

# **Counseling Womxn: Teaching Intersectional Issues in Women's Mental Health**

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## **Abstract**

This paper was presented at the 2023 Counselor Education and Distance Learning Conference. In this paper, the authors describe the use of intersectional feminist pedagogy (IFP) in teaching an online, synchronous course on intersectional women's mental health, entitled *Counseling Womxn*, which addresses issues pertinent to the mental and emotional health of women across diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds. The authors describe the key tenets of IFP and its application to teaching women's issues in counseling, detail the planning and development of the course, and discuss their use of collaborative teaching. The authors also discuss the unique considerations of using IFP in an online learning environment, as well as strategies to address common challenges in online classrooms.

## **Counseling Womxn: Teaching Intersectional Issues in Women's Mental Health**

The fields of counseling and counselor education have long urged the use of an intersectional framework to approach women's mental health (Chan et al., 2018; Cheshire, 2013; LeMantia et al., 2015; Ratts et al., 2016). Intersectionality serves as a tool to highlight the ways in which power, privilege, and social location shape the lives of women across cultural groups, as well as the implications of these factors on the mental health and wellness of diverse groups of women (Brown et al., 2020). Gender discrimination in the form of unequal pay, gender-based violence, sexual harassment, objectification, and stereotyping based on gender roles and expectations may impact women from all cultural groups, however these barriers are further amplified by women with additional minoritized identities, such as Black, Indigenous, and other Persons of Color (BIPOC) women; immigrant and refugee women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) women; and disabled women.

As women from diverse backgrounds experience unique supports and barriers to wellness, counselors must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to infuse intersectionality throughout all aspects of the counseling process. To address this need, the following article describes the use of intersectional feminist pedagogy (IFP) and collaborative teaching practices in a course centered on women's issues in counseling, entitled *Counseling Womxn*. Additionally, the authors explore the process and rationale for creating the course, provide a detailed overview of the topics covered in the course, and discuss specific considerations for utilizing intersectional feminist pedagogy in an online learning environment.

### **Counseling Womxn: Why “Womxn” and How?**

*Counseling Womxn* was co-developed by the authors as a fully online, synchronous elective course in a master's counseling program to address issues pertinent to the mental and emotional health of womxn, a term selected to include cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary individuals who identify as women/female/femme or have some personal resonance to womanhood. The 11-week course, which is co-taught by the authors, is centered on intersectionality, which informs the instructors' pedagogical approach and serves as a framework in the conceptualization of the mental health of women of diverse cultural and demographic backgrounds. The neurobiological, physiological, psychological, social, cultural, and political factors that contribute to women's mental health are identified, as well as evidence-based treatment practices in working with womxn of diverse backgrounds. Specific issues addressed in the course include women's lifespan development, relationships, maternal health, physiological changes and illness, sexuality and intimacy, body image, eating disorders, and career development. Additionally, the course explores and critiques the ways in which the fields of medicine, psychology, and counseling have historically conceptualized/treated women's mental health issues, particularly with respect to BIPOC women, immigrant and refugee women, LGBTQ women, and disabled women.

The practice of collaborative teaching (co-teaching) is utilized in this course for several reasons. Foremost, co-teaching allows teachers to provide differentiated instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners (Cobb & Sharma, 2015). Co-teachers have increased capacity to support a wider range of learning abilities and are better able to provide individualized attention to larger groups of learners. Co-teaching also fosters collaboration and open dialogue between instructors, which can lead to enhanced transparency and accountability about curricular decision-making, as well as opportunities for continued bias exploration (Cobb & Sharma,

2015). In the classroom, collaborative teaching also provides learners opportunities to witness co-instructors model decision-making, respectful disagreement, and accountability in real time. In the early stages of development of this course, co-teaching also enabled the instructors to discuss and define a guiding pedagogical approach that was consistent with feminism, intersectionality, liberatory psychology, and multicultural counseling—intersectional feminist pedagogy.

### **Intersectional Feminist Pedagogy in Counseling**

Intersectional feminist pedagogy is guided by the several key tenets. Foremost, the course is centered on the aim of decentralizing the instructor as the sole possessor of knowledge (Light et al., 2015; LaMantia et al., 2015). Instead, teachers and learners are equal contributors to knowledge construction in the classroom, including deciding what topics are most relevant, the learning outcomes of members in the class community, and the methods by which knowledge is evaluated. Thus, the curriculum is flexible, recalibrating, and evolving based on learner inputs and experiences. Students and instructors balance input through collaboration, open dialogue, and giving/receiving feedback.

Of course, open communication may be inhibited given the inherent power differentials between learners and teachers. Rather than presenting a façade of equality with and among students, instructors broach the power differential early in the course and invite frequent discussions on how power dynamics may be best navigated and how the harmful effects of the power imbalance may be mitigated (Cheshire, 2013; Light et al., 2015). One such strategy is the development of “accountability partnership agreements”, where learners and instructors create clear, mutually established guidelines for giving/receiving feedback, naming unintended harms (e.g., microaggressions), and tending to conflict. Often this process centers on helping

community members realize how the shadows cast by their privileged identities may create hidden biases and stereotypes about other members' lived experiences. Through this process, learners are better able to trust their instructors and classmates, enhancing their capacity for vulnerability, self-reflection, and exploration of the different identities, experiences, and values each community member holds.

In classrooms guided by IFP, knowledge is also positioned within the context of cultural pluralism—which emphasizes mutual respect, understanding, and tolerance of cultural differences—as opposed to cultural assimilation, which is based in expectations that minority cultures should adopt the dominant culture of a society. Thus, the curriculum aims to decenter traditionally Western sources of knowledge, such as textbooks and academic journal articles, with the inclusion of diverse voices, realities, and ways of knowing (LeMantia et al., 2015; Lewis, 2011). The curriculum is enhanced by outside guest lecturers and other varied knowledge sources, such as blogs, personal narratives, podcasts, videos, poetry and film, and current events. Instructors create intentional, dedicated space for learners to additionally share sources of knowledge that are reflective of their own cultural backgrounds.

Another aim of IFP is the formation of community through consciousness-raising and the practice of mutual accountability, respect, and empathy (Lewis, 2011). In the classroom community, learners are encouraged to explore how collective action can help empower the communities in which they belong, as well as the communities in which they serve. This focus on social justice and community advocacy is woven throughout classroom discussions, homework materials, and assignments to create direct connections between the course content and the real-world environments and systems that directly impact clients. Learners are urged to view positive social change as an essential responsibility of all professional helpers.

## **Developing the Curriculum**

The curriculum of this course was developed over the span of several weeks, as the co-instructors met regularly to identify: 1) issues central to women's mental health, 2) an expansive literature base to include academic, cultural, and personal sources of knowledge, and 3) potential guest speakers that have personal, clinical, and/or research experience with the topics to be addressed throughout the class. The instructors additionally collaborated with other counselors and educators who specialize in women's mental health and intersectional feminist theory for further ideas on curricular opportunities. From this, the following course foci were identified:

1. Introduction to Womxn and Intersectional Feminism
2. The Past, Present, and Future of Womxn in Counseling
3. Cultural Socialization, Religion, and Citizenship of Womxn
4. The Bodies of Womxn: Beautyism, Sizeism, Colorism, and Texturism
5. Sex, Intimacy, and The Pursuit of Pleasure
6. Expansive Gender and Sexual Identities of Women
7. Reproductive Health, Family Planning, and Abortion
8. The Caretaking Responsibilities of Womxn
9. Womxn's Experiences of Violence
10. Womxn, Disability, and Illness

Once the key issues were identified, knowledge sources were collected that provided an in-depth exploration of the impact of identity, access, power/privilege, and systemic oppression with respect to each issue. Priority was given to sources of knowledge that were derived from historically marginalized authors with direct experience of the issue.

## **IFP in Action: Co-Construction of Learning**

A central task in developing this course was creating a syllabus flexible enough to respond to student inputs, while also structured to encourage accountability via measurable learning outcomes. As such, the syllabus and key assignments were developed and intentionally responsive to students' personal learning goals for an individualized learning experience. Assignments included reflection essays, a gender identity multimedia collage, a gender-responsive intake form tailored to their unique practicum population/setting, and a research presentation on a women's issue of their choosing.

In the initial class meeting, the co-instructors provided an overview of the course, the guiding framework of intersectional feminist pedagogy, and the notion of "co-creating knowledge." From this discussion, learners were invited to reflect on their personal learning goals for the class and compare their goals to the class outline and key assignments. Learners were asked, "What do you hope to learn in this class? What should be included in this syllabus to better align with what you hope to gain from this class? Given your goals for learning, what assignments might best measure your accomplishment of those goals?" Upon receiving the syllabus, learners were also requested to provide in-person and/or anonymous suggestions for additional topics to be included in the class, as well as other meaningful sources of knowledge to be included in the weekly assignments. Given that many learners have largely participated in traditional, "top down", instructor-as-expert classrooms, the process of co-construction can feel uncomfortable or unusual for students at first, so the co-instructors worked to establish openness and trust within the group and frequently modeled this process with each other in front of students to normalize and encourage co-constructed learning behaviors.

### **IFP in an Online Learning Environment**

Scholars have noted the potential social justice benefits of online learning, such as increasing access to higher education for learners with childcare, employment, geographic, and disability-related constraints (Koseoglu, 2020); however, literature supporting the use of anti-oppressive teaching pedagogies in an online setting is nascent and sluggish in responding to the rapidly changing technological landscape of online education (Migueliz Valcarlos et al., 2020). Notable challenges exist for intersectional feminist educators endeavoring to create classrooms centered on caring, mutual trust, and open dialogue, as communication in face-to-face video platforms may feel stilted and awkward as community members struggle to navigate bandwidth issues, muting etiquette, and conversational turn-taking (Migueliz Valcarlos et al., 2020). Additionally, video conference participants often report struggling to maintain focus, experiencing screen fatigue, and difficulty managing environmental distractions at home. Synchronous video platforms also significantly limit community members' abilities to get a full sense of others' emotional state due to missed nonverbal cues, which can hinder IFP efforts of mutual empathy building (Migueliz Valcarlos et al., 2020).

As such, the co-instructors of this course set initial ground rules for classroom participation, requiring class members to have their cameras turned on (when possible), to be in a distraction-free environment (as possible, given specific living arrangements), and to minimize or close other applications, windows, and programs while in class. Learners were also invited to share other strategies that have proven useful in creating engaging, supporting learning environments. From this discussion, additional ground rules such as using the hand-raising feature, frequently checking the chat box, and taking a mid-class, 10-minute break were adopted. Additionally, the co-instructors would frequently use breakout groups for class activities, whereby groups of five or less students could more easily engage in discussion and remain



unmuted. The co-instructors also wove intentional silence throughout discussions and would frequently invite learners to share who had not yet done so. Lastly, the co-instructors invited learners with outstanding thoughts or questions to stay after class was dismissed, which often provided opportunities to clarify content, receive learner feedback, and generate ideas for enhancing group cohesion in future meetings.

## **Conclusion**

Intersectional feminist pedagogy offers a powerful framework for teaching women's mental health counseling by fostering an inclusive and collaborative learning environment where learners' experiences are seen and their voices heard. When combined with collaborative teaching, IFP has the capacity to enhance classroom community, expose students to a wider range of perspectives, and further decentralize the primary sources of knowledge. Through critical reflection, dialogue, and action, students can learn to challenge the systemic barriers that impact the mental health of women and develop practical skills for promoting healing and resilience for all women.

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