, 2008). There can be tensions or conflicts with specific identities or between particular intersecting identities. For instance, some people experience tension between their sexual orientation and their religious identity. In those cases, the threads may be woven too tightly and there can be pulling and bunching. Other individuals with wealth may feel a conflict between their beliefs in equal opportunity and their unearned class privilege; thus, their class thread may pucker the tapestry as it runs through it.

Extending the Tapestry Metaphor

The aforementioned concepts and examples focused on facets of intersectionality and the interrelationship among different axes of identity. There are many other ways the TM can be used to examine aspects of social identities, privilege, and oppression. As I present this model in workshops and classes, people often suggest ways to extend the tapestry metaphor. One way the image of a tapestry can be used is to reflect on how the public expressions of people's identities and experiences may be different from their private ones. For some people, the front of the tapestry, what is shown to the world, might look nice and pretty with many beautiful colors and designs, while the back of the tapestry may be full of knots and loose threads. This side may reveal their internalized oppression and self-doubts, as well as the stresses of trying to exist in situations that are not equitable or inclusive. Even people who appear to "have it all"—upper-middle-class, straight, White males, may be

experiencing the pressures of living up to others' expectations based on societal norms. In other cases, the back of the tapestry may reveal people's more authentic selves, which are not as visible on the front of the tapestry, their public face.

The TM also can help us compare individuals' own self-definitions and perceptions of their lives with how others see them. They can consider the similarities and differences in how they weave our own tapestry with how someone else might weave their tapestry. How people self-identify may be at odds with how they are identified by others. Discrepancies may also be due to different perspectives on the identities or experiences that are considered most salient or how identities intersect or to their own lack of awareness of how a particular identity or form of privilege/oppression manifests.

Another concept that can be explored using the tapestry is the notion of central versus salient identities. While salience varies due to particular contexts, centrality more broadly captures one's sense of self and experience that transcend specific situations. For identities that feel most fundamental to who one is, there would be more of those colored threads throughout that part of the tapestry. Central identities remain stable or people may think more about certain identities than others at different times throughout their lives. For example, people of color who experience race as a central identity may be highly conscious of their race and feel that it plays a major role in who they are and how they live their lives. Or, as individuals get older, becoming more aware of health issues and ageism, age may become more significant and central to their sense of identity and lived experiences, so their age threads may be more prevalent in their tapestries. Therefore, the number of colored threads of a particular social identity and the overall hue of the tapestry may also change over time.

Since individuals and society are always evolving, people are continually weaving their tapestries. Social identities are not static. The salience and centrality of our identities are ever-changing depending on who we are, where we are, and what we are doing. Moreover, societal changes also affect how we identify and experience our identities. People can add threads, alter the color of their threads, and weave different intersectional colors and designs to reflect the dynamic nature of their identities and lived experiences. Looking at individuals' entire tapestry can reveal the variations and changes in how they have experienced themselves and their lives over time.

APPLICATIONS

The TM can be used in various higher education settings. In educational or counseling contexts, the tapestry can be used as a way to help people learn about intersectionality and to better understand themselves and others. It can be very

helpful to have an actual tapestry or pictures of one to assist people in visualizing the concepts. Individuals can weave their own tapestry (literally or figuratively) to reflect on how they simultaneously experience different intersectional identities (both salient and less salient, privileged and marginalized) in a variety of contexts at different times in their lives. These tapestries could be shared with others in order to discuss similarities and differences in experiences and how these experiences are connected to larger systems of inequality. Based on reading or hearing other's life stories, individuals can use the TM to represent and gain insight into other people's intersectional identities and lived realities. People can be asked to consider how one's sense of identity and experiences change as different threads are included in the mix of intersectional threads and the meaning of the new intersectional colors.

These ways of using the TM also could have implications for other areas of higher education. People could think in terms of intersectional threads, intersectional colors, and salient identities to develop policies, programming, or research projects that reveal, examine, and address experiences based on different intersectional identities (e.g., students' experiences in the classroom, feelings of safety on campus, factors that affect retention). Generally, this model can be a conceptual frame and tool to examine issues of social identity and inequality in more complex ways, recognizing the intersectionality of people's lived experiences and the impact of context. Asking people to think about the new intersectional colors and designs created refocuses their attention on the more challenging task of how identities and inequalities simultaneously interact rather than the impact of each identity separately.

CONCLUSION

The TM offers one way to conceptualize elements of an intersectional approach and issues related to social identities and social power. It has numerous implications for use in higher education. I encourage readers to consider how to expand, adapt, and utilize the tapestry metaphor. My hope is that the TM will help people grasp the ways social identities and experiences of oppression and privilege interact and interplay for ourselves and others, and thus, inform our ability to create greater equity and inclusion on our campuses and larger communities.

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