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# Teaching Domestic Violence in the New Millennium: Intersectionality as a Framework for Social Change

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## Violence Against Women

### **Teaching Domestic Violence in the New Millennium: Intersectionality as a Framework for Social Change**

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Review

TEACHING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM:  
INTERSECTIONALITY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Keywords: intersectionality, domestic violence, teaching, social change

## ABSTRACT

This article describes an intersectional approach to teaching about domestic violence, which aims to empower students as critical thinkers and agents of change by merging theory, service learning, self-reflection, and activism. Three intersectional strategies and techniques for teaching about domestic violence are discussed: promoting difference-consciousness, complicating gender-only power frameworks, and organizing for change. The author argues that to empower future generations to end violence, educators should put intersectionality into action through their use of scholarship, teaching methods, and pedagogical authority. Finally, the benefits and challenges of intersectional pedagogy for social justice education are considered.

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What will it take to end domestic violence (DV)? As a critical sociologist, my focus is on the classroom as a site for building future generations of citizen-advocates. I ground my DV courses<sup>1</sup> in an intersectional framework that makes women of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people—whose needs and experiences tend to be obfuscated by gender-only frameworks—visible. Intersectional scholars examine the simultaneous and interacting effects of gender, race, class, and sexuality on people’s experiences and life-chances. Feminists of color have shown that a gender-only analysis of DV can imply a false universalism that is in actuality rooted in white, middle class, heterosexual women’s experiences and interests (Davis, 1981; hooks, 1993; Lorde, 1984). For example, Crenshaw (1991) found that antiviolence agencies that rely on a “race-neutral” understanding of battered women often fail to meet the needs of women of color<sup>2</sup> and immigrant women. These scholars argue that only when the *intersection* of race and gender is placed at the center of inquiry (i.e., neither category is analytically privileged) can we create systems of care that promote justice and well-being for all.

Intersectional pedagogy offers a framework to mobilize Millennial Generation students for justice. To accomplish this, we must transform not only what we teach, but *how* we teach. In this article, I present a framework for putting intersectionality into action in the classroom. First, I explain why it is important to move beyond gender in teaching about DV. Second, I give an overview of the course I teach, the readings I cover, and the methods I utilize in the classroom. Third, I discuss three intersectional strategies for teaching about DV—promoting difference-consciousness, complicating gender-only power frameworks, and organizing for change—and some techniques for implementing these strategies. Finally, I discuss the challenges and benefits of an intersectional pedagogy by giving examples of student resistance and suggested responses.

WHY IS AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH NECESSARY?

Why is it necessary to move beyond gender frameworks in teaching about DV? Consider the issue of *holding abusers accountable*. The battered women's movement has succeeded in building a network of shelters and support services for survivors. Yet, it also champions the criminal justice system as a core mechanism for stopping abuse. Intersectional scholars point out that the criminal justice system has not ended violence. What's more, law-and-order approaches contribute to mass incarceration and bring many victims into conflict with the law (Incite! 2006). Communities of color, low-income communities, and LGBT people are targeted for abuse by law enforcement. For LGBT individuals, the abuses include profiling trans women as prostitutes, selective non-enforcement in DV investigations, and police brutality (Amnesty International, 2005; Mogul, Ritchie, & Whitlock, 2011). There is an urgent need to broaden our definition of DV to encompass this state-based violence. When we do, intersecting issues and coalitions come to light. For example, DV activists could unite with the police accountability movement to end violence against all targeted groups.

Or consider the *causes of DV*. Frameworks such as the Duluth Model, which "works to change societal conditions that support men's use of tactics of power and control over women," have been crucial in establishing a coordinated community response to violence. Yet, by casting men as perpetrators and women as victims, gender models inadvertently reinforce the invisibility and experiences of gay and transgender survivors (Ristock, 2011). The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (2011) found that 45 percent of gay and trans victims were turned away from shelters, and 55 percent of those seeking protection orders were denied. To address this, domestic violence needs a framework that recognizes multiple oppressions.

## SETTING AND STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

My course is organized in three units: 1) Social Contexts of DV, 2) Narratives of DV, and 3) Strategies for Ending DV. In Unit 1, we explore the social contexts of oppression and violence, using the Center for Disease Control’s (2009) social-ecological model of violence prevention, Johnson’s (2005) *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, and Pharr’s (1997) *Homophobia as a Weapon of Sexism*. These readings, paired with short lectures and active learning exercises, provide students with a sociological view of systems of group privilege that operate from the individual to the institutional levels. I also assign the *Macho Paradox* (Katz, 2006) and *Leadership for a Better World* (Komives & Wagner, 2009), which emphasize links among theory, action, and social change. We rely on these frameworks throughout the course to unpack the social causes and effects of DV in our society.

In Unit 2, we explore survivor and activist memoirs of how race, gender, and sexuality shape experiences of, and activism against, DV. Drawing on the *Color of Violence* (Incite! 2006), we examine the cycle of abuse, myths vs. realities, sterilization abuse, mandatory arrest policies, and the child welfare system through the eyes of African American, Native American, Latina women, and/or LGBT people. Like Schulman (1999), I teach students to “telescopically” zoom in and out between individual experiences and social-ecological factors. In Unit 3, we generate strategies to end violence. In class, we read activist reflections on organizing within and across race, class, gender, and sexual boundaries (Incite! 2006). Outside of class, students throw themselves into social change projects to prevent DV on campus and in the local community. The social change projects empower students and sustain their hope in the power of citizens to change the world (see also [Yllo](#), 1989; Hollander, 2005). One student said on her course evaluation, “I thought the course was going to be depressing, but as soon as we started the social change projects...It was very inspirational.” The interplay between experiential learning and

reflection enables students to use their personal experiences as a starting point for applying the concepts learned in class.

## INTERSECTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING DV

Adapting the core tenets of intersectionality to the classroom, I use three strategies to teach DV: 1) promoting difference-consciousness, 2) complicating gender-only power frameworks, and 3) organizing for change. Here I discuss each strategy and some of the techniques I use to implement it.

### Promoting Difference-Consciousness

Many advocacy groups emphasize that DV affects “individuals in every community, regardless of age, economic status, race, religion, nationality or educational background” (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2007). While this may be true, such difference-blind claims imply that all people share a common experience (or at least a common *threat*) of violence. Intersectional feminists urge us not to downplay differences. Even among women, race, class, immigration status, and sexuality shape how survivors experience violence, how they are treated, and whether help and safety can be obtained (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

Several techniques can help to move students toward a *difference-conscious* analysis of DV. First, students with little previous exposure to theories of oppression and privilege may be confused by the idea of intersecting inequalities. This can lead to relativistic thinking (e.g., “we are all privileged and disadvantaged”) that fails to comprehend how inequalities differentially shape the lives of social groups, in some cases cumulating over generations. Thus, I focus on one system at a time, building up to a framework that incorporates the simultaneity of privileges and oppressions. During the first few weeks of class, male privilege, white privilege, heterosexual privilege, and the simultaneity of privileges/ oppressions are introduced in succession. Students



participate in the Privilege Line as we cover each new -ism (statements available from Paul Kivel’s “Benefits of Being White” and “Benefits of Being Male” ([www.paulkivel.com](http://www.paulkivel.com))). Films like *VDay: Until the Violence Stops* (2003) and the *Joy Luck Club* (1993) can also bring the race and ethnic consciousness of survivors to life.

It is not enough to help students become aware of privilege; critical educators must also give students tools to effect change, especially privileged groups. Thus, I teach the concept of an ally (Ayvazian, 1995, 7), or “a member of a dominant group in our society who works to dismantle any form of oppression from which s/he receives the benefit.” I provide scenarios and ask students to role-play actions allies can take to interrupt the mistreatment of targeted groups (e.g., male allies interrupting a man who plans to use a date rape drug on a woman at a party; a white ally educating her white friends about why it’s not OK to call black women “bitches and hoes;” a heterosexual ally educating staff at a Catholic college about the importance of providing queer-affirming resources). Then we discuss questions like, *What are the barriers to being an ally here? What are the benefits? Considering the spectrum of awareness (analysis-education-interrupting behavior-collective action) what would you be willing to do as an ally to this target group?* By the end of the semester, we have compiled a long list of actions that allies can take.

Another way to promote difference-consciousness is to critically analyze news coverage and cultural representations of DV. Katz (1999, 2006) notes that media accounts of rape and abuse are often *gender-blind* where perpetrators are “people,” “offenders,” or “bands of concert goers,” obscuring the fact that all the perpetrators were *men* (Katz, 1999). Men’s violence against women is often framed in the passive voice (“x number of women were raped last year at state university”), which fails to name *who did what to whom* (Katz, 2006). Like masculinity, race is rarely mentioned when the parties involved are white. Yet, reporters often rely on racial

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3 stereotypes to explain rape cases when the perpetrator and/or survivor are people of color  
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5 (Moorti, 2002). In general, reporters are more likely to blame the victim when she is a low-  
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7 income woman of color, and are more likely to be sympathetic when the victim is a middle-class  
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9 white woman (Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002). Equipped with an  
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11 intersectional lens, students deconstruct media framings of DV by pouring over television  
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13 transcripts from *Law & Order: SVU*, analyzing how discursive patterns challenge and/or  
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15 reinforce myths about DV as they intersect with race, class, gender, and sexuality.  
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### 19 20 Complicating Gender-Only Power Frameworks

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22 An intersectional lens views race, class, gender and sexuality as interlocking systems of  
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24 power that differentially shape survivors' experiences. While the battered women's movement  
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26 has been vitally important in shifting accountability from the victim to *social structures of*  
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28 *patriarchy*, gender-only frameworks tend to reinforce images of helpless female victims and  
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30 male abusers. Intersectional scholars insist that women have *agency* to resist violence and shape  
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32 their own lives (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996). Making agency visible is vital to challenge harmful  
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34 images of women as *either* helpless victims *or* survivors who have all the strength necessary to  
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36 stop violence (Creek & Dunn, 2011).  
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41 One technique for keeping gender inequality in focus, but challenging women-as-victim  
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43 frameworks, is the bystander intervention approach, which positions students as friends, family  
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45 members, teammates, classmates, colleagues and coworkers (Katz, 2006). Bystander intervention  
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47 highlights the responsibility and power of all people to challenge abuse and mistreatment  
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49 whenever they see it. An effective tool for teaching bystander intervention is the *What Would*  
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51 *You Do?* Bystander Scenario, adapted from UNC Chapel Hill's *One Act* interpersonal violence  
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53 training (See Appendix B). Prior to viewing the episode from ABC's hidden camera series,  
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students and I review the warning signs for sexual assault. After the video, students role-play various lines of action and consider what gets in the way of speaking up. The conversation can be pushed further by asking students to imagine how their answers might have been different if the woman was African American, Muslim, and/or gender non-conforming.

Teaching DV intersectionally also calls us to complicate frameworks that reify power as fixed and inalterable. I teach Collins’ (2000) model of power as a dialectic between oppression and activism, where intersecting oppressions constrain the opportunities of oppressed groups and privilege dominant groups. Where there is power, there is empowerment and resistance. By conceptualizing *power* and *empowerment* as two sides of the same coin, intersectionality disrupts the inevitability of female victimization.

One technique for complicating power frameworks is the Power Grid (see Appendix B). According to the Power Grid, people are constrained by systems of power, but they can also reevaluate, push back on, and work together to change these systems. Power is exercised *over* others, *with* others, or *within* oneself to produce a desired effect. Power also manifests as *empowerment*, where individuals or groups expose the fallacies of *power over* and disrupt oppressive power relations. Students fill in each node of the Power Grid with examples from course readings and daily life that show the intersections between power and violence. Examples may include militarized rape at the US-Mexico border (*social power over*), a woman reading feminist texts and taking self-defense classes (*personal power within*), Men Can Stop Rape and other groups of men targeting gender violence (*social power with*), a student challenging victim-blaming accounts of sexual assault (*personal empowerment*), and student teams conducting workshops to equip adolescents with a critical analysis of controlling images of black women

(e.g., Jezebel) (*social empowerment*). In this way, students connect their preexisting knowledge to new frameworks, which has been shown to foster learning (Prince & Felder, 2006).

These exercises complicate gender-only frameworks and present students with *both/and* ways of thinking. This helps to build a community where women are seen as structurally disadvantaged *and* agents of change, where men are held accountable *and* urged to become allies and active bystanders, and where all students are urged to shift attitudes and behaviors that contribute to DV and victim-blaming. In addition, students learn that DV is itself a matter of both individual and institutional practices.

### Organizing For Change

Finally, intersectionality calls educators to transform knowledge into action for change. In my course, social change projects mobilize students as advocates. Inspired by the Social Change Model of Leadership (Komives & Wagner, 2009), students work in teams to organize against DV on campus and/or in the community (see Appendix A for examples). While most programs in our society focus on crisis response (Martin, Coyne-Beasley, Hoehn, Mathew, Runyan, Orton, & Royster, 2009), social change projects focus on prevention, intervention, and community accountability, thus targeting the *root causes* of violence and envisioning alternatives to the criminal justice system. As a praxis-oriented sociologist, I was thrilled when a student wrote on her course evaluation: “This class created agents of change.”

I use two activities to urge students to think intersectionally about organizing for change. Building a Bridge (See Appendix B) asks students to see leadership as a process of building bridges among groups working to end violence. Yet, barriers such as language, culture, and economics can get in the way of bridge building. Student teams use masking tape, newspaper, and string to build a bridge that supports a heavy book in under 5 minutes using only nonverbal

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communication .This creates a real-time situation where obstacles impede a group’s ability to solve a problem. The game offers a starting-point to discuss how social locations shape students’ leadership, and how race, class, gender, and sexuality may pose barriers to successful coalitions. Finally, I ask students to identify “bridge issues” such as access to housing and the protection of children that can motivate diverse groups to unite across their differences to end violence.

As a follow-up, I assign each team a “constituency group” (e.g., gay men, Muslim women, African American women with children). I challenge them to Build a Coalition among the five highest-priority organizations the group views as its allies (See Appendix B). For example, the “African American women with children” group could build a coalition among the local housing coalition, DV organization, racial justice project, Baptist churches, and HeadStart. Students write their organizations on five separate note cards, and arrange the note cards in a pattern (e.g., a continuum, pentagon, spider web, etc.) to illustrate how the organizations would relate to one another. This activity encourages students to use their difference-consciousness to strategize for change. It also helps them move beyond “deficit-based thinking” by recognizing the strengths and resources of socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

One semester, this activity sparked a debate about whether law enforcement is an ally to women of color. A group of white women chose the police in a coalition for African American women and children. Several black and Latina students strongly disagreed. The discussion turned to Campus Safety’s racial profiling of students of color on our campus. Students of color shared that they were routinely followed and asked for college ID even though they were residential students on a very small campus. Every student of color who spoke up viewed law enforcement (including Campus Safety) as antagonistic to women of color. A Latina student challenged her classmates to “not be that [white person] who says, ‘that just makes me so mad!’ but does

nothing about it.” In response, three white women created a Campus Safety Complaint Form, moving from dorm to dorm to ask students to anonymously report any harassment they had witnessed or experienced from Public Safety. This student activism was inspired by an intersectional analysis of police violence and the need for privileged groups to act as allies.

### CHALLENGES OF TEACHING DV INTERSECTIONALLY

While I find intersectionality to be highly valuable for teaching about DV, it is important to acknowledge its challenges. My biggest challenge is student resistance. Like many educators, I find that today’s Millennial Generation students, who were raised in the “post-feminist” and “post-racial” era, often display a staunchly individualistic resistance to identity labels and politics (Stevenson, Everingham, & Robinson, 2011). In addition, many white students espouse a “color-blind” view of race (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000) where ending racism is simply a matter of ignoring skin color. Some white students even react to a sociological view of racism—defined as a system that privileges one group (e.g., whites) over others (e.g., people of color)—as if it were in itself racist. In an effort to convey that privilege is a matter of social position in an unequal society, I introduce sociological definitions of Racism as *prejudice (individual attitudes)* + *power (the ability to enforce prejudice)*, and White Privilege as *the unearned and often invisible advantages of being white in a racist society*. Then, I show hidden camera exposés such as *True Colors* (1991) and *Shopping While Black* (2012). Most of today’s learners, immersed as they are in mass media, consider visual media far more compelling than statistics in a book.

Meanwhile, students of color, who often enter the course with more critical awareness of race and class than do white students, may fear reinforcing stereotypes of men of color as hypersexual and violent. Thus, some resist talking about race in this context. I try to lessen this concern by creating a foundation for students to understand the connection between racism and

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DV. Only after spending several weeks raising students’ awareness of racism do we focus on DV within communities of color. One reading/video combination that works very well is “Assume the Position” (Collins, 2004) and *No! The Rape Documentary* (2008). These texts provide a larger social context for racist myths and stereotypes *and* confront the problem of sexual violence in black communities.

I have found teaching heterosexual privilege to be especially challenging. Many straight students, especially conservative Christians, view non-heterosexuality as a (morally wrong) *choice*, not a basis for social privilege/disadvantage. To move students from moral judgment to sociological analysis, I begin by exploring the privileges that institutions—from schools to workplaces to religion to families to the legal system—confer on heterosexuals. Next, I stress that heterosexism and sexism are interconnected. The documentary *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* reveals how homophobic labels such as “fag” and “bitch” are used to enforce gender roles by shaming men into acting “masculine.” Likewise, “lesbian baiting” can prevent women from identifying as feminists through the fear of being labeled a lesbian (Pharr, 1997). Thus, heterosexism enforces the gender roles that pin men’s victimization of women in place. I emphasize that if we want to end DV, we must work against heterosexism as well.

Finally, some Millennial Generation students view identities as fluid, and believe they are free to perform gender and sexuality as they wish. Queer students may be open to talking about difference, but their postmodern views do not always align with a sociological view of institutionalized power. To encourage students to base their views on empirical reality, I teach sexuality (and gender) as a continuum. The sexuality continuum, based on the Kinsey Scale, views sexual orientation as an emotional and physical continuum from 100% gay to 100% heterosexual. Human sexuality holds a range of possibilities; it is *society* that imposes binary



categories on us. Thus, even if we refuse to claim a sexual identity, the legal system forces us into categories based on who we are and whom we love.

### BENEFITS OF TEACHING DV INTERSECTIONALLY

In my courses, students engage in a potentially transformative process of exploring new relationships, planning new lines of action, and trying out new roles (Mezirow, 1991). On this journey, students add intellectual and practical tools to their antiviolence toolkit. Students rate the course very highly on evaluations, demonstrating that an intersectional pedagogy can inspire hope about social problems that often leave students feeling hopeless. Many students become powerful advocates and change their community in positive ways.

The fusion of theory and practice also benefits students. On evaluations, students express excitement about their newfound competencies. In addition to gaining critical thinking skills, students become better public speakers, leaders, teachers, and active listeners. They feel proud that “if anyone I love ever needs my help, I know what to do.” One student wrote at length in her journal about the anxiety she felt in staffing the rape crisis line. By the end of the course, she had gained a deep sense of confidence: “it is hard to put the learning experience of this class into words....[the hotline is] still nerve wracking...[because] you have to be calm and react quickly at the same time...but being able to give strength to others as an advocate is priceless.” Several students have gone on to pursue graduate school or other work in antiviolence programs. Many report that “doors [a]re opened” for them and feel they have built connections with “community leaders and amazing people.”

The journey to critical consciousness, while challenging, brings other rewards as well. Students experience personal growth as they learn to analyze the social world and take action for social justice. One student reflected, “All the readings, interaction, training, class time, and



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projects have made me grow, challenged me, and helped me be a better person.” Another said, “I am forever changed as a future educator.” Another felt the course “helped me reflect on who I am and who I want to be.” As a critical educator who believes my highest calling is “to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of [my] students” (hooks, 1994, 3), I find my part in this process incredibly satisfying.

I am not naïve enough to believe that students’ transformation stems from my personal talents as a teacher. Still, I agree with Hoop (2009) that incorporating students’ lived experiences enhances their “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959). Through hands-on practice analyzing the nexus of biography and history, students come to see how their own lives and the lives of others are shaped by the larger social scene. This can create change in the short and long term. Learning from the scholars and advocates who came before them, they are working through the snags that have foiled past approaches. In the process, they are healing themselves. One student said, “I hoped to help women who suffered domestic violence. I never dreamed that I would help myself, but that is what happened.” An intersectional approach can help students move beyond questions of individual *or* society, social service *or* social change, to think strategically about how change happens: under what conditions should we focus on meeting individual needs? How can activists organize within and across differences? How can we use *multiple strategies* on *multiple fronts* to end DV?

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on my experiences teaching relationship violence courses at two private liberal arts colleges on the East Coast. I am a white female sociologist in my late 30s and am openly lesbian.

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms “women of color” and “people of color” to refer to social groups who are systematically disadvantaged by a racist society. Although these terms may ignore differences between persons of color, it is the best language I know of to name racism without reinforcing a black/white binary.

<sup>3</sup> I address triggers in the first week of class, when students and I generate class participation guidelines. The definition of “triggers” is given and the process for discussing them is explained (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007, 55).

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APPENDIX A: SOCIAL CHANGE PROJECTS

On-Campus Projects

A. *Stomp Out the Violence! Raising Awareness through the Performing Arts*

Student performances and original media to raise awareness about relationship violence.

Students raised over \$500 in proceeds for the community partner agency.

B. *Friends for Friends: Creating a Community of Active Bystanders*

Students facilitated programs in dorms to educate students about recognizing early warning signs and intervening to stop sexual assault and relationship violence.

Community-Based Projects

A. *Young Awakening: The Importance of Respecting Self and Others*

Students designed and conducted Spanish-language workshops merging principles of social justice and media literacy education with faith-based messages with Latino children ages 10-14 at a local Catholic church.

B. *Empowering Survivors through Poetry Workshops*

Students designed and conducted poetry workshops with survivors at the local battered women's shelter. They presented the poetry at an on-campus awareness-raising event.

APPENDIX B: CLASS EXERCISES

What Would You Do?: Bystander Scenario

Students learn to recognize warning signs for sexual assault and practice intervening to stop it.

View clip from ABC special that looks at what strangers do in public when a man tries to lure a drunk woman out of a bar (<http://abcnews.go.com/WhatWouldYouDo>). Debrief warning signs, what strangers do, obstacles to intervention, and brainstorm actions people can take. (Adapted from UNC-Chapel Hill's *One Act* Bystander Intervention training).

### The Power Grid

Students elucidate different forms of power. Discuss definitions of power (see Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007, pp. 189-193). Ask students to write an example of each arranged in a grid distinguishing personal and social power as it relates to DV.

### Building a Bridge

Students analyze how leadership can be used to bridge social differences in the movement to end DV. Student teams use masking tape, newspaper, and string to build a bridge that supports a heavy book in under 5 minutes using only nonverbal communication. The facilitator tests each team's bridge with the book and awards a prize. Debrief: *Who assumed leadership roles in bridge construction? How did social locations (privilege & disadvantage) shape how team members related to each other? How does nonverbal communication mirror obstacles to bridge-building among diverse groups in our community? What specific bridge issues (shared needs and goals) might encourage diverse groups to work together across their differences?* (Adapted from MINCAVA e-clearinghouse: [www.mincava.umn.edu/documents/perf/perf.html](http://www.mincava.umn.edu/documents/perf/perf.html)).

### Building a Coalition

Students brainstorm coalitions to end DV. Student groups are assigned a constituency (e.g., undocumented women, gay men, African American women with children, etc.) and given a Checklist of 15-20 national and local social service, health care, faith-based, and social justice organizations. Groups rank organizations based on importance to their constituency group (1 is low, 5 is high), write the names of the 5 highest priority organizations on separate note cards, and configure the note cards to illustrate what a coalition among these organizations would look like (e.g. a continuum, pentagon, spider web, etc.). Groups explain choices, and strengths and weaknesses of their coalition configuration.



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BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Krista McQueeney is an Assistant Professor at Merrimack College in North Andover, MA. Her research and teaching interests center on intersectionality, emotions, the media, and domestic violence. Her dissertation was a feminist ethnography of race, gender, and sexuality in lesbian and gay affirming Protestant congregations in the South.

For Peer Review