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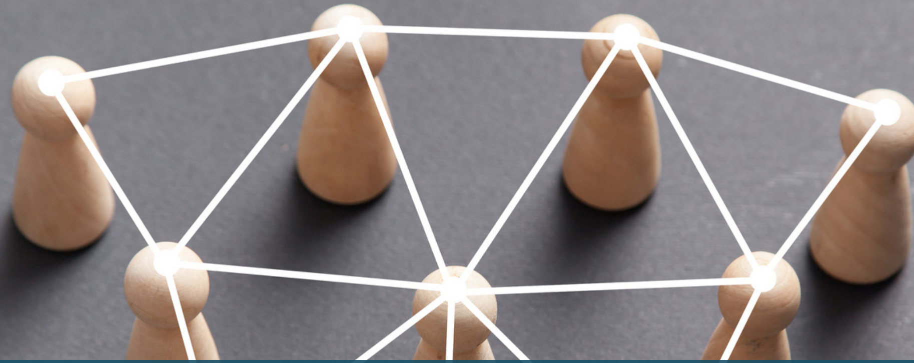

EXPLORING INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL POSITIONALITY:

# A Tool for Equity in Community Engagement and Collaboration

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## Introduction

Community engagement in social policy work plays out in an interactive hub of social relationships and structures. *Positionality* is the reflective process of understanding our own social position and identity relative to others and the work we engage in (e.g., research, technical assistance, nonprofit programs). Social constructions like gender, race, and class, and the way these all intersect with each other, determine individuals' social positions, which significantly shape our experiences, power, privileges, and even expertise. All these factors, in turn, shape the thinking, approach, and process of our research in overt and subtle ways.

This toolkit is intended to support researchers, practitioners, policymakers, organizational leaders, and all who seek to examine their own motives, identity, and feelings, to better understand how these influence their work. It is divided into three main parts:

- begin with an overview of positionality and reflexivity. We provide definitions, trace the history of the use of these concepts, and discuss how and why positionality matters for our work;
- make our case for including positionality and reflexivity in community-engaged and participatory methods and explain ways to do so; and
- provide activities on reflecting on positionality and reflexivity.

Throughout the toolkit, we provide critical discussion questions to answer throughout your reading. We hope this toolkit will serve as a catalyst for all our readers in their journeys of ensuring their work is contextualized and transparent.

## Positionality Statement

A positionality statement is a disclosure of how one's background, experiences, gender, race, beliefs, and other important self-identified qualities might relate to the work at hand. There is more information on positionality statements in a later section of the tool.

Our team includes two cisgender white women, one mixed-race cisgender woman identifying as Asian and white but who is often white assumed, and two cisgender men of color identifying as Black and Latino, respectively. Our educational attainment spans from bachelor's degrees to doctoral candidacy. Our research draws on public health, sociological and anthropological models of thought, and mixed methods. We value lived experiences as expertise and reject the notion that only technically trained researchers are experts. As a group, we bring lived experiences to our work, including racial discrimination, food insecurity, queerness, disability, and involvement in the criminal legal system. We also rely on our professional experiences working with diverse communities as trained academics and practitioners in legal advocacy, child nutrition, environmental justice, community planning, and the criminal legal system. We value the contributions, while recognizing the limitations, of our lived and professional experiences. The frameworks we approach our work with include community organizing, structural lenses, non-carceral responses, and asset-based frameworks. We are also guided and inspired by critical theories related to race, feminism, intersectionality, and queer theory. We work at a relatively well-resourced and predominately white research organization based in Washington, DC. And we acknowledge the extensive history of intentional and unintended harm that research organizations have caused to structurally marginalized communities. As a team, we are committed to the values and lenses of meaningful community engagement, complex personhood, equity, and justice in creating and sharing our work.

## Positionality and Reflexivity: Strategies to Understand How Our Identities Shape Research and Community Engagement

A person's positionality is the intersection of all their identities and experiences. Who they are, how they are situated in society, the powers and privileges they hold, and their past experiences all come together to shape the perspectives they bring to life and work. Three overlapping concepts create a person's positionality: (1) social identity categories (such as an individual's race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and so on.); (2) the position and aims of the research or community work itself; and (3) the individual's personality and disposition (Carling, Edral, and Ezzati 2014). Examining personal positionality is important for research in general. It can and should be examined at every stage of a research project, even if the project is not community engaged. This is especially important when partnering or working with a community, especially when trying to understand systems of oppression and address power imbalances between organizations (e.g., research organizations, nonprofits, and government entities) and community partners and members. Positionality can help answer questions about what the subject of the project should be, whose voice needs to be heard in the planning and implementation, and how the partnering effort should be undertaken (Muhammad et al. 2015).

*Reflexivity* is the process of addressing and wrestling with our positionality. It is a continual process that most often occurs informally through internal check-ins with ourselves. It can also take a more formal shape where we write briefs or memos documenting our positionality, practice notetaking, or follow a reflective exercise. We should think of the process of being reflexive as a muscle that develops and strengthens the more we use it. People who are newer to reflexivity and positionality may find it helpful to start with formal exercises, which can help develop the capacity to

continually reflect on positionality during projects. Further, our positionality is dynamic in that it changes over time, so continuing to strengthen the reflexive muscle will be useful over a lifetime.

With any project, individual researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and organizational leaders should explore their own positionality and their relationship to the project, the work they do, and their community partners. Team members can practice reflexivity individually or can host spaces for group discussion. Teams should seek to establish systems for continual reflexivity, which can contribute to creating an atmosphere of trust, facilitating communication and conflict resolution, and promoting power sharing among team members (Muhammed et al. 2015). The reflection exercise at the end of this toolkit provides suggestions for opportunities to integrate reflexivity within project work in meaningful ways.

Overall, positionality and reflexivity are important tools to interrogate power and systems of oppression, and we can and should use them to work toward equalizing and questioning power imbalances within our partnerships.

## Positionality Statements

One of the most common practices of positionality is the creation of a *positionality statement*. A positionality statement is a brief overview of a person's identities, perspectives, and experiences as they relate to the research and/or community work at hand. Positionality statements can be written for individuals, teams, or institutions, and are meant as a first step to prompt critical consideration of the ways those individuals or entities relate to the project and community. Positionality statements are also included in published works such as journal articles and reports as a way to achieve transparency with the audience about the authors' relation to the work. When writing positionality statements, it is important to include an institutional power analysis of the institution you are representing, as that shapes individuals' relationship to the work.

**Individual Researcher Positionality Statement:**

> My name is Justin Morgan, and I am a Black man who lives in Roxbury. I'm also a member of this project team as a PhD student, so I experience this research both as an investigator and a community member. I've lived in Roxbury less than three years, and my relationship to the space is one of a temporary resident. I get to engage our participants with the authenticity of a Black resident seeking to know more about where he lives and with the institutional authority (and sometimes fraught history) of a Harvard researcher seeking to advance understanding of a historically marginalized community. I use some of the local businesses in our study every day, but my relationship to them is surface level given my brief time living here.
> *– from a Harvard School of Public Health research project studying the impacts of small local businesses on health and well-being in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts*

**Team Positionality Statement Example:**

> As Crow Tribal members, we have always lived along the Little Bighorn River; we spent our childhoods playing, swimming, fishing, hunting, and berry picking along the river. Our families always drew water directly from the river for both household and ceremonial consumption, and some of those practices continue today. Given our close ties to the river, we observed and remember that water quality began visibly deteriorating in the late 1970s, with the intensification of both ranching and farming and a growing population. Our reports of evident water quality problems to the federal authorities, including leakage from municipal sewage lines directly

> into the river, went unresolved. We realized that the aging municipal water and wastewater infrastructure was deteriorating and inadequate to serve the growing population, and that we had to address these issues ourselves. Several of us formed the Apsaálooke Water and Wastewater Authority (AWWWA), volunteering to take on the responsibility for tribal water and wastewater infrastructure.
> – *Challenges and Opportunities for Tribal Waters: Addressing Disparities in Safe Public Drinking Water on the Crow Reservation in Montana, USA (Doyle, Kindness, Realbird, Eggers, and Camper 2018)*

## Researcher Bias: Moving Toward a Strong Objectivity

Objectivity is essential to research. However, for many researchers, being "objective" means keeping an imposed distance between the researcher and the people who are experiencing the social issues under investigation. The distancing is done out of concern that the inclusion of people close to the issue being studied would make the research "less objective." Contesting this belief, Sandra Harding (1991) describes the importance and process of bringing together various points of view, types of evidence, and lived experiences to create an understanding of the truth as a *strong objectivity* (Fine and Torre 2021). What this means is a multitude of perspectives does not weaken the ability of the team to remain objective but rather strengthens it, compelling team members to critically engage their perspectives along with other presented viewpoints and evidence. To achieve the goals of objectivity—unbiased, truthful research—researchers, policymakers, and service providers must turn to practices of positionality and reflexivity in community engagement.

There is a long-standing and growing perspective that traditional approaches to research grounded in *positivism* (that there is an absolute objective truth that can be proven and can only be understood one way) may prevent researchers from uncovering the biases they inherently bring to the work rather than keeping bias out (Lincoln and Guba 1989; Van Heertum 2005; Headley, Jones, and Carter 2023). Researchers and practitioners can use reflexivity to identify and address the ways we bring our own perspectives to bear on the work we do, which results in a "strong objectivity" (see definition above) (Gillani 2021).

One of the traditional values of research is the belief that research must and can be completely objective (or unbiased and value-free). At face value, the goal of "objectivity" is to strengthen research by not allowing anything or anyone to bias it. However, in practice, this is done by assuming that researchers can use the scientific method—identify an issue, collect information on the issue, analyze the information, report out the information learned—to produce facts free from bias and subjectivity.

However, although objectivity is vital to research, we now understand that absolute objectivity is not possible in social science research. Researchers dictate every stage of the research process and all humans, researchers included, have biases stemming from their positionality when examining social phenomena with which they are inextricably linked. These biases, when not accounted for, influence all facets of the social science research process and limit the capacity of absolute objectivity in research. In a guide for conducting social science research, the University of Minnesota explains:[1]

> *Acknowledge that data is not objective: Data (even quantitative data) is not neutral, objective, or free of bias. Humans are involved in all aspects of data creation; we decide what data gets collected and from whom, how that data is combined and analyzed, and where and how that data is presented or shared [...] While the individual measurement of something may return an objective data point from a given sample, the process of collecting, combining, analyzing, reporting, and using of data imbues a seemingly objective dataset with biases.*

Because objectivity is strongly valued in the research community, it is widely assumed that products of research, if following the scientific method, automatically produce objective information. However, because of this assumption, it is not standard practice for researchers to check for their biases or reflect on how their identity and positionality may affect their research. In practice, this means that when taken at face value, objective research creates the opportunity for the unchecked ideas and preexisting thoughts or goals of the researcher to influence the project. In the most troubling instances, the pretense of objectivity has provided opportunistic researchers a veil—one that clouded the motivations behind research that has actively pathologized Black communities, placing the cause for inequities at the level of biology or culture rather than an inherently inequitable society. The pretense of objectivity has yielded the scientific racism of James Watson and others, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*,[2] and Lawrence Mead's arguments on racial disparities in poverty.[3] Applying and mandating objectivity in other settings can have unsettling impacts.

# Uses of Reflexivity and Positionality in Community-Engaged Methods

*Communiy-engaged methods* (CEM) are "a rigorous methodology that recognizes and centers the expertise of the people and communities at the heart of the [social] issues we study by collaborating with them as fellow experts in research, policy, and practice."[4] The range of community-engaged and participatory practices to incorporate into research can vary from including specific, contained, practices such as a Data Walk or a community advisory board (CAB) to a fully collaborative process like participatory action research (PAR) or community-based participatory research (CBPR); but the underlying tenets and principles of this work are the same:

- people with lived experience are collaborators and equal decisionmakers in the research process,
- research is a mutual and reciprocal process with communities co-creating knowledge, and
- research should be used to create social change with the communities that are at the heart of the research.

In this section, we discuss how power operates in community-engaged research and social science research in general. We also examine why reflexivity and positionality are particularly important when doing community-engaged work because of the focus on shifting power. We also discuss the several factors that create a need for these reflective practices, the value they provide in our work and relationships, and examples of how various critical paradigms approach positionality.

### *Power and Privilege in Research and Community-Engaged Methods*

Research is often the way that we distinguish fact from fiction, and it informs policies, programming, and solutions to social issues across all social systems. It also has the power to shape the way society thinks about a topic or a group of people. Because of that, research is an extremely powerful tool that shapes the way our world works (Farrell, Young, and Willison 2021).

**Researchers hold power from their position as researchers and gain more by engaging communities.** Researchers, as a professional group, wield authority. This power stems from their job titles, education and training, the power of their institutions behind them (universities, research organizations, foundations, government, and so on), their experience navigating bureaucratic leadership processes, and their access to external funding (Farrell, Young, and Wilison 2021; Martinez, Evans, and Jaramillo 2021). For project completion, researchers can be rewarded with promotion, awards, future grants, book deals, and institutional power; however, nonresearchers frequently do not have a clear path to more power or personal benefits earned from their participation in research (Dupont 2008; Farrell, Young, and Wilison 2021).

**Despite the position of researchers within institutions of power, social science research is not often used as a democratic tool to share power with marginalized communities who are often the subject of research.** To understand the power dynamics of social science research, it is important to consider *who* is doing the research, and therefore who is shaping our world. Historically, research has been the domain of white men from wealthy backgrounds whose work has excluded Black, Indigenous, people of color, and other disempowered groups, such as people with disabilities and incarcerated people or immigrants, from research processes. At the same time, there is a lot of research conducted *on* (not with) marginalized people. The uneven power dynamics between white researchers and minoritized communities is an extension of structural racism, colonization, and economic inequity; these forces have subjugated the information and experiences of people of color people with generational poverty, and other people at the intersections of systems that work to oppress some and privilege others (LGTBQ+ people, women, people with disabilities), whom they are doing research without having much voice in the research or how it impacts them (Israel et al. 1998; Igwe et al. 2022).This history has had lasting effects on who accesses the research sector as a researcher or as a subject only.

For these reasons, a profound power imbalance can exist between the people who conduct research and the people and communities whose lives are the focus of social science research—and this imbalance compromises the quality of research. The first step in working to share or equalize these power dynamics when working with a community is for researchers and others to reckon with their power and privileges. This same lens can be applied to any other work with communities, including service, policy, and technical assistance work. One should always examine who they are in relation to the people they are working with, the power dynamic or perceived authority that might exist there, and the need for an approach that puts community members and their needs at the forefront.

## *Why Does Examining Privilege and Power in Community-Engaged Methods Matter?*

Community-engaged and participatory research is based on valuing equitable decisionmaking over the project and resources. One challenge of community-engaged work is meaningfully grappling with power differences between the research team and the community they are working with. Without effectively dealing with power differentials, research efforts can yield unequal partnerships and power struggles (Martinez, Evans, and Jaramillo 2021).

Community-engaged methods cannot be done authentically unless unequal power dynamics within a research team are identified and addressed (Muhammad et al. 2015). The process of reflexivity—discussions about how the team's identities, interests, experiences, and world views shape the research process and the power dynamics that exist between them—is a necessary first step to sharing power between researchers and communities.

While equalizing power dynamics within a project team is the goal of engaging in reflexivity, tensions, power imbalances, and contradictions will always exist within a research project and cannot be completely solved or removed by this practice alone. Despite this, discussing power and privilege in the research team and with partners contributes to an authentic relationship with community partners (Luttrell 2000). Researchers need to be acutely aware of their own interests and personal investments in the project, as well as their frustrations with it. In “Working the Hyphens,” Michelle Fine, a participatory action researcher at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, advocates for researchers and community partners discussing openly what their relationship is and what it is not, embracing contradictions, and confronting the power dynamics around who tells the story and leads knowledge creation. Fine argues that by doing this, researchers can develop more meaningful relationships with community partners and directly confront the implications of power and privilege within their research projects.

### *Reflexivity and Positionality Make Us Confront Racism, History, and Privilege*

In the US context, we cannot talk about power without addressing racism and privilege. As previously discussed, we do not all come to research and community work in the same way, nor do we have the same experiences moving about the world. Race, racism, history, and privilege are present in social science research projects and CEM projects because in a multiracial, oppressive, highly unequal society, these aspects of our identities exist as context in every situation we are in, whether or not we are cognizant of them.

While community-engaged research partnerships can be meaningful in themselves and provide a shared vision and commitment for a project, these partnerships exist within a world characterized by historical and current racial injustices. Engaging with communities reflexively should include critical consideration of race and privilege both in partnerships and research content. Without critical reflexivity on race and privilege, CEM research cannot be liberating and empowering, even if it is well-intentioned, grounded in CEM principles, or includes other opportunities for reflexivity (Hockley 2012). The authors of “The Dance of Race and Privilege in CBPR” (Chavez et al. 2008, 100) write about the importance of engaging with privilege in a research project:

> *For professionally trained researchers who are white or otherwise advantaged, privilege is one of the most important and difficult arenas in [Community-Based Participatory Research] to address, as in part it defines who they understand themselves to be. The outcomes and mechanisms of institutionalized racism are easier to uncover because they are not personal. To look internally at privilege conferred due to education, race, sexual orientation, gender, or institutional affiliation means a long-term commitment to engage in deep inner work researchers may not be prepared to do.*

In Milner’s (2007) “Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working Through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen,” he discusses a framework on researchers’ positionality. Milner shares three different steps in engaging in self-reflection on positionality: (1) researching the self, (2) researching the self in relation to others, and (3) moving from a reflection on the self to a reflection on systems.

In the first step, Milner suggests reflecting on individuals’ cultural heritage, how their racial and cultural backgrounds influence how they experience the world, what they emphasize in their research, and how they evaluate and interpret others’ and their experiences.

The second and third steps of Milner’s framework are particularly salient for CEM research and provide opportunities for researchers to think about themselves in relation to others and to systems. Milner encourages researchers to consider the multiple roles, identities, and positions that both they and those they are working with

bring to the research. In seeing themselves in relation to systems, Milner encourages researchers to take their personal reflections and think of the larger economic, political, and systemic factors that shape us and those we work with. In this step, he specifically calls out how researchers might reject the need to think about race or racism because they don't view themselves as racist, and instead pushes for a need to think about racism and inequality at a systemic level, and the "systems of domination that work against so many" (Harris 1993).

## Critical Paradigms and Practices That Rely on Positionality

Positionality and reflexivity are practices integrated into and borne out of several scholarly fields. We highlight a few prominent critical research paradigms and practices that include positionality as a key component of analyses of systems of oppression and the influence our work and ourselves have within them.

### *Black Feminism – Not Just for Black Women*

Black feminism is a scholarly field and lens for understanding the world we live in. It can be used to inform positionality and reflexivity by providing a lens through which to examine the layers of oppressive structures and the ways that marginalized groups of people, including Black women, have resisted these structures. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), one of the most-well-known feminist texts, Patricia Hill Collins describes the "matrix of domination," a framework that illustrates how Black women are marginalized by multiple social structures, including race, class, and gender (Collins 1990, 225). Collins (1986) also conceptualized the "outsider within," which is the knowledge that Black people develop when they are in white spaces but are not accepted in those spaces. Being in a space while still being treated as an outsider gives marginalized groups of people and individuals knowledge of how those spaces operate, which then becomes a tool to more critically examine the world that they live in.

Similarly, W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, although it did not explicitly address gender, is another way to understand one's position in relation to others and the larger environment. Originally, double consciousness was used to describe the experiences of Black people in a racist white society where they are caught between two worlds.

### *Intersectionality*

As previously discussed, identities, experiences, and perspectives can vary across multiple areas. Intersectionality is a critical theory (or theory that challenges dominant perspectives and norms that undergird our social world) that helps us understand how multiple structural forms of oppression converge simultaneously to create unique experiences and perspectives for different groups of people and individuals (Crenshaw 1991). It also allows us to examine the unequal distribution of power and privilege between groups and individuals. Intersectionality is credited to critical legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw who used the framework to examine the unique experiences of Black women, who simultaneously experience racism and sexism in society. Intersectionality can also include an analysis of other oppressive structures such as classism, homophobia, ableism, and ageism (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality, which builds on a long legacy of Black women activists and scholars who recognized that race and gender cannot be studied separately, underscores the importance of recognizing the multiple dimensions of positionality and reflexivity.

### *Culturally Responsive Evaluation*

Culturally responsive evaluation is not a theory but rather a practice that combines key tenants of community engagement, equity, and positionality and reflexivity. According to Rodney Hopson (2009), culturally responsive evaluation (CRE) "includes the centrality of and [attunement] to culture in the theory and practice of evaluation. That is, CRE recognizes that demographic, sociopolitical, and contextual dimensions, locations, perspectives, and characteristics of culture matter fundamentally in evaluation" (p. 431). Coined by Dr. Stafford Hood, culturally responsive evaluation relies implicitly on positionality and the practice of reflexivity. Some of the core characteristics include the "importance of shared lived experience between observers and observed," "attention to power differentials among people and systems," and creating spaces and granting permission to discuss issues of race, power and privilege (Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart 2015). More of these core characteristics, many of which overlap with key community engagement principles, can be found in *Culturally Responsive Evaluation: Theory, Practice, and Future Implications* (Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart 2015).

## *Ever-Changing Positionality, Identity, and Relationships in Community-Engaged Research*

Reflexivity and positionality are formed by and dependent on relationships between researchers and communities, enabling us to reflect on our position or identity in relation to the people or communities we work with. But positionality is not necessarily fixed or static. Certain aspects of our own positionality can vary in degree of significance depending on the people we are working with, how the work or priorities of the community might be changing, and changes in our own identities and experiences. For example, when working with a group of formerly or currently incarcerated people one of the toolkit authors may connect with these community members by sharing her own family history and connection to incarceration. But on other projects, she might relate more about her identity as part of the LGBTQ+ community or her experience with disabilities. Thus, positionality is situational, changing based on context and interpersonal relationships (Fasavalu and Reynolds 2019). Crossa (2012) echoes that positionality is not just about how someone understands themselves in relation to the community or people they work with, but it is also about how others understand that person. For example, one of the toolkit authors is multiracial (Asian and white) but is assumed to be white in most spaces she is in. While she feels connected to being Japanese American, when working with a population of Japanese Americans or with other East Asian communities, she might not have the connection that she perceives to have because of how she would be seen by that group.

Additionally, positionality is a continual and ever-changing process because we have the ability to change, learn, and take on new identities and experiences (Fasavalu and Reynolds 2019; Merriam et al. 2001; Nast 1994). Consequently, it is important to not see positionality and reflexivity as a one-off exercise but instead as an integral and continual piece of conducting CEM research and community work that should be embedded throughout the research process.

Another important step in reflexivity is understanding how the identities of the research team affect and influence the research and community work. Muhammad and colleagues (2015) argue that who is on the team can either impede or ease the ability of the research team to engage in CEM work, prompting teams to think about how the identities of the research team intersect with the research. For example, to Muhammad and colleagues, having researchers who share identities or experiences with the community is an integral component of community engaged research. These commonalities can (but are not guaranteed due to researchers' other intersecting identities) bring an identity-based lens that facilitates communication and connection between the research team and community. One way to conceptualize the importance of these shared identities and experiences is the insider-outsider theory, which positions people working with communities that they identify with as "insiders," while others are "outsiders." Merriam and

colleagues (2001) unpack the insider and outsider dynamic further based on their own experiences with research. For example, two researchers of Taiwanese and Korean descent thought of themselves as insiders when they interviewed people from their own cultures, but factoring in age, gender, class, and education level meant they had less insider status than they had originally thought. They echo Johnson-Bailey (1999) who experienced tension with being an insider or outsider with other Black women due to social class and being lighter or darker than her interviewees.

Further, researchers who do not share identities with communities may face challenges in getting the "real" story from communities. For example, some community members might feel as if they need to guard conflicts or issues from researchers to protect aspects of their community that they feel are confidential or internal (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Community members might only share what is considered "public discourse" with the research team, while the research team might not have access to the "hidden transcripts" in that community (Chavez et al. 2003). Therefore, communicating the reflexivity of the teams' identities with the communities they are working with—incorporating racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic differences— is just as important as sharing information about the partnership and project as is required by the institutional review board (Muhammad et al. 2015). While community-engaged research attempts to level the playing field and create equitable partnerships, researchers should accept that outsiders may still not be able to access and fully understand community and interpersonal dynamics. Consequently, researchers should reflect on and transparently acknowledge how insider-outsider status shapes their insights during analysis and reporting findings.

Lastly, it is important for research teams to be reflexive in thinking who they select as community partners and how those partners are situated in relation to the larger community. Research teams need a critical reflexivity in selecting their organizational partners within communities, as "community representatives have the opportunity to write or revise the public discourses made about their community(ies)" (Martinez 2021). Moreover, selecting a community partner that will uphold the status quo of the project and not challenge the research team may not fully reflect the perspectives and needs of the broader community.

## Conclusion

Understanding the dynamics of community-based research, especially variations in human experiences and perspectives among researchers and community members, is critical to conducting research with potential to be empowering and transformative. Positionality and reflexivity are important processes for recognizing and addressing these multidimensional dynamics, especially for projects that are intended to be community driven, engaged, and led. Positionality and reflexivity remind us that work is not produced in a vacuum but shaped by the viewpoints of those who are doing it, particularly those whose communities stand to gain or lose from the project's efforts. By being reflexive, we work to create a stronger sense of objectivity in our research, confront and correct power imbalances, and be cognizant of how our human identities and experiences—and our institutions and systems—shape the transformative work we are engaging in.

## Notes

[1] "Conducting Research through an Anti-Racism Lens," University of Minnesota Libraries, last updated October 13, 2023, https://libguides.umn.edu/c.php?g=1096139&p=7993780#s-lg-box-wrapper-31763246.

[2] Eric Siegel, "The Real Problem with Charles Murray and "The Bell Curve," *Scientific American*, July 2017, https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/the-real-problem-with-charles-murray-and-the-bell-curve/.

[3] "CPSP joins poverty center directors in denouncing the racism in Lawrence Mead's 'Poverty and Culture,'" Center on Poverty & Social Policy, July 30, 2020, https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/news-internal/2020/statement-poverty-centers.

[4] "About the Community Engagement Resource Center," Urban Institute, https://www.urban.org/research-methods/community-engagement-resource-center#about.

# Positionality Activity for Researchers, Policymakers, and Practitioners

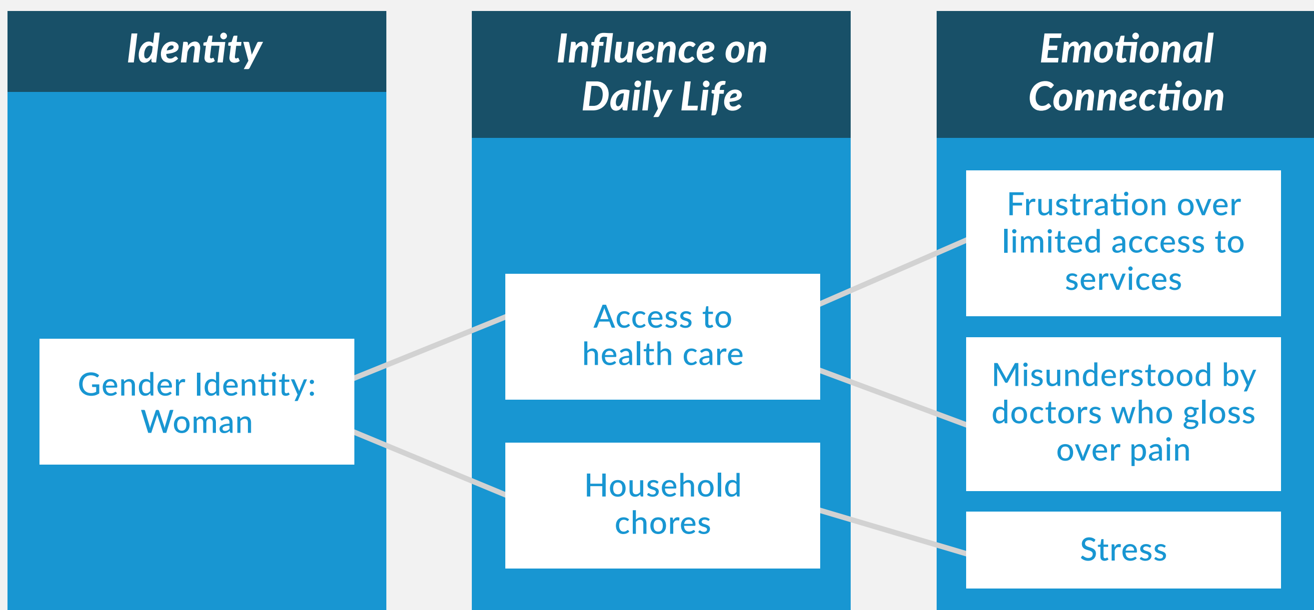
To begin the important work of reflecting on your positionality and your relations to research, policy, and service work, this engaging activity explores how individual identities, experiences, and perspectives shape projects and processes. This activity can be done at multiple junctures in projects. It provides a formal process to begin reflecting on the values and concepts underpinning positionality and reflexivity. The project will help participants remember these concepts throughout their research, policy, and service work and engagement with communities. We encourage you to both think through these things and to capture your brainstorming and answers to questions in writing.

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR IDENTITY AND LIFE EXPERIENCES

Our life experiences shape how we see and experience the world around us. In this activity, you will first brainstorm different dimensions of your identity. These dimensions interact to create intersectional experiences that are important to acknowledge and describe.

To explore how different dimensions of your identity shape your lived experience, the exercise below asks you to reflect on dimensions of your identity and how they influence your daily life and emotional experiences. This exercise draws on work from Dr. Vohra-Gupta, Dr. Danielle Jacobson, and Dr. Nida Mustafa. You may want to capture your thoughts and dimensions in writing as you are brainstorming to use for the second part of the activity.

- **First, brainstorm the dimensions of your social identity that are important to you.** Examples of *social identities* include gender, sexual orientation, ability, race and ethnicity, citizenship status, educational attainment, and economic/social class. For this exercise, reflect on those identities that feel most important to you versus all identities at once. If you are part of an organization engaging in research, policy, or service work with communities, be sure to consider your identity as a member of that organization as well as your role.
- **Next, consider how these identities *shape your day-to-day life***, including your experiences with others and with institutions, policies, and opportunities. Consider how these identities both positively and negatively shape your day-to-day life.
- **Then, consider how each identity shapes *your inner emotional world***—what emotion is a particular identity associated with? Consider how these dimensions elicit positive and negative emotions. Are any emotions associated with feelings of being an insider or outsider?
- **Finally, reflect on how different identities (e.g., race and gender) overlap in any way and draw lines between identities that shape different aspects of your daily life and emotions in new ways when considered together.** What new impacts on daily life and emotions emerge when these identities co-occur?




## REFLECTING HOW YOUR EXPERIENCES SHAPE YOUR APPROACH TO RESEARCH, POLICY, AND SERVICE

After brainstorming your social identities and life experiences, you'll need to understand how these experiences shape your research, policy, and service work. Reflecting on this helps you understand how your positionality from your identities and experiences shapes your assumptions, values, goals, and approach to work.

- **To ground your reflection, think of a specific research project you are working on and then consider the following questions**, either drafting paragraph responses or jotting down bullet points:
  - Who, which community, and what topic are involved in your research project?
  - Do you have identities and prior experiences that are relevant (e.g., similar or different) from the community or topic? What are these? If helpful, identify specific stories or experiences and write these out, acknowledging similarities and differences.
  - What motivates your research, policy, or service work? How does this relate to the community or topic present in this project?
  - What beliefs or assumptions about the community, topic, or setting emerged from these experiences? If it is challenging to think of this, consider what lessons or learnings you inherited from your prior experiences. Pay particular attention to assumptions about communities and their knowledge.
  - Are there any dimensions of your prior experience that seem unrelated to this project? Why do you believe this? Explore the idea that these dimensions and identities could be related to the research project and note how this can happen. If helpful, consider how these dimensions and identities can intersect with other dimensions.
  - How have your beliefs and assumptions shaped the research, including choice of research question, choice of methods, and plans for deliverables and dissemination? If helpful, look at your research design and consider which pieces rely on an assumption about how a community, people, or settings operate and explore how this is related to your experiences.

- What are the implications of your beliefs and assumptions about the research and community? Consider potential advantages and disadvantages stemming from these beliefs and assumptions at different stages of the research process, paying particular attention to your relationship with the community being studied. Consider how strengths in one context may be weaknesses in another.

- **If conducting your research as part of a team, it is helpful to consider the ways in which you and your identities fit into your team and the community** you are engaging with, including:
    - What is the social identity composition of race and ethnicity and gender of your team?
    - At what rank is each member of your team?
    - How might these social and professional categories shape your team dynamics and project-related work and roles?
    - Are there other important social, political, or economic categories that may intersect and affect your team dynamics?
    - What skills, expertise, resources, and connections can your team members contribute to this project?

It is important to think about your role in your organization. When you engage with communities, you are representing your industry and organization to community members. This means that it is important to reflect on how communities' past experiences with research, policy, and services and your organization shape the way you enter and are perceived by communities. It is also important to acknowledge the legacy of your organization working with communities and what this means for your own work as a member of that organization. It may be helpful to write out a statement that acknowledges this organizational context to be able to situate your own role within this broader context.

Example reflection of organizational role in engaging in research in communities: https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/reckoning-structural-racism-research-lbjs-legacy-and-urbans-next-50.

- How has your organization previously engaged with communities in the research process? Consider staff composition, investment, and reciprocity of researcher-community relationships, and genesis and types of research questions asked. Pay particular attention to how power, privilege, patriarchy, and structural racism, among others, shaped your organization's approach to research over time. How does your role fit within this history? How do you acknowledge this history in your research?
- How much power and resources does your organization have relative to other comparable organizations or organizations working with the community? Think about power and resources broadly—they can include, but are not limited to, economic, social, and political resources and access.
- What harms, intentional or not, has your organization caused to marginalized communities and/or the community with whom you are working? How might past and ongoing harms affect the way people think of me as a member of this organization and how people in the community perceive me and my work?
- In what ways has your industry and/or organization produced tangible benefits for marginalized communities?

## BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

After reflecting on your individual experiences and how they shape your approach to research, policy, and service work, you'll want to bring these insights together in a way that acknowledges your positionality, its influence on your work, and its implications, so you can develop strategies to address any potential weakness and lift up strengths. (While it is helpful to reflect on this at the beginning of a project, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should see this as a living document and continual conversation to have with themselves and their teams.)

After completing the two prior activities, it may be helpful to create an "identity memo" or personal positionality statement that integrates learnings from the reflection questions and describes how your identity and experience as a researcher, policymaker, or practitioner shows up in a particular project.

Example positionality statement for a researcher working on the Healthier Food Access Project (a research project that elevates insights from 11 grantees working on expanding healthy food access in communities across the US):

> *Kassandra (she/they) is a researcher at the Urban Institute, a white-led research organization based in Washington, DC that has a legacy of doing research in disadvantaged communities, but has been shaped by privilege, patriarchy, and white supremacy. She is a white, queer woman who grew up in New England and relied on WIC and other public benefits. Her experiences with WIC, SNAP, and other programs led her to work in nonprofits that expanded services to families who struggled to meet their food needs, and all of these experiences shape her approach to research, in focusing on better supporting families left behind by existing programs. She is currently food-secure and resides in Washington, DC.*

After integrating your personal reflections on your identities and their relation to your research, policy, and service work, think about how to sustain and integrate reflexivity and positionality in each piece of your project moving forward. Some strategies for you to consider:

- Set time to reflect as a team on the activity.
- Set a time in the future to revisit the identity memo/positionality statement and add addendums and updates that reflect how the community relationship has evolved over the course of the project.
- Consider how the project could address weaknesses stemming from individual and team positionality, including adjustments to staffing, intercoder reliability, analysis processes and theoretical frameworks, relationships and power-sharing with communities, engagement with community experts, and more.
- Consider how to build on the strengths stemming from individual and team positionality.

As you review these suggestions, think of any others and put together a list of strategies that you will use to embed reflexivity in each phase of your project work with communities.

Overall, reflecting on positionality is not a one-and-done affair. This reflection should be a continual, ongoing process that should exist throughout every stage of the project. Constant reflexivity and reflection on your experience and relationship to the project is essential to strengthening your research, policy, and service work and ensuring a power-balanced relationship with communities.

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