CHAPTER

1

Intersectional Definitions of Identity and Communication

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL FIND . . .

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

- ableist logic
- AFAB/AMAB
- agency
- agender
- aromantic
- ascriptions
- asexual
- avowals
- binary logic
- bisexual
- cisgender logic
- cisgender/cis(gender)/cis
- classist logic
- color-blind logic
- communication
- discourse
- double (multiple) jeopardy
- double (multiple) protection
- essentialism
- gender expression/presentation
- gender fluid
- hearing
- heteronormative logic
- heterosexual/straight
- homosexual
- humanism
- identity
- intersectional approach to communication
- intersectionality
- intersex
- invitational rhetoric
- listening
- marginalized
- pansexual
- power
- privileged
- queer
- skiliosexual
- speaking
- standpoint
- transgender/trans
- truth regime

THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY

In her TEDGlobal talk, Nigerian-born novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shares that she grew up reading British and American children's books.[1] The stories in those books described blue-eyed and blond-haired children playing in the snow and eating apples, with their adult counterparts worrying about the weather and drinking ginger beer. Aspiring to be a writer, Adichie wrote her first stories as a child author about these same characters and situations, despite the fact that "we ate mangos," not apples, never thought about the weather, and she had no idea what ginger beer was. What "this demonstrates," she concludes, "is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children." Adichie also relates what her mother told her about their new house boy, Fide. "The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor." And so, when she discovered the beautiful baskets Fide's mother wove, she was surprised: the only story she had heard was about his poverty and not that his family made beautiful things.

She shares that her college roommate, in the United States, was surprised that Adichie spoke English, knew how to use a stove, and listened to Mariah Carey rather than "tribal music." She explains that her roommate had heard only one story, and hence "she had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe." But Adichie, too, had fallen prey to a single story: a story of Mexico. She explains, "I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant."

Such is the power of representation—the presentation of images and stories that show us people, places, and ideas. Representations are found in stories—in the films, television, YouTube posts, music videos, news reports, and books we listen to, watch, and read. Like a definition, representations put boundaries around people, places, and ideas; they are never neutral. Representations filter "what happened" through a particular lens, often the lens of good and evil, right and wrong, guilty and innocent, and strong or weak. Representations are linked to power, Adichie explains, "the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person." When we are only exposed to one story, Adichie explains, representations reinforce a particular story of what is "right" and what is "wrong." It feels like they are telling us what is "true"—but they aren't, they are only telling us a story, a single story told from a particular point of view.

The world, people, and human experiences can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. Events and conditions of social and political life and the

Figure 1.1 Traditional handmade African baskets. (Source: iStock. Credit: brytta)

self are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. This means that we are never just one identity. This is because a person's **identity** is comprised of the various traits, characteristics, experiences, and histories each of us rely on to answer the question, Who am I? No person can be explained and understood by a single trait. No one is only "tall" or only "smart" because each of us is comprised of a variety of qualities and experiences. Neither can we be explained in terms of binaries placed in opposition to each other: male/female, rich/poor, able/disabled, ethnic/white, native/foreign, educated/ignorant . . . and the list goes on. Our characteristics—the things that make us who we are—are a complex compilation of intersecting features intricately woven together, each with a different and important relationship to our sense of self, our power, or our lack of power in the world. We have to move beyond binary thinking and binary categorizing in order to understand ourselves and other people and to communicate effectively with them.

In their book *Intersectionality,* Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge propose that "social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other."[2] We all are informed by our past experiences, the groups we identify with, and our cultures and each of these framings privileges a particular slant, take, or way of seeing—that is, until you see or hear a familiar

story from a new angle. Adichie's example of her eye-opening travels in Mexico illustrate the invisibility of new angles; we often are unaware of their presence.

This chapter begins by exploring intersectionality, considering what it is, where it came from, and why it matters. The chapter moves on to analyze what intersectional thinking does: what it does to communication, to our understanding of past events, and to future interactions with people, policies, and our ability to act—to have meaningful agency—in the world. The chapter concludes with a call for invitational rhetoric, rhetoric that employs an intersectional lens when entering personal, social, economic, and political conversations. In their book, Hill Collins and Bilge urge us not only to understand just what intersectionality *is,* but to also consider what it *does.* In this book, we take up that charge and explore not only what intersectionality is but also what it does for us as students of gender and of communication.

WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

Imagine that you are traveling; you are on your way to something interesting or important. As you travel you arrive at a complex intersection. You realize that to get through it, and on to your destination, you must understand how each path meets the others, where each one could take you, and the implications of the crisscrossing paths for your journey. Which avenue do you select first, and why? Do you turn left or right, or move straight ahead? If it's a roundabout, how do you decide which exit will best get you to your destination? Which exits will complicate the journey? Are there several good choices or only one? Are there maps and signposts to help? What if there are none? Is there someone you can ask? On this journey, you've arrived at an intersection of options, crossroads, and pathways that converge and overlap, and you must figure out what each option entails and where it might take you.

Suppose that you navigate successfully through this intersection, only to arrive at another, and then again another—your journey is actually a maze of crisscrossing intersections, one after another. Occasionally, a direct path takes you to your destination, but even so, you find you must negotiate yet another intersection, stopping to consider other travelers, detours, and obstacles to avoid or work your way through, the benefits of choosing one option over others, and the difficulty in doing so. Some trips are easily accomplished; the path seems straightforward and easy, even familiar. Other trips are fraught with complications and frustrations; no matter how you try, you cannot seem to negotiate the maze to get to your destination.

Our identities are like intersections. We are, in fact, made up of multiple identities. Who we are is informed by where we come from, our experiences and habits, our preferences and frustrations, and our daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly journeys. To become the individuals we are now, we have traveled

Figure 1.2 Consider the complex identities of these three women. How might you be similar or different from them? How many different social locations can you identify in this photo and in your own identities? (Source: iStock. Credit: Ridofranz)

through intersection after intersection. Some roads were clear and free of challenges—we moved easily through them—but others entailed conscious choices, careful navigation, confusing and conflicting crossroads, backtracking and reentering, detour after detour, and rarely a signpost or a person around to help. When we consider our identity as an intersection, we acknowledge that the bits and pieces of us as a person might look different, but they operate together, constantly crisscrossing, working in concert to make us who we are. For example, we all have bodies and minds that work in specific ways; we all are expected to identify with particular genders and races; we all are affected by our economic status, our religions, our cultures, our ages, our families. This means that we are never just one identity, because no person can be explained and understood by a single trait. Instead our identities are complex matrices of traits informed by our bodies, minds, genders, races, economic opportunities and resources, religions, sexualities, cultures, and families, and all these influence how we are perceived by others and how we perceive ourselves.

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge define **intersectionality** as "a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences." Communication scholars April Few-Demo, Julia Moore, and Shadee Abdi explain that "intersectionality is a theoretical framework" that helps us "consider how individuals and groups—who are situated in

multiple social locations and whose social identities may overlap or conflict in specific contexts—negotiate systems of privilege, oppression, opportunity, conflict and change." Intersectionality has the power to transform our thinking about identities and our understanding of those identities in relation to power. Intersectionality brings our attention to historical forces, how individuals and groups negotiate those forces, and how "interlocking systems of oppression—racism, sexism, classism—configure to form an overarching structure of domination that shapes life for specific individuals, groups, and communities."[3]

The Problems with Essentialist Thinking

Consider a conversation you are having with a colleague. You are female, married, and have just had your first child. You are also Mexican-American, Catholic, from rural Texas, and highly educated with an MBA (Master of Business Administration) from the University of Texas. Your family has large landholdings in the area of Texas where you are from. Your colleague is male, identifies as queer, and white. He is also highly educated with a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics in computer science from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), where he received a scholarship. He is urban—from the inner city of Boston—and his family is working class. You are of equal rank at the Center for Digital Inclusion (a nonprofit organization that promotes technological education in marginalized communities) where you both now work, and you have been tasked with presenting a proposal together to the board at the company's headquarters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. What are the intersectional issues at play in this conversation?

Nirmala Erevelles, a professor in Social Foundations of Education at the University of Alabama, explains that a person's identity is made up of many identities that are always interacting and being negotiated: they are "concurrently mediated by the politics of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nation," and more.[4] Even as identities are mediated, however, it is easy to slip into essentialism. **Essentialism** claims that there is a fixed and unchanging "essence" to an individual or a group of individuals. Essentialism posits that there is some substance or trait, a core element, that a group of people always possesses. Essentialism suggests that regardless of circumstance or life experience any individual who is said to be a member of that group will possess that trait. The reality, however, is that "individuals can be seen as having multiple 'subjectivities' [sense of self] that they construct from one situation to the next. In other words, people have many choices and considerable agency about who they choose to be."[5] People are far more complex than essentialism would allow.

From an intersectional perspective, the assumption that we can speak of a universal "woman" and a universal "man" is equally flawed. It hinges on **humanism,** which is the "belief that underlying the diversity of human experience it is possible, first, to discern a universal and given human nature," and to

speak of that universality in a meaningful way.[6] To argue for a universal "woman" and universal "man" is to advance a logic that says that there is a "female human nature" and a "male human nature." This would mean that there is some characteristic or trait present in every man and a different characteristic or trait present in every woman, regardless of culture, class, religion, circumstance, or geographical location. But we cannot find this universal trait or characteristic: there is nothing we can find in every person we call "man" that is present in every other "man" on this planet and not present in the beings we call "woman." All men are not fundamentally alike, nor are all women. The assumption that they are depends on several problematic logics.

color-blind logic: says race, ethnicity, culture, and the color of one's skin have no effect on how individuals are treated.

cisgender logic: says that every person's gender matches the biological body they were assigned at birth.

heteronormative logic: says that all individuals possess the same sexuality—that is, everyone is, and should be, heterosexual.

classist logic: says that economic conditions, opportunities, and resources are the same, or can be, for every person in a community or country.

ableist logic: says that all bodies and minds function without obstacles or challenges and that they should move about the world as though there are none.

These errors in logic suggest that all women and all men—their bodies, cultures, religions, economies, and political systems—are essentially similar and can be understood through a single lens. But there is no universal "woman" and no universal "man" about whom we can think or speak. There may be commonalities where some intersections align, but the diversity of any person's identity makes it unrealistic to talk about "men" and "women" as if we all share similar histories, experiences, and lives.

Because of their diversity, women encounter the forces of sexism differently: the more mainstream a woman's identities are (that is, she is white, cisgender, able-body, heterosexual, affluent, and Christian), the easier she moves through intersections; the less mainstream, the more challenging the journey. Similarly, all men do not move through the world with equal ease: the more mainstream a man's identities are, the easier he moves through intersections; the less mainstream, the more challenging the journey.

When we engage an intersectional perspective, we are trying to understand the combination of identities of people—as individuals and as members of groups—as their identities shift and change in relation to power, access, equity, and respect. We are interested in understanding how each of us interact with other people and how we are linked to our history. By "history" we mean more than a static or linear record of facts. By history we mean that *what* has

happened and *how* those events influence us today are intimately linked to structures of power and privilege. As cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall explains, identity is not simply a "matter of being," it is very much a matter of becoming. Our ideas about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and nationality, for example, did not come from nowhere. Our ideas about these aspects of identity came from events in the past and the stories told or not told about those events. Identity "becomes" because these stories frame our understandings—we don't exist outside of them; in fact, we are the products of the stories. This is to say, identities have histories, they have a past as well as a future. They come from somewhere and, as such, are "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power."[7]

The Benefits of Intersectional Thinking

It is helpful to think of intersectionality as both an orientation to a communication interaction as well as a tool with which to communicate. When we orient ourselves intersectionally, we begin to name the complexity of our identities as well as the complexity of the identities of other people. When we think of intersectionality as a tool, we see that it is foundational in naming that complexity. Let's examine the conversation between the two colleagues introduced earlier in this section. Orienting ourselves intersectionally, and using intersectionality as a tool for analysis, we see that the man has the privilege of gender and race; he is male and he is white. Some might consider that being a white male would give him social advantage and opportunity, and certainly these identities offer some. But he is also from a working class background, and he may have a working class Boston accent. This exposes his socioeconomic roots in a way that may not be to his advantage. In addition, he identifies with a marginalized group in terms of his sexuality. Thus, he is carrying a "double jeopardy" as well as a "double protection." None of these characteristics individually tell you who this person is because he is an amalgam of these features and others. To assume at the outset that his gender and race give him all the power would be inaccurate. On the other hand, if you are the Mexican-American woman, these factors might make you assume you are in a disadvantaged position, especially considering your recently acquired status as a working mother. But you also come from a well-to-do family, are heteronormative, and have a superior education, with an advanced degree. There are real advantages and disadvantages to particular statuses, but we are not just one thing. Intersectionality brings richness and increased accuracy to our conversations, helping us embrace and engage complexity rather than denying and ignoring it.

Intersectional thinking benefits students of communication and gender in three very concrete ways: first, intersectionality helps us avoid essentialist thinking about identity. Second, we can recognize that individuals possess multiple identities. Third, we can acknowledge that those multiple identities