



Sample Teaching Plan for *JUST A PIECE OF CLOTH*: College level

Developed by Larissa Akiko Favela, Instructor¹
Communication Department, Ohlone College, Fremont, California

Audience: Community college or university students – appropriate for courses in Intercultural or Interpersonal Communication, Ethnic Studies, Womens Studies, and Religious Studies among others.

Length of time: Three class sessions of about 60-75 minutes each

Materials and resources needed

- Documentary video: *Just a Piece of Cloth* (to order the video or learn more about it, go to <http://www.justapieceofcloth.com>)
- Additional discussion questions
- Internet access for links to
 - images of hijab/niqab/burqa,
 - articles about burqa bans in Europe
 - article about Belgian official and Qatari princess
- Film analysis and reflection assignment

Student learning objectives

Students will be able to

- Describe perception as a process
- Identify and distinguish burqa/niqab/hijab within each step of perception process
- Describe how identity, culture, society, experience, positionality and so on, shape our perceptions of others (including their clothing, such as headcoverings).
- Explain how identity may be communicated verbally and nonverbally, as well as through artifacts or clothing such as headcoverings.
- Explain how the meanings of the headcovering vary, and how these meanings are co-constructed by the intersection of various factors, such as culture, society, experience, positionality and media.
- Recognize that perceptions can evoke an emotional response in the perceiver.
- Recognize how emotions can impact communication and relationships, positively or negatively.

¹ We are grateful for the support provided by the Open Meadows Foundation. This plan is available for any teacher to use; if you pass it along to others, please give the author, Larissa Akiko Favela, credit for her work.

- Connect their own experiences of being misperceived or treated unjustly with the experiences of Muslim women.
- Recognize that perceptions can be encoded in institutional systems or national policies in ways that oppress or marginalize certain people.

Vocabulary note

The term *headcovering* will be used to refer to the hijab/niqab/burqa in order to allow for each instructor to adapt term and related material for their specific focus. Please be clear on the definitions of each headcovering to reduce confusion. It is also helpful to point out that the documentary is specifically addressing the wearing of the hijab.

Overview of themes for each day

Day One: Process of perception; how perception is shaped by identity, culture, society, experience, etc.; headcoverings of different types used by Muslim women and the names of these coverings (burqa, niqab, hijab...)

Day Two: How Muslim headcoverings both reflect identity and shape perceptions of identity (includes viewing the video *Just a Piece of Cloth*)

Day Three: How emotions triggered by our perceptions can impact communication and relationships, positively or negatively; how perceptions can be encoded in institutional systems or national policies in ways that oppress or marginalize certain people; what we can do to change the narratives we hear that unjustly stigmatize people (Muslims, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, immigrants, women...).

PROCEDURE

DAY ONE (approx. 60 minutes)

1. Review perception (10-15 minutes)

Review 1) perception process, and 2) how perception is shaped by a variety of factors, such as culture, politics, gender, & positionality. It's important to understand how we process and seek to understand the variety of symbols that express or reveal/reflect identity. *Note: In my Interpersonal Communication class, students had already done some introductory readings on perception. If students are not already familiar with basic perception processes, you may refer them to the following:*

The perception process includes (based on Adler and Proctor's *Looking Out Looking In, 14th edition, 2014*) –

- 1) Selection - what we choose to pay attention to (data) and what we do not
- 2) Organization – arranging this data in a way that is meaningful (perhaps discuss the factors that play into data we select and how we arrange the data we select (e.g., classifying or categorizing other people by skin color, gender, age, ability/disability, etc.)
- 3) Interpretation – the meaning we attach to the data (value and expectations based on race, gender, social comparison, socio-economic status, etc. and how these meanings affect our interactions)

- 4) Negotiation – how the data compares to the narratives we are told compared to narratives we live and how they may contradict each other

Transition - Let's take a look at how perception affects how we see a particular form of symbolic expression of identity.

2. Identify different headcoverings and perceptions of them (15-20 minutes)

Introduce the topic of headcoverings by asking students to identify images. See [Guide to Muslim Headwear](http://www.channel4.com/news/from-hijab-to-burqa-a-guide-to-muslim-headwear) (url: <http://www.channel4.com/news/from-hijab-to-burqa-a-guide-to-muslim-headwear>). If this link doesn't work, just type in the search terms hijab, burqa, niqab and click on "images" – you will find many sites that show these different types of covering.

- What is this? (*show images, identify vocabulary -- hijab/niqab/burqa*) Make sure students can correctly identify the different types of covering.
- (2 min) Free write response – as honest as possible:
 - What thoughts/images/ideas/values/beliefs, and so on come to mind when you see this image? (Essentially asking them to organize and interpret).
 - What are some perceptions (yours, others', or both) that are associated with these head covering?
- Small group discussion: break up students into small groups of 3-4 to discuss thoughts from free write. (5-10 minutes)
- Large group discussion: Write answers on board (allow freedom, but be aware of potentially harmful stereotypes – use to dissect and analyze assumptions). (5-10 minutes)

Note: Events in the news (ISIS, Charlie Hebdo attack, etc...) may influence responses/reactions to be more negative. Be sensitive to emotions but be sure to carefully and sensitively address any stereotypes, unjust assumptions, or unfair characterizations.

3. Critically explore/examine (20 minutes)

Why do you think women wear the headcovering?

Write answers on board. Probe (& challenge) assumptions about choices, gender, religion, etc... Consider discussing or comparing /contrasting places around the world where women are required to wear the headcovering versus places where it is NOT required. What issues related to perception are the same (regardless of required attire for women or not)? What issues related to perception are different? (for example, do people in Western cultures attach different meaning to the headcovering if we know that it is required versus a choice?)

Why do (many?) people raised in Western cultures hold those perceptions of the headcovering?

Write answers on board - probe students to critically examine their own assumptions that underlie their perceptions – assumptions about gender and gender dynamics, assumptions about "freedom" and "oppression", and so on. Discuss how/why American values/beliefs and current events could be shaping perspective. (make connections between selection-organization-interpretation parts of perception process)

4. Debrief – highlight major assumptions, emphasize areas obviously stereotypical *and* areas that reflect American/Western perspective and values. Mention/close with how headcoverings are symbolic and reflective of identity and next class we will explore this issue further by learning other perspectives (5 minutes)

DAY TWO (approx. 75 minutes)

1. Review previous day’s discussion – highlight areas of note from previous discussion (such as common perceptions, stereotypes, assumptions, meaning, etc…) (5 minutes)

2. Introduce the documentary *Just a Piece of Cloth* (5 minutes) – The media seems to favor one narrative; let’s explore how some Muslim women here in the US interpret the head covering. For easier recall later, write the names of the four women on the board, and their national/ethnic origins. Tell students that as they watch the video, they should keep in mind the questions below.

- Arwa Abushariefeh: Palestinian parents, born in US, early years Jordan, US high school and beyond
- Dian Alyan: Indonesian, immigrated to US as an adult
- Mahsa Modirzadeh: Iranian, immigrated to US as an adult
- Nur (Laura) Bean-Caskey: born and raised in the US, European–American.

Questions to keep in mind while viewing * –

- *How do the different women in this video interpret and assign meaning to the headcovering? In what ways are they similar and/or different from each other?*
- *Based on your personal preconceived ideas before the film, were your impressions about the headcovering and/or Islam and women changed at all? how and why/not?*
- *If anything, what resonated with you about the film or one or more of the stories?*

*See “[Additional discussion/assignment prompts](#)” for more discussion questions and/or directions for analysis

3. View *Just a Piece of Cloth* (34 minutes)

4. Post-viewing discussion (think-pair-share) (30 -35 minutes)

- Free write thoughts/impression/discussion questions (2 minutes)
- Small group discussion – *What jumped out or made an impression upon you? How did the women interpret the head covering? How similar or different were these interpretations? After hearing their stories/perspective, how could this change our perspective of the head covering? [or of the European bans?] Why is there so much drama about a piece of cloth? (5 minutes)*
- Whole class discussion: (20-25 minutes) As students share, write responses to the above questions on the board. Highlight stereotypes, different perceptions of the same things. Discuss assumptions and how they are related to perceptions; highlight how meaning is constructed and interpreted depending on one’s initial perceptions.

- To close this discussion, ask students to think about their own potential roles as change agents: “Is it important to change the current narrative(s) about what head covering means (and potentially, change perceptions about Muslim women)? If so, how can we do this? If not, what do you propose? (5 minutes)

5. Explain Reading Assignment and Paper Assignment. (5 minutes)

- Reading on the [burqa bans](#) in Europe: Give the students the links and questions and have them choose any two articles. They should be prepared to discuss these in class next time.
- [Film Analysis and Reflection Paper](#): Give students a few days to work on this – maybe have it due 2 meetings from now. But ask students to preview the questions before the next class, as they will be discussing them to get some ideas for the paper.

DAY 3 (approx. 75 minutes)

1. Revisit last meeting w/ documentary viewing: (15-25 minutes)

- Small groups -- ask students to gather w/ a few students around them and share a few of their thoughts about the questions in the [Film Analysis and Reflection paper](#). (5 minutes)
- Whole class – facilitate discussion based on voluntary sharing. Encourage students to engage at least briefly on each of the questions, noting that this will help them generate ideas for their paper. (10-20 minutes)

2. [Burqa ban](#) discussion

This discussion adds a policy dimension that goes beyond individual perceptions. It can help students grasp how our perceptions are part of institutionalized, systematic construction of differences and threats. Follow the link to see questions.

- Have students discuss the questions in small groups (10 minutes)
- Then convene as a whole class and share highlights (15 minutes)

3. What would you do? (40-45 minutes)

- Hand out brief article (see link below) about Belgium official and Qatari princess and ask students to take a moment to read it and write down their initial reactions to the article (feel free to use another article if this one is no longer current) (3-5 minutes)

[Belgian Official and Qatari Princess](#)

<http://www.ibtimes.co.in/belgium-burqa-ban-brussels-officer-strips-off-niqab-qatari-princess-607294#.VAIEvZNqLj4.email>

- Ask students to consider and discuss in small groups (5-10 minutes)
 - After considering what we have been examining the last couple of class periods, how would you explain the reaction of the Belgian official?
 - How do you think the situation should have been handled?

- What can this teach us about the role of emotion to our communication and interaction with others?
 - What are some repercussions you can foresee?
- Large group discussion of questions above (10-30 minutes)
Highlight the power of emotion and how it shapes a communication moment, for better or worse. Probe w/ further questions such as
1. Can you relate at all to the Belgian official? Can you relate to the indignation or fear?
 2. Invite students (especially those who are Muslim) to share experiences with fear affecting them personally either in their reaction to another or another's reaction to them. Consider touching on issues of gender, race, youth if students need more assistance in connecting experience w/ fear.
 3. Can you relate to the Qatari princess? How do you think she feels? How would you feel if something you were wearing was stripped from you? How would you react? (also highlight the fact that gender is involved here too – would the official have done that to a man?)
 4. What is the difference between facilitative and debilitating emotions? How would you characterize the burqa bans in Europe – as facilitative or debilitating?
 5. The US has not (will not?) ban the burqa or head covering. However, how would you describe the emotions/feelings in this country or community toward the head covering? Toward Muslims?
 6. What can we do in order to foster more facilitative emotions? Facilitative communication, community bonds?
 7. After exploring this whole unit, what is the biggest impression you are left with, and how will you use what you have learned?

4. Debrief and close (5-7 min) –

Highlight major themes that emerged from the discussions; close with some relevant quotes:

“It is never too late to give up our prejudices” – Thoreau

“I know there is strength in the differences between us. I know there is comfort, where we overlap” – Ani DiFranco

BURQA BANS: Reading questions and resources

Below are some possible news articles to assign for reading and some discussion questions (have students bring responses to next class): Instructors can feel free to update with more current articles if they wish to.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are your initial impressions of the burqa bans in Europe?
2. What different perspectives about the burqa ban are reflected in the articles?
3. How is the burqa (and the woman who wears it) being perceived and discussed in these articles? What does the burqa “mean” to the different points of view? How are these different views similar and/or different than what we discussed in class?
4. Do you think that Muslim headcoverings could ever be banned in the United States? Why or why not?
5. Do you think institutional policies like these bans change the way people perceive the burqa and those who wear it? Or do you think that people’s perceptions of the burqa and those wear it then lead to institutional policies? Or both?
6. Can you think of other articles of clothing (or lack of clothing) that might be banned in certain contexts? What is the reasoning behind such bans?

[CNN article – burqa ban, 2011](http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/04/11/france.burqa.ban/index.html?iref=allsearch)

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/04/11/france.burqa.ban/index.html?iref=allsearch>

[CNN article – burqa ban 2014](http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/01/world/europe/france-burqa-ban/index.html?iref=allsearch)

<http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/01/world/europe/france-burqa-ban/index.html?iref=allsearch>

[ABC News article 2011](http://abcnews.go.com/International/burqa-ban-effect-france/story?id=13344555)

<http://abcnews.go.com/International/burqa-ban-effect-france/story?id=13344555>

***Just a Piece of Cloth* - Additional discussion questions or assignment prompts**

Why would Arwa say it was big commitment to wear the hijab?

Arwa talks about “Putting a wall between me and other people – don’t see me, don’t mind me”– how is this contrary to traditional “American” values?

Arwa says “I am wearing a scarf with meaning that I wasn’t even aware of...” Why wasn’t she aware of the meanings?

What do you think Dian means when she described the hijab as “required of me, I was just not ready to do it”?

What does the hijab mean to Dian?

Why did Nur feel uncomfortable around her peers who wore the hijab?

Nur says, “This is liberation!” – what are your thoughts/reactions about this? How is this similar or different to the dominant narrative (especially in Europe)?

What are your thoughts about Nur’s comment that guys are offended that she wears the hijab – that they can’t “see her legs...I can’t see you”?

How do different life experiences shape the differences in opinion of these 4 women about wearing/not wearing the hijab?(Specifically Mahsa’s background & perspective vs. the others).

How does focusing on the fashion (or how fashionable or current) change the meaning of the hijab? Perhaps changing its impact/power?

How did 9/11 affect women who covered their hair?

What do you think Arwa means when she says that taking off her scarf is not her – but a new face, a new identity?

What do you think Nur means that “she has been better” since wearing the hijab?

Nur says "the women are out front, if we choose to wear it." What are some implications of this visibility? Are Muslim men equally visible? Do head-covered women play a bigger role than men in shaping how Americans understand Islam?

Do you agree w/ Mahsa that there are more important questions to ask about her religion than what she wears? Why/why not?

All of the women in the video emphasize the importance of choice. Why is choice such an important concept in American/Western culture? Is our personal choice an either-or matter, or do you see gradations in the degree of choice we have (in what we wear, for example)?

***Just a Piece of Cloth* Film Analysis & Reflection**

For this assignment, you will thoughtfully consider and analyze the documentary, *Just a Piece of Cloth*, by exploring a specific area of communication and identity issues and how these issues impact the process of communication and the development of relationships. Choose three of the discussion prompts below to address in your analysis and reflection. In your discussion, be sure to thoroughly discuss the prompts, appropriately and adequately apply the concepts to specific examples from the film, and provide your own unique insight and perspective. This assignment should be at least 2 full pages, no more than 5 pages, double-spaced.

1. The head covering is “just a piece of cloth” to which people assign various meanings based on their cultural background, yet this piece of cloth has prompted some strong reactions. From verbal insults to national legislation, why is this piece of cloth such a big deal? How and what is symbolic about the head covering?
2. How is the head covering symbolic of identity for the women in the documentary who do/not wear it? What does the head covering “mean” to them? How does it influence how these women see themselves? How does it influence how these women interact with the world around them (other women, people of other faiths, men, community, etc...)?
3. What does the head covering “mean” to you? Examine your perceptions of the head covering and what it symbolizes to you – how did you form these perceptions? What or who influenced you? How have your perceptions shaped how you view the identity of those who wear it? (religious, cultural, national, gender)? How have these perceptions shaped how you interact and communicate with them? (or, how could it?)
4. Compare and contrast the arguments used in the burqa ban debate. What assumptions about meaning and the “other” are reflected in the rhetoric? What are the merits of each perspective? Do you think such a ban is possible here in the US? Why or why not? Please support your perspective.
5. Discuss a particular thread of the dominant US or western narrative about the Muslim head covering, or head coverings in general (for example, head coverings as a form of oppression). What is (re) enforcing this narrative? In what ways is this narrative helpful or harmful to women and/or Muslims? In what ways is this narrative helpful or harmful to diversity and pluralism? How can we potentially change the narrative to encourage an appreciation for diversity and respect for differing belief systems?
6. Do you see any similarity between yourself and any of the women in the film, in terms of the misperceptions or systematic injustices you face (perhaps as a woman, as a minority, as a person growing up “different” in some way)? In what ways do you see the women in the video challenging the misperceptions/injustices they encounter? How do you challenge misperceptions or injustices related to your own identity(ies)?