



Interdisciplinary Analysis of:

“Oppression, Power, Inequality: An
Interdisciplinary Approach”

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Tihoni 1

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Introduction

My Interdisciplinary Analysis assignment is on the article titled “Oppression, Power, Inequality: An Interdisciplinary approach” by Delores Cleary. This article is primarily directed towards teachers of sociology. The issue it addresses is the anger and overall negativity that arises within students when they talk about issues of inequality regarding race, sexual orientation and class. Instead of dealing with the negativity strictly with a sociological approach this article explores an interdisciplinary program using English, art and sociology to help students develop skills in assessing the issues regarding all forms of inequality. The need for interdisciplinarity is that by bringing in the expressiveness of art and the ability to communicate effectively with the English area the students break free of their preprogrammed perceptions on inequality.

The solution offered by this article is that to get students to think outside of their comfort zones there is a need to offer them variety in their learning environment. This variety is in the form of an interdisciplinary course named ISM. (N.). The negative feeling of talking about oppression and inequality are obviously present in all categories of students, so finding an innovative way to help students get comfortable with difficult subject matter was both effective and brilliant.

Interdisciplinary Evaluation

I chose this article because I feel very passionate on issues of inequality. I also recognize the struggle of dealing with discussing these issues both in educational institutions and general conversations one might have on a daily basis. I remember how argumentative I was in my sociology class when issues of oppression came up and I would have welcomed the fresh approach offered in this article. That fresh approach comes from interdisciplinarity through the convergence of three separate disciplines creating a new learning experience and therefore a new knowledge. These characteristics are essential in an interdisciplinary approach to such complex problems as inequality issues, thus the ISM. (N.) project, and subsequently this article, are representative of a truly interdisciplinary solution.

Tihoni 2

Summary

A lot of the stress and negative reactions that surface in typical sociology classes when dealing with issues of inequality come from what the students have already learned and have let become a part of their identities. The typical sociology class offers no alternative way to deal with the feelings of guilt felt by students who cannot identify with the examples of oppression and inequality they encounter in the course material. The ISM. (N.) program addressed in this article develops a broader sense of awareness in students by using areas of English, art and sociology in the curriculum. The importance of using the different disciplines was in approaching the issues that caused student discomfort from various points of view. This helped the students break free from their opinion that issues of inequality were too imbedded in society to change (Cleary 39). Another benefit in using the three disciplines was the ability for students to learn how to gather and utilize varying forms of data to create a more informed point of view.

The sociology discipline is at the core of the ISM. (N.) class due to the fact that it is, in fact, a course based on the study of social issues. The use of English combined the analysis of different readings from a variety of minority authors and the practice of effectively communicating the views on the various materials studied. The third discipline used in the interdisciplinary class was art in the form of studying media and using video projects as a common form of expression amongst class members. A benefit of the ISM. (N.) course was that it met the plan of Central Washington University (CWU) to have more minority representation in its student body and curriculum.

The ISM. (N.) course is a yearlong course broken up into four quarters. The first quarter focused on the students developing a relationship between their own identities and their views on inequality. It also brought the students into groups and initiated their video projects. The second quarter focused on the struggle of various non-majority populations. The third and fourth quarters are dedicated to the further development and finalization of the final video project. Though considered a success, there were some students who dropped the yearlong course because of their negative feelings toward the subject matter. A great benefit of the ISM. (N.) course was that the faculty gained experience in working in interdisciplinary teams. In fact, the professors of all three disciplines were present during each class meeting. In the end, the use of the three disciplines helped to expand the minds of students, which helps to understand how issues of inequality need a broader view cast upon them. The video aspect of the class created such a high level of accomplishment that it led many students of the ISM. (N.) project to declare it the most rewarding class of their college career.

Tihoni 3

Sources Evaluated

Interdisciplinary research should come with a variety of sources. After reviewing the sources used by Professor Cleary I noticed that the majority were from the academic journal *Teaching Sociology*. This initially led me to think that because her sources were biased towards sociology the paper may not have been as interdisciplinary as I thought when making my initial assessment. However, after looking into Professor Cleary's cited sources more closely, I noticed that many of the *Teaching Sociology* journal articles were actually interdisciplinary articles. For example, although the article titled "Exploring Race in the Classroom: Guidelines for Selecting the 'Right' Novel" (Fitzgerald) is found in the *Teaching Sociology* academic journal, it is written on the subject of literature. It is, in fact, directly related to the English section of the ISM. (N.) course in which the students focused on novels written by minority authors. Another example of an interdisciplinary article in the *Teaching Sociology* academic journal is the article titled "Searching the Sociology of Popular Music with the Help of Feature Films: A Selected and Annotated Videography" (Groce). This article focuses on the use of film to study social issues. This is where art is brought in to teach Professor Cleary's students on its use to understand the problems of inequality.

Still, out of her twenty-four cited sources I counted fifteen that were primarily sociological in nature with the majority of those sources coming directly from the *Teaching Sociology* academic journal. This may seem like it displays a tendency for the article by Professor Cleary to not be interdisciplinary, but as I stated in my summary of "Oppression, Power, Inequality: An Interdisciplinary Approach" the core of the ISM. (N.) course is sociology. With that being said, I still do not feel like the many sociological sources takes away from the interdisciplinarity of the article and its subject matter.

Author Evaluation

The author of the article is Delores Cleary, PhD. Dr. Cleary is the Sociology department chair and chief diversity officer at Central Washington University (www.cwu.edu). A list of Dr. Cleary's areas of expertise include: Contemporary Native American society, Criminology/Deviance: Alcohol and Drugs, Minorities, Poverty, Gender, Minority Relations, Social Psychology: Self, Ethnic Identity, Life Course.

Dr. Cleary is a key practitioner in all aspects of the sociological discipline associated with the approach described in this article. She is a contributing author to the book "American Indians: In pursuit of Their Academic Dreams", and has a variety of interests in social issues. She clearly takes on the issues of inequality and diversity from the sociological and psychological points of view. From the information provided on Central Washington University's website; Professor Cleary is a very active participant in issues that relate to inequality, oppression and all the aspects presented in the article I chose to analyze. In 2009 Dr. Cleary won a Women's

Tihoni 4

Achievement Award from CWU for being so supportive of women's issues (<http://www.cwu.edu>). The fact that she holds such high esteem at her University solidifies her reliability to me. I trust in her research and the findings she presents in "Oppression, Power, Inequality: An Interdisciplinary Approach." Someone who has such a wide range of special interests seems like the perfect example of someone who would utilize interdisciplinary studies into her own research and curriculum.

Evaluation of Research Methods

Research on social issues is usually done in a qualitative manner but when we use interdisciplinary approaches the door opens up for variety. The Main purpose of qualitative research is to interpret and understand social situations (www.xavier.edu). That basic definition would define the research for this article as one based in qualitative methodology.

Although the majority of the data analyzed was based on a qualitative method there are instances of quantitative research being used in a few specific areas of the article. One example of the use of a quantitative research method was the focus of the article. Although the breadth of an article on social issues would be a very large one and lean towards a qualitative method; this paper explores a very specific area of a social issue. In a purely qualitative research methodology the variables would encompass all sociology students, but since the article focuses on the problem of students dealing with specific issues, that brings in a quantitative element.

The general difference between qualitative and quantitative research is that the latter is based on hard facts and not nearly as subjective as the former. Dr. Cleary uses a quantitative statistic to help solidify the relevance of the art paradigm in her article. She states that “Central Washington University students are on average between the ages of 18 and 24; this is a generation that gets much of its information from visual media” (Cleary 39). This fact enforces the use of the video diary’s and final project as relevant ways to reach a specific demographic.

The interdisciplinary aspect of this article is apparent when you realize that its purpose is both to test the theories of non-interdisciplinary sociology classes and to develop new theories of ways to help students handle inequality issues brought up in those “traditional” classes. I feel as if any research on an interdisciplinary subject matter must have a mix of research methods.

Tihoni 5

Identification and Analysis of Disciplines

The disciplinarity of this article was not easy for me to assess as either interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary. The fact that the purpose of this course was not only to correlate disciplines to inequality but to make a new knowledge come forth from students while integrating the three disciplines is what makes this article interdisciplinary.

As stated in the introduction of this analysis, the article is based on the use of sociology, English and art for an interdisciplinary approach to learning about inequality and dealing with the personal issues that arise in doing so. In analyzing the relevancy of the disciplines it comes to mind that each of these have more specific, sub-disciplines that may be more helpful in describing the solution of the problem described in the article.

I do believe that the chosen disciplines are pertinent to the goal of dealing with students' apathy towards the learning of inequality in sociology classes. For example, Delores Cleary states that "through the use of literature a student may gain insight into the life experiences of members of minority groups" (38). In Appendix B, Dr. Cleary offered a list of books so that the reader could see exactly what the ISM. (N.) students had to choose from when focusing on "Minority Experiences" during the second quarter of the class. This clearly shows the English discipline having a role in making students who may never read a book on minority issues a little more educated in the area. It's through literature that that students develop and use their sociological imaginations (Hendershott, Wright 325). This enables students to break free from pre conceived realities and form a more educated and non-biased opinion on the discussion of inequality.

I also questioned the use of the art discipline a bit. My question does not lay within the use of video to create an interdisciplinary approach. I question that this area of the ISM. (N.) course would be better labeled as a mass communication area. This assumption of mine is based on the fact that almost all the content related to the art area is based on the video projects done by the students. The article states that “by using video, both mainstream and alternative, students are able to consider alternative perspectives to racism, classism, sexism and heterosexism (Groce). This directly enforces the use of video and media examinations as vital parts of the interdisciplinary approach to solving the sociological problem. However, I feel the discipline is more in the area of Mass Communication as opposed to the generality of “art”. Without all aspects that encompass art, this can be a little misleading. Originally when I chose this article to analyze it was the art discipline that interested me the most. I felt that music would definitely be a part of the interdisciplinary approach. I feel that although video use and the study of media bias does cover an area of the art discipline; without music, photography and even performance pieces, you can't really say that the whole art discipline was represented.

Tihoni 6

This actually brings up a conundrum. Should the disciplines used in this article be more specific? I feel it would have served the reader better if the disciplines were described as sociology, literature and mass communication. Another issue I had with the disciplines used was the absence of social psychology. Social psychology is the “study of the manner in which the personality, attitudes, motivations, and behavior of the individual influence and are influenced by social groups” (www.merriam-webster.com). It seems to me that not only is this discipline relevant but it may very well be a flaw in the research to be left out or at least not noted as an influence. The problem of student’s feeling uncomfortable with the subject matter of inequality discussions is directly related to social psychology. As stated in Dr. Cleary’s article “white middle class students who have had little experience of diversity have difficulty identifying racism and issues of inequality, and therefore fail to grasp its impact on them (Bohmer and Briggs cited Cleary 38). This example displays how a social group influences the feelings of white middle class individuals in these sociology classes, and also personifies the definition of social psychology.

Identification and Analysis of Key Concepts

A key concept of society in general is inequality, but to study inequality you have to also incorporate other concepts such as race, sex, gender and class. Although this analysis is on an interdisciplinary article and Dr. Cleary states that “Concepts of power, oppression, and the social construction of meaning have a similar basis in sociology, English and art” (37) I feel there is one key concept that runs throughout both; the subject matter and disciplines represented in this article. That key concept is culture. Yes, oppression, power, and inequality are all contributing concepts that are a part of the apathy many students feel when dealing with issues of inequality. But it is my belief that all of these concepts lie within the concept of culture and it is the basic concept of culture that is the root of solving the problem dealt with in this article.

If you look up the word culture on www.merriam-webster.com you will get a long list of definitions, each pertaining to a specific situation or area of society, to which it applies. I feel the definition that best defines relevancy to the subject matter of “Oppression, Power, Inequality: An Interdisciplinary Approach” is the following: “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations”. In its rawest form, this definition describes why certain sub-cultures have issues with talking about inequality. Since most college students have a decent knowledge of civil rights and the history of turmoil our country has progressed through, it is no wonder that we have created a culture of guilt for many non-minority individuals. The concept of race, sex and class are an almost uniting front for members of these minority groups. With that being said, when an issue of inequality is spoken about it seems as a given that members of a minority group will band together, thus leaving members of the social majority feeling uncomfortable and maybe even alienated. It’s a culture of guilt, and it is what I would describe as the main pulse behind the problem described in this article.

The group aspect of the ISM. (N.) class contributes greatly to the concept of culture. When you put a diverse mix of students together in a group they form their own society and a culture arises from that group. The group dynamic also makes students second guess their assumptions about other people and learn to accept and work with people of different backgrounds. It’s by giving the students an opportunity to better understand the relationship between their own ideas about diversity and those of the various perspectives they encounter that the ISM. (N.) course seeks to change the culture of guilt and apathy associated with discussions regarding inequality (Cleary 38). I feel that through an interdisciplinary approach you can change a culture because you are approaching the need for a new environment from various, integrated disciplines. A culture is created through many contributing factors. So it only makes sense that to change a negative culture that you use many positive contributing factors to create a positive culture.

Identification and Analysis of Key Theories

Without a doubt the main theory used in Dr. Cleary's research of students in sociology classes, is the theory of social construction. Social construct is the "perception of an individual, group, or idea that is 'constructed' through cultural or social practice" (Dictionary.com). I feel that this is what the ISM. (N.) course work would be described as. The use of an interdisciplinary approach allows the students to practice their skills at overcoming their own pre conceived notions about issues of race, sex, class and other inequality issues. Social construction theory pertains to the ways social phenomena are made into tradition (Dictionary.com). It is this tradition that leads to the need for the solution presented in Dr. Cleary's scholarly article. The tradition of the truly uncomfortable feelings that are stirred up when people get together and talk about issues of inequality are very familiar to myself and I think many others.

The main strength behind a social construct theory is the belief that knowledge is created, not discovered, by the mind (Schwandt). This belief coincides directly with Dr. Cleary's attempt at solving the behavior that she witnessed from so many students throughout her time teaching sociology. If the theory of social construct is correct in the fact that knowledge is created and not just discovered, then the apathy and discomfort students had created for themselves could be changed by gaining new knowledge through the use of English, sociology and art disciplines. One vital point to recognize is that social construct theory focuses on the construction of reality (Cleary 36). Thus, students dealing with personal discomfort regarding issues of inequality are doing so on their own construct of what they believe to be reality. The solution presented in "Oppression, Power, Inequality: An Interdisciplinary Approach" is to make

Tihoni 8 students change their perceptions of what they assume to be reality and see issues of inequality from a more enlightened perspective; this "new" knowledge is at the heart of social construction theory.

Another theory that I feel is represented in the search for a solution to the apathy and cynicism expressed in this article is the theory of stasis. With its origins in the rhetoric practitioners of ancient Greece, stasis theory is fundamental in the knowledge building that is important for research, writing, and for working in teams (Brizee 2013). This theory may be the most important one used in the ISM. (N.) course due to the fact that it is used to help in the critical analysis of the students own research. Since stasis theory is so deeply rooted in rhetoric it is a good example of the interdisciplinarity of this article.

Here is a basic overview of stasis theory and the 4 questions (fact, definition, quality and policy) that are at its core and their relationship to the ISM. (N.) class (Brizee 2013).

Fact • Is there a problem/issue? The problem is the discomfort of students dealing with discussions of sexuality, race and class inequality. • Can it be changed? This may be the most relevant question of the stasis theory used in the ISM. (N.) course. Changing the mentality towards discussing inequality is, in reality, the whole purpose of Dr. Cleary's research.

Definition • What exactly is the problem/issue? Again, the discomfort felt by students when talking about issues of inequality. • What kind of a problem/issue is it? This is a social issue, and with almost every aspect of life (including most disciplines) having a social component to it; this is a life issue.

Quality • How serious is the problem/issue? This is an important question since inequality problems run deep through the psyche of most people. Almost everybody can relate to some form or experience with inequality and can agree that any form of inequality is a very serious issue. • What happens if we don't do anything? The search for a way to get students more comfortable with discussing the issues addressed in this article are important ones and if nothing is done, the cycle of discomfort will continue.

Tihoni 9

Policy • Should action be taken? Yes, and the ISM. (N.) class is the proposed solution to the problem • Who should be involved in helping to solve the problem/address the issue? Apparently, it seems like the more disciplines that approach the inequality issue (interdisciplinary studies) the better the outcome will be.

Though stasis theory has many other questions it can ask when pertaining to a problem or issue, the previous breakdown shows the relevancy to the study of why an interdisciplinary approach though theories based in sociology and rhetoric help in searching for a solution to the issue presented in Dr. Cleary's article.

Identification and Analysis of Key Thinkers

As I stated in my evaluation of sources used for the article "Oppression, Power, Inequality: An Interdisciplinary Approach", the majority of the works cited for this article are academic journals from *Teaching Sociology*. Although I am sure plenty of key thinkers have contributed to academic journals, I don't see any of Dr. Cleary's sources as key thinkers since none of them stand out as innovators for the disciplines they represent. Most of the author's Dr. Cleary cites are fellow scholars and thus, I lean towards them being key practitioners. I realize that one cannot make the assumption that if someone is considered a key thinker that they cannot be key practitioners and vice versa. It is only in the context of this analysis that I choose to make these assumptions. With that said I feel Dr. Cleary missed the opportunity to recognize two people who I would say are definitely key thinkers of social construction theory.

I find it a bit odd, since Dr. Cleary clearly states that social construct theory is a focus of the ISM. (N.) course and its students, that she did not use the work of Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The book “The Social Construction of Reality” written by Berger and Luckmann is viewed by many to be the seminal work to introduce social construction theory. In fact it is where the term social construction was first coined (Iowa State University). To showcase how important this piece of literature is to the discipline of sociology, and in essence this article, the International Sociological Association ranked the book number five on its list of books of the century (International Sociological Association). Although I don’t think it discredits Dr. Cleary’s work at all, I still feel that some form of acknowledgment should be made when you conduct research that is so closely tied to a specific theory.

In defense of the fact that such key thinkers as Berger and Luckmann have been left out of this article; I would say that I feel Dr. Cleary decided to focus more on sources that leaned towards “the doers” of the three disciplines as opposed to the “the thinkers”. Still, I think that anyone interested in the theories presented in this article should read the book “The Social Construction of Reality” to be able to tie social construction theory directly into the subject matter of dealing with discussions of inequality.

Tihoni 10

Identification and Analysis of Key Practitioners

In determining the key practitioners of my article I thought back to the discussion we had in IDS 3933 about the definition of key practitioners. When we were asked to make up our own, every day, definition I chose to label key practitioners as the “doers” of a given discipline. I stand by this definition and for that reason I feel that the key practitioners of Dr. Cleary’s article are all the authors she cited in her works cited page. I may be missing the mark on this concept of the interdisciplinary analysis but I just feel that since all of the authors Dr. Cleary cited are fellow scholars that they are definitely practitioners of their discipline.

This led me to think that since most of Dr. Cleary’s sources were from the sociology discipline and even more specifically, were contributors to the “Teaching Sociology” academic journal that I would focus on the key practitioners of the disciplines outside of sociology.

David Heyerle developed “Thinking Maps” which uses visualization tools in the form of eight different types of “maps”, to help learners organize their knowledge (Heyerle). The use of visualization is vital in Dr. Cleary’s interdisciplinary approach. She uses video to get her students in the ISM. (N.) class to organize their thoughts and to break free from any constraints they may feel from general discussions about oppression and other inequality issues.

Some more key practitioners would be Karen LeFevre and T.J. Larkin who wrote the scholarly article “Freud, Weber, Durkheim: A Philosophical Foundation for Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences”. Dr. Cleary uses this source to provide an example of how the English paradigm can provide critical thinking skills for students to express their thoughts in a meaningful manner. LeFevre and Larkin explore the movement of writing across the curriculum and state that writing can “emphasize the idea that in all disciplines, writing can contribute significantly to learning by aiding memory, promoting synthesis of ideas, and improving reading ability” (LeFevre and Larkin 65). With this kind of contribution, the journal article that Dr. Cleary cites by these authors is an example of the value of such key practitioners. The article, and subsequent research, by LeFevre and Larkin is not only a display of key practitioners but also a display of interdisciplinary research.

I also believe that the specific practitioners that focused on the issue of inequality in their articles should be considered as key practitioners. The reason is because inequality issues are the source of the problem that Dr. Cleary is presenting a proposed solution to. The majority of content needed to be from the research of inequality issues and in this aspect I think Dr. Cleary succeeds in using so many Sociological sources in her work.

Tihoni 11

Identification and Analysis of Assumptions/Worldviews

When you consider the issues presented in Dr. Cleary's article you are going to find very distinct concepts that can cause a variety of assumptions. There is no doubt in my mind that the main assumption in this article is a social one that focuses on how social differences can cause feelings of detachment from the subject material. From a sociological point of view the assumption is that social factors such as class, gender, and sexuality cause feelings of guilt within certain demographics of students. This guilt is what causes the students to behave certain ways when it comes to dealing with issues of inequality. For example, Susanne Bohmer and Joyce Briggs state that "it is primarily our white, middle-class, male students who provide individualistic explanations and who raise objections to some of the materials we present" (159). These "materials" presented by Bohmer and Briggs are examples of various oppressive acts committed by a majority group. These discussions reinforce the sociological assumption that discomfort is felt amongst members of the majority because they feel that, in some way, they are being blamed for the oppression of members of minority groups.

However, it seems that tied so closely to sociology is the social psychology aspect of the apathy felt from these majority groups. Guilt is an emotion and that makes me think that the psychology of these students is an important aspect to be represented in the article by Dr. Cleary. I stated that social psychology should have been a discipline that was used in this article. Well, in a way, the use of guilt as a trigger to the negative feelings student's feel in dealing with issues of inequality is an assumptive social psychological view. I just don't think you can describe negative feelings without using the discipline that deals with studying people's emotions; it was an assumption by Dr. Cleary that we would see the psychological current that runs throughout the article.

Conclusion

This article made me think back to my introductory sociology class and the experiences I had that were very similar to the students who inspired Dr. Cleary's research. Sociology is a requirement for all of us as college students so I feel this article can relate to the majority of college readers. There was some initial doubt on my part, even after a few reads that an interdisciplinary solution to a complex problem was offered in this article. I initially felt as if it was a multidisciplinary solution. However, after further analysis and class discussions I realized that the sociology, art and English disciplines were integrated into the approach to solve the proposed problem. It is a good example of how analyzing a text can reveal new layers of knowledge upon its reader.

Tihoni 12

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