

Positionality:

Locating a Personal and Professional Position

Authored By: Kendra Liljenquist and Michael Light

WHAT IS POSITIONALITY?

Positionality refers to a person's occupation or adoption of a position in relation to others, usually in relation to sociocultural identifiers. It helps locate a person in the context of other individuals, social groups, and to society based on the identities assumed by them or ascribed to them.¹ Positionality firmly relates to the concept of **intersectionality**, a term drawn from the American civil rights movement which refers to the intersection of these overlapping identities which are also related to systems of dominance, oppression, and discrimination. These concepts are deeply rooted in the fields of social work and sociology but applied to theory and practice in many disciplines and also a common frame of reference in qualitative research.

INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

While personal identity can be defined in great detail on a private level, positionality is constructed based upon broad categories of public identities which locate people within groups which are positioned in relation to one another. Below is a list of common domains of identity with examples of each (which attempts to be inclusive but not exhaustive). Individuals may have multiple identities within a single category and their identities may change over time although the freedom or means to change is not the same for all people. Both categories and discrete identities are socially constructed by multiple mechanisms including (but not limited to) culture, politics, economics, science, and pseudoscience. The meaning of and stereotypes associated with these identities may change depending on the setting as well as one's proximity to identity groups. Similarly, an individual's experience of and relationship to their social identity may vary as may the degree to which they internalize the social construction of that identity.

CATEGORIES	EXAMPLES OF IDENTITIES
Race	Black, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, White, Native American, Biracial, Multiracial
Ethnicity	Chicana, Jewish, Lakota, Dutch, Multi-ethnic
National Origin	Puerto Rico, Japan, Barbados, Dominican Republic, Nigeria
Residency Status	Refugee, Asylee, Naturalized Citizen, Legal Resident, Undocumented Resident, Immigrant
Language	Tagalog, Spanish, Khmer, French, Xhosa; (Monolingual, Bilingual, Polylingual)
Socioeconomic Class	Upper Class, Owning Class, Middle Class, Working Class, Working Poor
Education Level	No Formal Education, Some High School, College Graduate
Age / Generation	Young Adult, Middle Age Adult, Adolescent, Senior, Elder
Biological Sex	Cis-Male, Cis-Female, Intersex
Gender	Male, Female, Transgender, Gender Queer
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Asexual
Physical/ Psychological/ Mental/ Learning Ability	Living with a Disability, Living with Chronic Disease, Living with Mental Illness, Temporarily Able-Bodied
Religious / Spiritual Affiliation	Jewish, Muslim, Atheist, Hindu, Bahai'I, Christian, Agnostic

¹Margaret Zamudio , Jacquelyn Bridgeman , Caskey Russell & Francisco Rios (2009) Developing a critical consciousness: positionality, pedagogy, and problems, Race Ethnicity and Education, 12:4, 455-472, DOI: 10.1080/13613320903362220

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POWER, OPPRESSION, & POSITIONALITY

Societies privilege groups with certain shared identities at the expense of other groups. These hierarchies reflect the distribution of power between groups and are reinforced by formal and informal systems which perpetuate inequities between dominant and oppressed groups. The classic “-isms” reflect the conceptualization of systemic oppression based on categories of identity (e.g. racism, sexism, classism, ableism). These forms of oppression become institutionalized in policies and practices which often prevent access to resources or participation in society, also referred to as **structural violence**. Historical inequities persist over time and therefore impact groups across multiple generations.

An individual’s positionality informs how they experience these systems of dominance and oppression. For example, a woman of color may face sexism in the workplace which is compounded by the experiences of racism. A white, gay male may face homophobia and have his experience of discrimination mitigated by his whiteness and male gender. People with identities located in multiple dominant groups in a given society are unlikely to face discrimination and may not be aware of or acknowledge the systemic nature of these inequities. While biases may exist toward and among any social group, only discrimination by dominant groups toward oppressed groups based on these biases limits access to equitable power.

Systems of power and oppression also influence the information we access and, therefore, our understanding of the world and our relationship to it. Information from the perspective of dominant society tends to become **normative**, meaning that it becomes the standard by which information is deemed “normal” or “acceptable” versus “abnormal,” “different,” “deviant,” or “other.” Information from the perspective of oppressed groups is often excluded, underrepresented, controlled, or interpreted through the perspective and institutions of dominant groups. These dynamics narrow the diversity of knowledge, for example the likelihood of reading academic literature written by indigenous people. It also informs a bias toward what stories are valued, believed, and shared with others. This can manifest, for example, in the willingness of the dominant society to accept or reject accounts of the lived experience of people of color. Here again, positionality informs how we are impacted by these biases and even our basic awareness of these biases.

SOCIAL JUSTICE ANALYSIS

Understanding systems of dominance and oppression allows us to more accurately and critically analyze issues of **social justice**, or the view of justice seen in terms of equitable distribution of power and resources. Likewise, the ability to articulate our positionality allows us to improve the analysis of our biases and participation in systems of dominance and oppression. By understanding our location in these systems, we are better able to examine the factors which influence our view of ourselves and our world. It also allows us to relocate the discourse on issues of social justice from individual actions to institutional and systemic levels. Understanding our positionality allows us to question the information we receive and to seek new sources of information which have been historically marginalized or omitted. A stronger analysis also allows us to make intentional choices about our words and actions and take steps to dismantle systemic oppression and structural violence in our spheres of influence. It allows us to develop humility and build authentic relationships with people who hold identities different than our own; we can strengthen communities, celebrate commonalities, provide mutual support, and engage in collective action.

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