Intersectionality, Stereotypes of African American Men, and Redressing Bias in the Public Affairs Classroom

Richard Gregory Johnson III  
University of San Francisco

Mario Antonio Rivera  
University of New Mexico

ABSTRACT
This article describes how the authors use the theoretical construct of intersectionality and concepts relating to stereotyping in treatments of diversity and social equity in the public affairs classroom. The authors’ approach reflects their efforts in civil rights advocacy, which inform their teaching. Larger framing questions, of some pertinence to the interpretation and determination of public policy and programs, emerge. The authors’ focus is on intersectionality, stereotyping, and miscategorization as these pertain to African American men in particular, with some consideration of the possibilities for assertive self-categorization within this population as a means for attaining greater self-efficacy and agency. Additionally, the authors bring the important constructs of critical race theory and public ethics into the discussion, reflecting their use of these constructs in the classroom. The article concludes with recommendations for public affairs faculty, regardless of background or area of specialization, who wish to address these subjects in their classrooms.

KEYWORDS
Stereotyping, diversity, Black, male, intersectionality

Intersectionality is a key theoretical referent used by the authors to address diversity, social equity, and inclusion in the classroom, as well as in our civil rights advocacy efforts. Intersectionality entails the complex layering of and negative synergy among multiple streams of biased categorization (i.e., miscategorization) of individuals as perceived members of socio-demographic groups. The bias at work may be either explicit or implicit (Stewart & McDermott, 2004). Informed by decades of research in fields ranging from critical race theory to gender studies, queer theory, and disability studies, intersectionality concerns the operation of bias at individual, group, and organizational/institutional levels of social interaction. Such bias requires critical analysis fitted to all of these axial levels of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

INTERSECTIONALITY AND MULTIPLE AXES OF CATEGORIZATION
Intersectionality is, in the end, the stereotyped ascription of compounded personal and group traits onto an individual perceived to be a member of a forbidding and alien “other” (e.g., threatening Black men). The subject of bias is at the receiving end of multiple stereotyped
misconceptions in the first instance, the parts forming a larger admixed whole. For example: Is a gay person of color with a disability seen to be three times as “lacking” in comparison to a heterosexual, white, able-bodied male? Individuals may come to own their multidimensional identities, claiming these identities in their own way and investing their configurational qualities with value in the face of denigrating treatment by others.

As McCall (2005) argues, in a foundational work, this interactive process of identity formation and valuation may take *intercategorical* form (e.g., discrete traits such as Black, male, and gay), *intracategorical* form (e.g., self-identification as a mixed-race light-brown-skinned gay male), and *countercategorical* forms. Using another arbitrary example, consider a subject who challenges each of the component stereotypes affecting his self-identity—say, a masculine, self-aware, self-confident gay man who embraces rather than shuns his Blackness. Another example is President Obama, whose long-time choice to identify with his African American rather than mixed-race or part-White demographic profile may be an instance of projective intracategorization.

We will add our own variant to McCall’s (2005) typology: namely *transcategorization*, in which subjects are identified not only by their own apparent identity traits but also by relational factors, such as identification with others for whom they advocate. For example, a heterosexual activist for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community may come to be misidentified as gay or lesbian. In this article, we draw on our own experiences in the classroom and consider the pedagogical or instructional implications of these various syndromes.

We find, in both classroom and society, that intersectionality is in paradoxical ways dialogical, sometimes involving the mutual adjustment of *subjects* and *instigators* of discrimination in the joint construction of identity. This phenomenon is prone to be negative, especially when it involves the internalization of stereotyping (to be considered further below). In some instances, however, engaging with and challenging stereotypes may result in increased agency for the subject and changes of attitude for the instigator. This mutually transformative process may be modeled in the classroom when all students are encouraged to explore the ways in which they may suffer from negative ascriptions and therefore exclusion, whether on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or other grounds, such as socioeconomic class.

In the authors’ experience in the classroom, the pedagogical value of intersectionality works best when it opens up possibilities of mutual identification beyond a narrow set of categories. This mutual identification allows for what we term *transidentification*, meaning the obverse or positive counterpart of transcategorization. Transidentification involves the realization by “majority” students that they are subject to comparable negative attributions of difference (especially but not solely socioeconomic class differences) and have their own experience of marginalization, exploitation, or powerlessness.

Ibarra (2001), with an antessentialist emphasis on the contextuality of discrimination, stresses that the cognitive differences between high-context and low-context cultural outlooks account for much of the misunderstanding among identity or affinity groups. Differences are socially constructed, often misconstruals of others, and often based on variations on the degree of contextualization found in various cultures. Oppressed minorities become adept at *bicognition*, or the ability to navigate both their own and alien sociocultural milieus.

Against this backdrop, the best classroom experiences bring all students, majority and minority alike, to increased bicognitive ability, or greater context diversity (Ibarra, 2001), and therefore to the possibility of greater mutual appreciation. By exploring examples from their own lives that overspill narrower categories of diversity—to include socioeconomic class for instance, or affectional preferences, or other, broader kinds of categorization—all students in the classroom may bring themselves to a
greater cross-identification. Related to this is *multicontextuality*, in which students from high-context cultures learn by interpretatively using “multiple streams of information which surround an event, situation, or interaction,” and students from low-context cultures “filter out conditions surrounding an event and focus on words and objective facts” (Ibarra, 2001, p. 53)—that is, some students focus on much more abstract renditions of subject matter.

Kolb’s (1984) Learning Style Inventory is an instrument that may be used to identify the extent to which students fall, along a spectrum, closer to *abstract conceptualization* or to concrete experience. Author Rivera has worked with Roberto Ibarra to adapt and develop a context-diversity survey capable of the same kind of diagnostics for cognitive and cultural styles. Assessing students’ learning styles may help an instructor avoid seeing some students as less engaged or less capable along ethnic, racial, or gender lines, when the difference is in fact cultural. Rather than administer these surveys to students, however, the goal is to engage students by applying the surveys to real-life projects—for instance to the evaluation of developmental education programs (such as Adult Basic Education or employability programs), to parallel the way the Ibarra survey is administered to program participants. In the classroom, author Rivera also stresses the interrelation of context and multiattributational experiences often found in instances of intersectionality (see also Organista, Marin, & Chun, 2010).

Returning then to intersectionality as a pedagogical frame, the authors of this article agree with Anderson and Collins (2004) that diversity is about awareness of and sensitivity to “the intersections of race, class, and gender”; about seeing “linkages to other categories of analysis, including sexuality, age, religion, physical disability, national identity, and ethnicity”; and about appreciating the disparities of power “that produce social inequalities” (Anderson & Collins, 2004, p. 1). We stop far short of suggesting equivalencies among the experiences of sexism, racism, and so forth, since these are in no way reducible to one another as mere “experiences.” The cultural, cognitive, experiential, and historical contexts of exclusion, including considerations of class and gender as well as minority status, are crucially important in this connection: Diverse graduate public affairs classrooms include both majority and minority students, such that explorations built on mutual identification, as previously suggested, may be undertaken.

The notion of identification with others is in fact key, since the aim is to go beyond simple acceptance or tolerance, or even empathy or sympathy, to a sense of identity, of oneness with the perspectives of others—intellectually, imaginatively, and emotionally. It is an arc that carries one from awareness to emotive engagement to enactment of and with others as they are situated. It involves, finally, attainment of critical self-awareness, as in awareness of one’s own group’s normative traits and cultural values, along with awareness of the dynamics of difference between one’s group and other groups—differences often entailing histories of conflict, oppression, and mistrust.

Questions of group identity are exceedingly complex, and setting out to master them in single academic or training class is futile. What is more feasible is to come to greater appreciation for diversity and difference and to mature in one’s attitudes toward dissimilar others. To take another instance of subject-matter complexity, Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002) examine the multidimensionality of biracial identity in the United States and consider how biracial individuals construct their identity, which shifts from single identity (e.g., Black) to *protean* or multiple identity, and then to transcendental identity beyond race. As already proposed, there is also complexity in the intersectional, multidimensional discrimination that may be undergone by individuals who combine more than one relevant identity trait, such as members of traditionally underrepresented ethnic minority groups who also have a disability (McCall, 2005; Turner 2002).
To put it more succinctly, we want students to come to see themselves in others, and others in themselves. This dynamic of difference—of comprehension of difference—unfolds in sometimes congenial and sometimes contentious classroom dialogue. As may be expected, classroom interaction around issues of race, ethnicity, and culture, as well as, by extension, sexual orientation and gender, differs significantly in classrooms where students of color are in the majority versus classrooms where they are a small minority. In the former, where there obtains what some scholars have called a “critical mass” of students of color (see Gudeman, 2000, p. 45; Rogers & Molina, 2006, p. 143), these students may be expected to speak their minds more confidently and assertively, whereas in classrooms where they are a small minority, they may be more diffident. Irrespective of numbers, when there is a classroom climate that values diversity and cultural difference, the prospect for productive dialogue improves exponentially.

**DIALOGIC PEDAGOGY**

Consequent to these experiences, we have elaborated a preliminary teaching model for cultural competency in the graduate public affairs classroom. Following the germane literature, it is characterized as a dialogic pedagogy (Rivera, Johnson, & Ward, 2010). Other terms of art for this participatory approach to cultural competency include interdiscursivity and interdiscursive pedagogy, perspectivism and perspectival pedagogy, and transactionism and transactional pedagogy.

In Antonio and colleagues (2004), the presence of minority students among White students in the classroom is the critical variable leading to a greater level of cognitive—and specifically integrative—complexity among all gathered there. Their experimental research confirmed earlier findings that group interaction “enhances integrative complexity among majority-opinion members,” which is also to say majority-group members (Antonio et al., 2004, p. 507). Other researchers (see, for example, Anderson, Daugherty, Eleanor, & Corrigan, 2005) have found, by extension, that the aforementioned critical mass of students of color in the classroom, beyond the minimal presence stressed by Antonio and colleagues (2004), makes a great deal of difference in the quality of those students’ participation in class discussion and in the prospects for their interactive engagement (Keiner & Burns, 2010).

The same formula, so to speak, has been found to help women and racial and ethnic minorities in the science classroom to participate more confidently, for instance in SCALE-UP classrooms (Beichner, 2006; see also Anderson et al., 2005; Keiner & Burns, 2010). For Antonio and colleagues (2004), the greater mutual engagement made possible is likely to allow most or all students to attain a greater degree of integrative complexity (or cognitive diversity, akin to Ibarra’s context diversity).

As instructors in our own academic settings, which vary in proportion of students of color, the authors set essentially the same ground rules for interpersonal dialogue. We both designate the classroom as a safe space with regard to exploration of issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural difference, meaning that students are encouraged to articulate their views, summoning evidence whenever possible, without fear of ridicule or other preemption by others. At the same time, contentiousness must be limited. Unsupported characterizations, assertions of stereotype, antagonism toward others, and lack of respect are not permitted. This is not a matter of political correctness. On the contrary, in the classroom we encourage active exploration of issues, but on the premise that such exploration requires dialogue, and that any dialogue requires real respect for other interlocutors.

In whatever setting, the role of the instructor, and in particular the instructor of color, is critical. In the authors’ experience, there are again commonalities, though also differences. One commonality is that the instructor of color, compared to a White instructor, may carry more weight and responsibility in establishing ground rules and frames and topics of discussion, down to the selection of materials to be discussed, as well as in setting the right
tone for productive dialogue and demonstrating it in his or her own discourse whenever possible. As to differences, it is our experience that in the “majority-minority” classroom, the instructor may take a lower-profile role, allowing discussion to proceed as it may and with the expectation that all students will join in, without undue concern for disagreement as such—but rather the quality of disagreement—in the discussion of these issues.

In the classrooms where students of color are distinctly in the minority, however, the instructor, particularly the instructor of color, may be in effect the equalizer, pressing topics more volubly and intervening more to steer discussion toward dialogue. In any event, as Brookfield and Preskill (1999) argue, it is important to keep student and instructor voices in dynamic balance when exploring gender and race. There are alternative roles the instructor can take, such as advocate or arbiter or moderator, to suit the demands of the classroom situation (Blum, 1998; Larson & Schermerhorn, 1989).

Both authors agree with Jackson (2008) that one needs to avoid being overly prescriptive in the classroom: Instructors and trainers can effectively act as advocates for diversity and inclusion without preempting discussion or rendering it undemocratic. Milovanovic (1995) insists that, ultimately, knowledge is co-produced by teachers and students. Learning is transactional, and the manner of discovery is or should be accountable: Instructors and students alike need to answer to one another for the way in which they approach and explore these sensitive subjects, and for the manner of conclusions they reach together.

The authors find it a feasible and desirable aim for instruction relating to cultural and diversity competencies to bring students to a threshold—a moral and attitudinal one—that is more about valuing than understanding difference, more about respect for others than about comprehension of others. This aim is more realistic than an aim to impart exhaustive knowledge of other cultural and group norms, values, and interests. The stress is on dialogue as an end rather than means, as an ethical approach to negotiating differences and difference (Gardiner, 1996; Pettit, 1989). Ultimately, the goal is to increase students’ confidence in their ability to address difficult issues. At minimum, having students learn about diverse groups (see Little & Marx, 2002) is critical to the process of developing new skills corresponding to increased cognitive (or bicognitive) complexity.

Although not a focus of this article, it should be considered that faculty members of color and from other historically underrepresented minorities often face stiff resistance in the process of career advancement—resistance including racism, stereotyping, denigration of research and teaching, and relegation to campus service on “minority issues” (Trower, 2003). In the authors’ own experience, response options are severely constrained: Accommodation strategies are self-defeating, while resistance tags one as a troublemaker. A “third way” is offered in Gonzales’s (2014) agency model. With it, one chooses when and where accommodation is called for; when challenge is necessary; and when negotiation for one’s core agenda is essential. For example, community-engaged research is increasingly acknowledged as valuable by major universities, in policy and in fact, and a faculty member pursuing such research may assert its importance in negotiating paths to promotion with administrators.

An agency stance (i.e., self-aware, astute, assertive action) takes advantage of such institutional developments to establish the validity of one’s research and teaching agenda when it involves (as it inevitably does) concern with marginalized communities. Both authors have navigated these challenges in their own careers. However, in the classroom, the goal is to strengthen students’ own sense of agency and self-efficacy through a dialogic engagement with other students and the instructor such as we have already described. The faculty member who has succeeded in navigating these challenges is in the best position to support a diverse group of students in developing their own sense of agency.
STEREOTYPING—AS A SOCIAL ILL AND AS A CLASSROOM HEURISTIC

Of all the groups referenced in this article, perhaps the most vilified and misunderstood are African American men (a term used interchangeably with Black men in this essay). This is not to suggest that women and other men, Native Americans, Latinos, Middle Eastern men and women, and others do not experience racialized treatment. However, we argue here that in both general and pedagogical contexts, Black men historically have suffered and still suffer unusually persistent and grievous bias due to their race and gender, especially in terms of education and employment and interactions with law enforcement, and that they are all too often regarded—categorized—in ways that are stereotypically racist (Johnson, 2009).

The purpose of including this critical section on racialized oppression as pertains to Black men is to suggest that the way university faculty govern and teach must adapt to this singular reality. As previously indicated, we consider the intersectionality theme most useful in fostering dialogue in the classroom—that is, in fostering engagement among students of all backgrounds as they come to recognize the commonalities in their unique experiences of marginalization. However, the focus here is on the critical and pedagogical treatment of stereotyping, with stress on the burdens uniquely borne by Black men.

The emphasis in the classroom will often move from the more comprehensive treatment of racialization and bias entailed by intersectionality frames to a focus on the plight of one specific group. In author Rivera’s classroom, it is often Native Americans and specific Latino subgroups who are most closely considered, but both authors deliberately bring classroom discussion toward Black men as the apotheosis of racialized oppression in the United States, with reference to both historical and contemporary forms of stereotyping.

The opposite of self-efficacy and increased agency is self-imposed limitation on achievement, or deficit-thinking. This is a syndrome that has been empirically demonstrated to occur among Black students. Stereotypes are hackneyed ways to miscast others, yet they influence the behaviors of those who are miscategorized and place limits on what they can achieve. What often occurs is the induced internalization of stereotypes, demonstrated by the mid-1990s research in which just asking Black students to self-identify by race on a form prior to taking a test reduced their test scores relative to Whites (Aronson & Steele, 2005). This finding was confirmed for gender categorization as well, making for self-ordained conformance to gender stereotyping (Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004).

As long-time activists, advocates, and educators, we take pains to point out (to our students, and to readers of our research) that the Black civil rights movement was the originating breakthrough phenomenon that opened the door and lent its strategies and tactics to the women’s, Latino, gay rights, disability rights, and other movements that followed. We view the suffering of African Americans in the United States as approximated only by that of Native Americans; both groups have been tagged with especially pointed stereotyping.

Stereotyping has serious implications—witness the kind of shooting gallery that the United States apparently has become (to put it starkly) for “threatening” young Black males. In short, it is the authors’ position that Black males likely suffer the worst and most persistent forms of racialized oppression in the United States today, and that American society has never come to terms with this particular racist history. The specific issue of police violence toward young Black males is very topical and of great interest to students, if also a difficult one to confront.

Even cutting-edge research that claims grounding in critical race theory and culture theories—for instance, treatments of hip-hop culture (itself a popular subject for today’s students)—has become a vehicle for a peculiar kind of stereotyping of Black men. In scholarship and
social critique alike, Black male artists are cast as misogynists (see Adams, n.d.). The stereotyping of Black men as threatening, as violent, and as sexual predators (whether heterosexual or homosexual) is dramatic and enduring and pervasive. The caricature of Black men in media reports is tied up with exemplification, which is a distortive sort of characterization akin to stereotyping (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994).

As advocates, and as men of color, both authors have experienced stereotyping themselves, either directly (e.g., as threatening in some way) or indirectly, either identified or misidentified with the groups for which we have been champions, in the kind of transcategorization previously discussed. This experience informs our teaching. We do not believe it necessary for an instructor to have undergone racism or other bias to effectively teach diversity and social equity subjects; we do, however, having dealt with the bias associated with ascribed traits, approach the subject of stereotyping with some experiential grounding.

In the classroom, both authors begin explorations of racism with the intersectionality frame, followed by consideration of stereotyping of Black men as a focal case. All this discussion is placed against the backdrop of the public affairs and public administration literature on social equity and cultural competence. We build on this foundational literature with critical race theory, queer theory, and other sources, as previously suggested (Johnson, 2012).

In 1968, against the backdrop of the 1960s civil rights movement, George Frederickson coined the term social equity, and it has been in use in the field of public affairs ever since. Briefly stated, Frederickson argued that American culture, and public administration more specifically, has insufficiently attended to social inequities as regards matters of race, gender, and other forms of excluded identity. Examples of issues crying for attention abound; Frederickson stressed specific inequities and how these are mutually reinforcing, as when public school districts in poor communities of color receive far less funding than do schools in more affluent and predominantly White communities (Frederickson, 2010; see also Glaser, Hildreth, McGuire, & Bannon, 2011, p. 19).

Over the last twenty years, scholars such as Rice (2010), Wooldridge and Gooden (2009), Borrego and Johnson (2011), and Norman-Major (2011) have come to address many such concerns under the rubrics of both social equity and cultural competency. Social equity may be the best lens for addressing social justice; cultural competence is the tool used for actually implementing justice projects; the equity and competency terms are at times used interchangeably (Johnson, 2012).

Frederickson (2010) traces his characterization of social equity to one of the 14 dicta that Fayol (1949) outlined in General and Industrial Management, as concerned the fair treatment of workers. Fayol did not prescribe ways to attain greater social equity, nor did he consider how one might extend principles of equitable treatment from one group (i.e., labor) to others. Frederickson and others cited above (in relation to the social equity literature) have both broadened the subject and laid specific stress on ways to implement corresponding social and public policies. We go back to this work in our attempts to establish a common normative vocabulary in the classroom.

The same literature on social equity has deepened the grounding of social equity analysis in philosophical ethics. For instance, Wooldridge and Gooden (2009), Norman-Major (2011), and Rivera, Johnson, and Ward (2010) all draw on the work of Rawls’s (1971) A Theory of Justice, in which he defines fairness as the maximally equitable extension of public goods consistent with the preservation of everyone’s coextensive rights to liberty.

Oldfield, Candler, and Johnson (2006) raise the question of what role faculty should play in teaching diversity, social equity, and cultural competence when these are viewed broadly,
while Rice (2010) brings up the uncomfortable question of whether faculty can provide an adequate education for students who are culturally far distant from themselves. It is the authors’ experience that having a background in advocacy for diversity and equity, more than being of “minority” background oneself, helps bridge such divides—if only because no one identity profile on the part of the instructor will correspond to that of every student in a classroom.

**STEREOTYPING AND THE FEAR OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN**

Stereotyping can be damaging for the person on the receiving end of the exercise. Examples of stereotyping Black men can be traced to the days of slavery, when a plantation owner would quite literally tell his wife not to go near a Black male slave, due to his large member. This particular stereotype, of sexual dangerousness, has lasted all these many decades to the present day, and almost every American has heard of it. Another example of stereotyping Black men comes from a recent and personal experience, on October 28, 2013, in author Johnson’s graduate capstone class in the University of San Francisco’s Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. A Latina student told the class that she and a friend had just finished watching a movie about Oscar Grant at a local theater in Oakland, California. Making reference to part of the film, she acknowledged saying to her friend afterward that if she saw a Black man coming toward her, especially a young Black man, she would clutch her purse and put her cell phone away—despite the fact that she claimed she had had African American lovers in the past. Since the student said to the class that this is how she actually felt, this was a sort of remorseless admission.

Many of the White students (male and female) agreed with the Latina student regarding the perceived dangerousness of young Black men. This class experience strongly suggests that the continued fear and misunderstanding of African American men is still often based on lurid stereotypes. Stereotypes also operate in the many instances of violence suffered by young Black men today. On July 13, 2013, George Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges for the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman’s defense was that he was scared of what the young Martin might do to him, despite the fact that Martin was unarmed and substantially lighter in weight than Zimmerman (Alvarez & Buckley, 2013). Arguably, Martin fell victim to the stereotypes that many if not most African American men and boys must endure on a daily basis.

It is assumed that a young African American man who wears a hoodie (sweatshirt with hood pulled over his head) and “sagging” pants poses a threat to others. *Sagging* refers to a manner in which persons wear their trousers or shorts below their waist to expose their underwear. The history of sagging may go back to prisoners—often men of color—who were not allowed to wear a belt (Jenkins, 2013), mainly to make escape difficult. Therefore, their pants sagged below their waists. Other accounts, according to Jenkins, suggest that sagging is a fashion statement in rebellion against the exaggeratedly buttoned-down images seen in television characters of “nerds,” such as Steve Urkel from *Family Matters* and many in the cast of *The Big Bang Theory*. Whatever is involved, there is no question that sagging is an in-your-face statement of separateness.

This is the kind of discussion that students find fascinating. Regardless of the reason that Black men “sag,” the authors propose in the classroom that sagging should not be judged by anyone who does not understand Black youth and their expression of rebellion through choice and manner of clothing. In these discussions, we make note of the fact that while there is a movement of reaction against sagging (see for example Jenkins, 2013), the likelihood is that sagging will run its course the way that many fashion trends do.

Texeira (2006) has written an insightful article about African American men and the challenges they face on a daily basis when trying to address
stereotypes. Texeira offers the following lived experience by an African American man interviewed for her article:

Keith Borders tries hard not to scare people.

He’s 6-foot-7, a garrulous lawyer who talks with his hands.

And he’s black.

Many people find him threatening. He works hard to prove otherwise.

“I have a very keen sense of my size and how I communicate,” says Borders, of Mason, Ohio. “I end up putting my hands in my pockets or behind me. I stand with my feet closer together. With my feet spread out, it looks like I’m taking a stance. And I use a softer voice.

Every day, African-American men consciously work to offset stereotypes about themselves, i.e., that they are dangerous, aggressive, angry. (Texeira, 2006, p. 1)

Johnson and Rivera (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Vermont and their views on race and gender, to see what stereotypes the students held about the different races and ethnic groups. The authors found that African American men were much more likely than White men to be associated with negative stereotypes. Black men were considered likely to be drug dealers, pimps, rappers, and thugs. Conversely, White men were viewed as likely to be chief executive officers and heads of state.

These were, in effect, word association exercises. Students were provided a semi-structured survey and asked to discuss what stereotypes they had been exposed to in recent years. While most students professed not to believe the stereotypes of which they were aware, they also pointed to the fact that such images persist because they are so pervasive, particularly in the mass media. This offers an instance of the previously cited phenomenon of exaggerated exemplification (Gibson & Zillmann, 1994). Johnson and Rivera (2007) concluded that such stereotyping of Black men was plausibly linked to their continued disenfranchisement.

CONCLUSION

This article begins with a detailed analysis of intersectionality and its significance, socially and in the classroom, when the instructor undertakes treatment of diversity and social equity topics. While too often tied to stereotypes, intersectionality is a concept or frame that can lead to a greater understanding, including self-understanding, of the whole person, and not just one part. Even if individual attributions are stereotyped, or simply wrong, the subject of stereotype typically has to process the multiple categorizations involved; this a cognitive and integrative process that can lead to self-affirmation. Consideration of this multi-attribution syndrome points to the complexity of personal identity as social identity, which, if adeptly treated in the classroom, may allow for self-affirmation on the part of students as well as for mutual identification and greater understanding among them.

This article also addresses the inevitable and potentially damaging limitations of any categorization of others. When the complex layering of identity that is associated with intersectionality is not given its due, one may fall back on monographic and unidimensional stereotypes, with devastating implications. A vivid, contemporary example is found (socially and in the authors’ teaching experience) in the exceptional instance of Black men. This article therefore concludes by recommending that public affairs faculty include treatments of the concept of intersectionality along with stereotyping in their own classrooms. Doing so will allow for a better understanding of their students, especially their Black male students. It will also lead to a stronger pedagogy of the public affairs curriculum by opening up the classroom to mutual exploration of the many dimensions of social bias.
The authors also encourage our colleagues—whether of a minority background themselves or not—to venture to explore these subjects in their classes with a spirit of advocacy. Honest advocacy and open exploration of subjects such as the violent police treatment of Black men, “sagging,” hip-hop culture, or other topics here explored is bound to receive enthusiastic responses from students, whom we have found to be inerrant in detecting authenticity of purpose.

NOTE
This article is fully coauthored and was a wholly collaborative effort, and the authors’ names appear in alphabetical order.

REFERENCES


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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Richard Greggory Johnson III is associate professor of public policy in the Department of Economics, Law, and International Business at the University of San Francisco School of Management. He is widely published in the social equity subfield of public policy and administration. Johnson is a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Society.

Mario Antonio Rivera is Regents’ Professor in the School of Public Administration at the University of New Mexico. A long-time civil rights advocate, he is widely published in the areas of diversity and social equity, public ethics, and program and policy evaluation, in both national and international contexts.