

Overview:

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected some groups of people more than others due to systemic inequities that make them more susceptible to the virus itself and to the rippling effects on the economy and other aspects of public health.

This activity brings together Sisneros et al.'s (2008) Web of Oppression, the concept of intersectionality, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Oxford Dictionary defines intersectionality as "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise." The term was first coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a law professor and social theorist, in her paper, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: The Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."

This lesson plan presents two options for discussing the relationship between intersectionality, the Web of Oppression, and issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- In Option 1, participants are provided with a short reading about intersectionality and several articles on how COVID-19 has impacted different marginalized groups. Then, using the Web of Oppression, they will discuss how people with interconnected, marginalized identities face greater health and economic consequences as a result of the pandemic. The approach is primarily cognitive.
- In Option 2, participants will do their own research on how different communities represented on the Web of Oppression have been affected by COVID-19. Then, after watching two videos, they will discuss the term intersectionality and how it connects to the Web of Oppression and issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The approach is more constructivist.

Note: If the facilitator would like to take a more structured, cognitive approach with the activity, they might consider using Option 1. If they would prefer a more open-ended activity where participants do their own research and discuss what they will do with what they have learned, they might use Option 2. Instructions for both options are available later in this document and in the [Downloads](#) section of this tool.

Additionally, participants and/or their family members or friends may have been adversely impacted by COVID-19 and have strong emotional responses. They may also already understand intersectionality from a deeply personal, experiential perspective. It is important for the facilitator to approach the topic sensitively, to ensure that no undue emotional labor is placed on any one participant, and to prepare to address emotional reactions.

Background:

The activities available in this lesson plan were adapted from ideas proposed during a conversation that occurred within a panel on intersectionality at the 2020 National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education (NCORE).

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Define the term intersectionality and recognize its importance for understanding inequity and disadvantage, particularly in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Identify systemic factors that create inequity and disadvantage.

Time:

1 hour

Group Size:

Entire group, or smaller groups for a portion of the activity in Option 2

Materials:

For Option 1:

Web of Oppression Handout (see [Downloads](#)); "[What is intersectionality and why is it important?](#)" reading; the following articles on COVID-19:

- "[COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups](#)" – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- "[Low Income and Communities of Color at Higher Risk of Serious Illness if Infected with Coronavirus](#)" – Kaiser Family Foundation
- "[Coronavirus: LGBTQ Americans Face Discrimination, Racism Amid Crisis](#)" – USA Today
- "[How COVID-19 Impacts People with Disabilities](#)" – American Psychological Association

For Option 2:

Web of Oppression Handout (see [Downloads](#)); the means of playing an online video for a group; a phone or other device connected to the Internet for each participant.

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Openness:

- To initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others.
- To suspend judgment in valuing interactions with culturally different others.

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

(Option 2) Curiosity:

- To ask complex questions about other cultures.
- To seek out and articulate answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

Other Skills:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Option 1 Activity Instructions:

1. Assign participants to read "[What is intersectionality and why is it important?](#)" and the four articles on COVID-19 before beginning the activity.
2. Begin by discussing the intersectionality article. Ask participants the following questions:
 - What is intersectionality?
 - Where does the term intersectionality come from?
 - How is intersectionality a useful term for understanding and addressing inequity and disadvantage? How can it be used to address systemic discrimination?
3. Next, briefly discuss the COVID-19 articles:
 - How did you feel after reading these articles?
 - In what ways are the groups mentioned in these articles adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - What causes these groups to experience such negative effects as a result of the virus?
4. Ensure that each participant has a copy of the Web of Oppression Handout. Provide an overview of the web and ask participants the following questions:
 - How does this web relate to intersectionality?
 - How might individuals whose identities fall within the categories on the outer edges of the web face more disadvantages or discrimination than those whose identities fall in the middle?
5. Next, use the Web of Oppression Handout to discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected various groups of people differently. The facilitator should begin with the identities in the middle of the web (white, male, heterosexual, etc.). Ask participants the following questions:
 - What advantages do individuals with these intersecting identities have when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - Why do you think individuals with these intersecting identities have so many advantages?

6. Then, the facilitator should choose other combinations of identities from throughout the web. They might begin by selecting one marginalized identity outside the privileged identities within the center of the web (for example, they could keep all privileged identities except in the ethnicity/race category). Then, they might select two marginalized identities outside of the center (e.g. African American and gay), then three, and so on. They may also choose to gradually move farther out from the center (e.g. middle class to working class to working poor). After each new set of identities, the facilitator should ask the following questions:
 - What disadvantages do individuals with these intersecting identities face when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - Why do you think individuals with these intersecting identities face these disadvantages?
7. Conclude the activity with the following debriefing questions:
 - What did you notice as we added more intersecting marginalized identities and moved closer to the outer edges of the web?
 - What do the disadvantages that we identified tell us about systemic inequity in the United States?
 - How can we use the concept of intersectionality to address these systemic inequities?

Option 2 Activity Instructions:

1. Hand out the Web of Oppression. Ask participants the following questions:
 - What do you notice about how the web is organized?
 - Looking at the different categories, what do you know about which communities have been most adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - What do you know about why these groups have been so adversely affected?
2. Tell participants that they have 15 minutes to use their phone or other device to locate an article or website from a reputable source that discusses how COVID-19 has affected a particular community of people listed on the Web of Oppression and why. They may choose to put 2 categories together, e.g., disabled LGBTQ people. Ask them to read the article or information. Discuss either with the whole group or in smaller groups:
 - How was it to search for an article or website?
 - What new information did you learn about who is most adversely affected and why?
 - (If necessary) What particular structural barriers or systemic inequities are mentioned or do you think should be mentioned?
 - Is there anything else you learned that you want to share?

Note: A credible source should be written by a trustworthy author and/or institution (check credentials if necessary), cite evidence that can be researched and verified, include the date/copyright, include contact information, have active links for factual information, etc. For this activity, it's ok to include not-for-profit advocacy organizations.



3. Ask: Have you heard the term "intersectionality?" What do you know about this concept?

4. Affirm answers as possible. Then watch the following videos on intersectionality, noting that this is to reinforce everyone's understanding:
 - Let participants know that this is Kimberlé Crenshaw, the law professor and social theorist who coined the term in 1989. Stop the video at 1:10.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViDtnfQ9FHc>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=po8AvBSaD1A>
5. Discuss:
 - How did it feel watching these videos?
 - What new understandings of intersectionality did you gain?
 - What connections do you make between the concept of intersectionality, the Web of Oppression, and the structural inequities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - What did you learn through this activity?
 - How will you apply what you learned to your daily life?