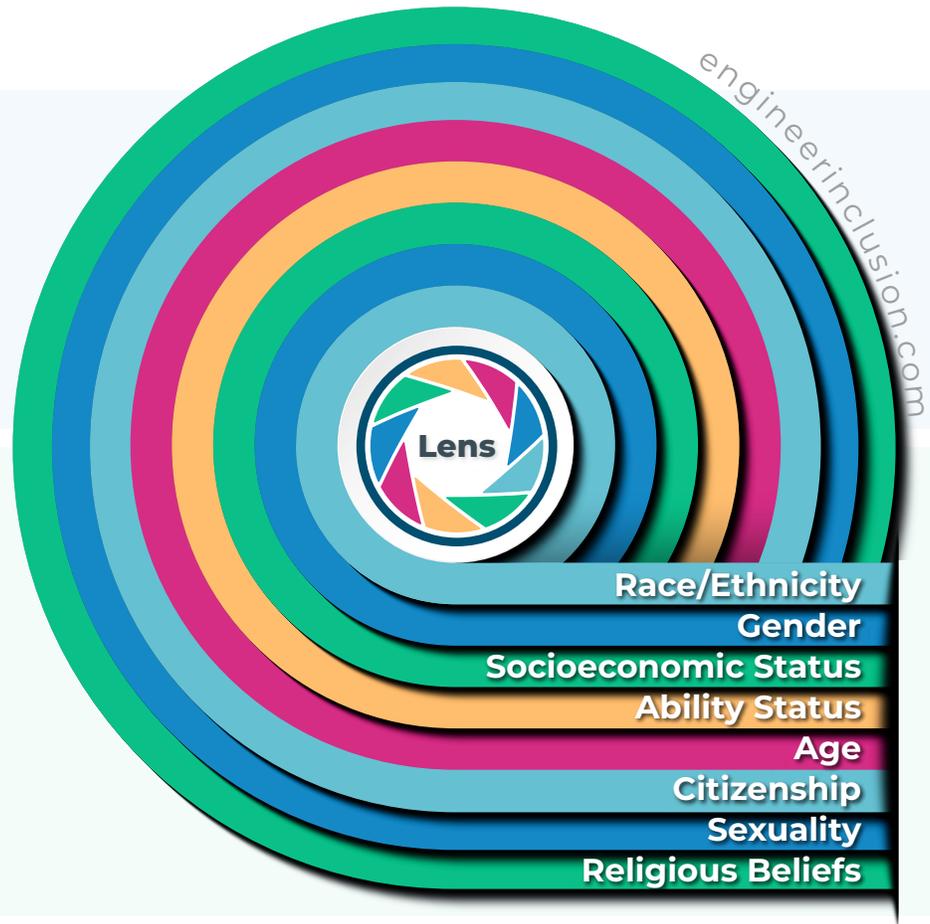


# Positionality

*The way we see and understand the world influences how we interact with others, make decisions, and interpret others' actions. To be equitable and inclusive leaders, educators, or humans, we must understand how our identities bias our perceptions. This activity provides definitions and explanations of several social identities and scaffolds an exploration of your positionality.*

## Positionality is

- 1) the social and political context that creates your identity and
- 2) how your identity influences and biases your perception of and outlook on the world.



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# PRIVILEGE

## DEFINITION

**Privilege** is a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group.

*It's impossible to reflect on positionality without considering privilege.*

Privilege is a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group. It gives advantages, favors, and benefits to members of dominant groups at the expense of target groups. People in dominant groups are frequently unaware that they are members of the dominant group due to the privilege of seeing themselves as persons rather than stereotypes.

Privilege is characteristically invisible to people who have it. People in dominant groups may believe that they have earned the privileges they enjoy or that everyone could access these privileges if only they worked to achieve them. However, privileges are unearned, and they are granted to people in the dominant groups whether they want those privileges or not.

Privilege operates on personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional levels. In the United States, people who have membership in one or more of these social identity groups have privilege:

- White
- Male
- Heterosexual
- Non-disabled
- Christian
- College-educated
- Middle or owning-class
- Married
- Middle-aged
- English-speakers
- US Citizen



# RACE AND ETHNICITY

## DEFINITIONS

**Race** is a social construct that divides people into groups based on physical appearance, ancestry, culture, history, etc. Notions of racial difference are human creations rather than biological categories and have the social and political classification systems gave morphed over history.

**Ethnicity** is a social construct that divides people into smaller social groups based on characteristics such as a shared sense of group membership, values, behavioral patterns, language, political and economic interests, history, and ancestral geographical base..

A **social construct** is an idea that has been created and accepted by the people in a society.

## Examples of Race or Ethnic Origins

- ★ **American Indian or Alaska Native** (Eg: Navajo nation, Blackfeet tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village or Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc)
- ★ **Asian** (Eg: Chinese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, etc)
- ★ **Black or African American** (Eg: African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somalian, etc)
- ★ **Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin** (Eg: Mexican or Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, etc)
- ★ **Middle Eastern or North African** (Eg: Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Syrian, Moroccan, Algerian, etc)
- ★ **Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander** (Eg: Native Hawaiian, Samoan, Chamorro, Tongan, Fijian, etc)
- ★ **White** (Eg: German, Irish, English, Italian, Polish, French, etc)

Race isn't just about your origins; it's about power, whether you perceive to have it or not.

The resulting structure of race produces **racism** or the system of oppression involving systematic subordination of targeted racial groups by those who have relatively more social power. This subordination occurs at the individual, cultural and institutional levels. Dominant groups benefit from and uphold those systems.



# GENDER

## DEFINITIONS

**Gender** is a socially constructed system of classification that ascribes qualities of masculinity and femininity to people.

**Gender identity** is a person's internal sense of themselves as a specific gender.

**Gender Expression/Image/Display** is the external presentation of self as gendered through cultural identifiers/markers such as clothing, behaviors, etc.

**Genderqueer** is a self-identifying term for someone who rejects the male/female gender binary in favor of a more fluid, nontraditional identity which merges or blurs characteristics of gender and gender norms.

**Cisgender** is a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

*Sex is biological; gender is not.*

Infants receive a sex assignment at birth based on biological differences between males and females, such as the genitalia and genetic differences. Biological sex, like gender, isn't binary.

**Intersex** is an umbrella term describing people born with reproductive or sexual anatomy or a chromosome pattern not classifiable as typically male or female.

Gender is a socially constructed system of classification that ascribes qualities of masculinity and femininity to people. When infants receive their sex assignment at birth, the corresponding gender is generally assigned, such as males are boys/men and females are girls/women.

Colors, toys, activities, and behaviors have become gendered or assigned (via a social construct) as either masculine or feminine. As children grow, they learn to perform gender based on the input they receive from their environment.

Some people do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth and adapt their gender expression to match their identity.

**Transgender** is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. Included in the LGBTQ acronym.



# SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

## DEFINITIONS

**Social class** (as in upper class, middle class, lower class, working class) refers to people's socioeconomic status, based on factors such as wealth, occupation, education, income, etc.

**Social capital** is the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

**Cultural Capital** is the accumulation of knowledge, behaviors, and skills (education, intellect style of speech, style of dress, etc.) that promote social mobility in a stratified society.

*Social class is another social construction.*

A hierarchical arrangement of social classes based on wealth, educational attainment, occupation, income, and membership in a subculture or social network stratifies society.

One's socioeconomic status (SES) is predictive of both social and cultural capital. **Social capital** includes the resources inherent in social relations such as trust, norms, reciprocity, and knowledge from exposure to certain experiences. **Cultural capital** provides social advantage and power to individuals whose cultures reflect dominant social norms.

Social and cultural capital increase access and opportunity.



# ABILITY STATUS

## DEFINITIONS

A **disability** is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions).

**Ableism** is the system of oppression based on ability; it assumes disabled people as flawed, insufficient, and inferior. Included are assumptions about what is “normal” and results in the marginalization of the disabled. In brief, it is the unearned privilege afforded to non-disabled people.

**People first language** (PFL) puts the person before the disability. “People with disabilities” acknowledges that individuals with disabilities are people first and not their diagnosis or disability.

*There are many types of disabilities, such as those that affect a person’s:*

- Vision
- Movement
- Thinking
- Remembering
- Learning
- Communicating
- Hearing
- Mental health
- Social relationships

According to the World Health Organization, disability has three dimensions:

1. Impairment in a person’s body structure or function, or mental functioning; examples of impairments include loss of a limb, loss of vision or memory loss.
2. Activity limitation, such as difficulty seeing, hearing, walking, or problem solving.
3. Participation restrictions in normal daily activities, such as working, engaging in social and recreational activities, and obtaining health care and preventive services.

The American Disability Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. It includes people who have a record of such an impairment, even if they do not currently have a disability. The ADA also makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person based on that person’s association with a disability.



# SEXUALITY

## DEFINITIONS

An **asexual** person does not experience sexual attraction.

A **bisexual** person has significant romantic, emotional, physical, or sexual attractions to both men and women, but not necessarily simultaneously or equally.

A **gay** person is an individual who is emotionally, physically, or sexually attracted to members of the same sex. This term often describes men but can also describe anyone who does not identify as heterosexual or straight.

A **heterosexual** person is an individual who is emotionally, physically, or sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex.

**Heterosexism** is the system of oppression that assumes heterosexuality as the norm, favors heterosexuals, and denigrates and stigmatizes

anyone whose gender or sexual behavior is considered non-heterosexual.

A **lesbian** is a woman whose primary romantic, emotional, physical, and sexual attractions are to other women.

**LGBT, LGBTQ+ and LGBTQIA** are umbrella terms used to refer to the community as a whole. The letters stand for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Allied

A **pansexual** is a person with a sexual, romantic, or emotional attraction towards people regardless of their sex or gender identity. Pansexuality rejects the gender binary.

**Queer** is a term people often use to express fluid identities and orientations.

*Sexuality includes sexual orientation, such as who a person is attracted to and whether the person identifies as heterosexual or LGBTQIA+ and their sexual fantasies and attitudes and values related to sex.*

The list of definitions is not comprehensive. Additional sexualities include, but aren't limited to, allosexual, novosexual, omnisexual, quoisexual, polysexual, androsexual, abrosexual, ceterosexual, skoliosexual, gynosexual, and demisexual.



# PAUSE AND REFLECT

## INSTRUCTIONS

Before exploring your positionality, reflect on what you've learned about privilege and the selected social identities.

For each of the items, reflect on the following questions:

1. What surprised you about this topic?
2. How will you use this knowledge?
3. What will you do differently?
4. What will you share with your peers?

Privilege

Race and Ethnicity

Gender

Socioeconomic Status

Ability Status

Sexuality



# IDENTITY SUMMARY

## INSTRUCTIONS

In the provided column, list your identities. There is space provided to add other salient identities that affect how you move through and perceive the world.

The summary will inform the following positionality exercise, serving as a starting point for the reflection.

Race

Ethnicity

Gender

Socioeconomic Status

Ability Status

Age

Citizenship

Sexuality

Religious Beliefs

Marital Status

Education

Political Ideology

Appearance

Geographic Location

add your own

add your own

add your own

add your own

# Social Identity Map

*Identifying your social identities is just the first step. After that, you must reflect on how that identity impacts your life, and what that means to you.*

Danielle Jacobson and Nida Mustafa created a process for explicitly identifying and reflecting on social identity.<sup>1</sup> Their three-tiered approach allows us to conceptualize social identities and positionality.

## TIER 1 Social Identity

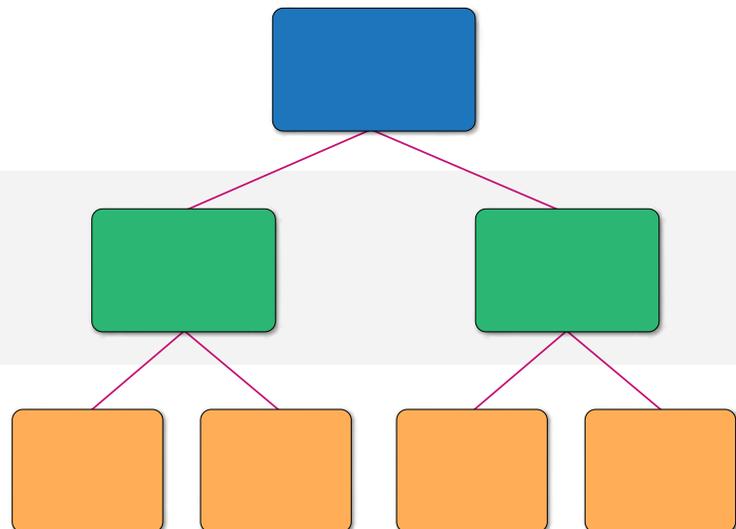
Start with a broader facet of your social identity at the top of the tier. You'll repeat the reflection for multiple identities.

## TIER 2 Life Impact

Consider the positions you may hold, values attached to the identities, or interpretations of events or interactions.

## TIER 3 Emotions

Dig deeper and identify emotions or feelings that may be tied to the details of your social identity.



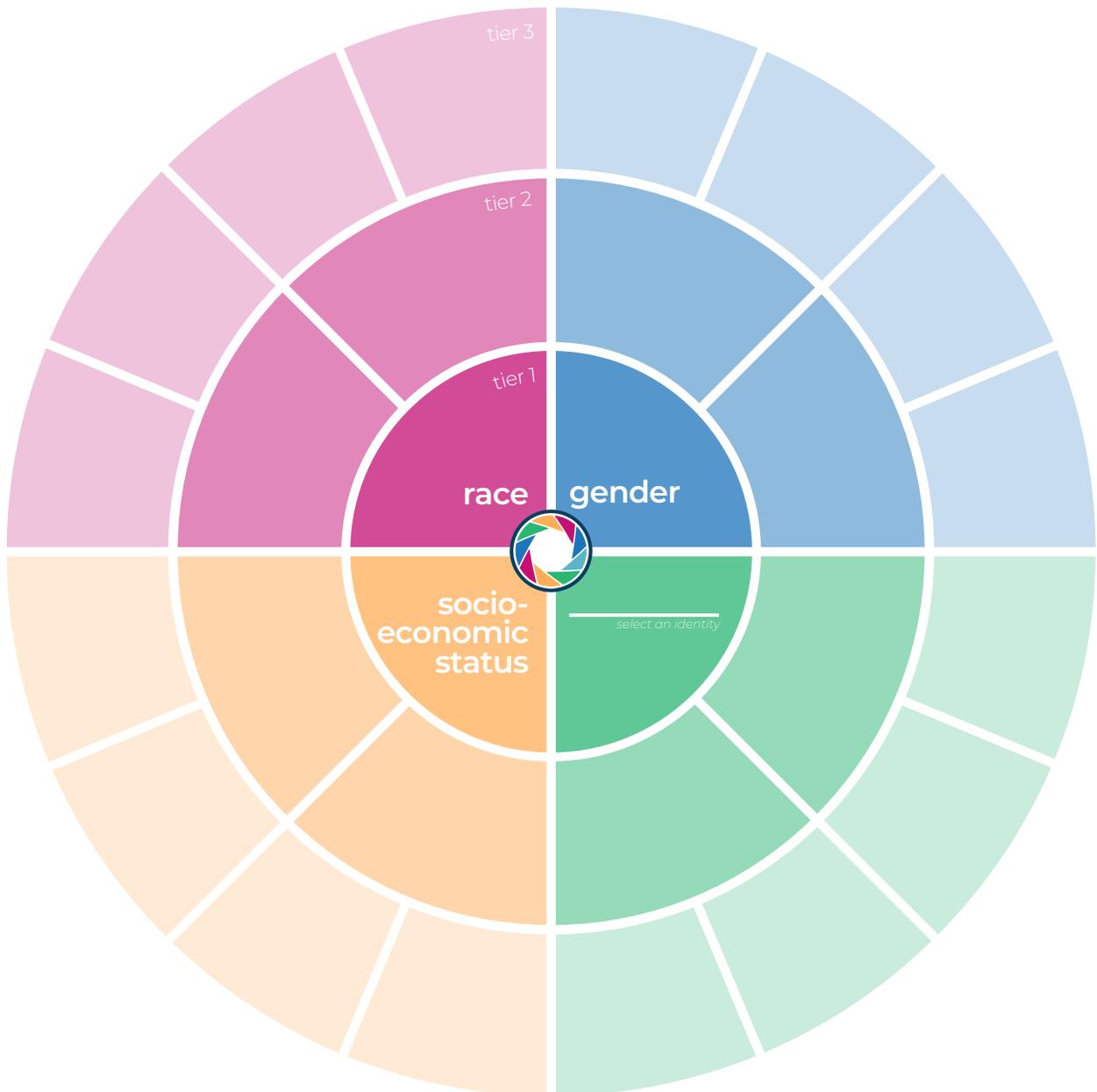
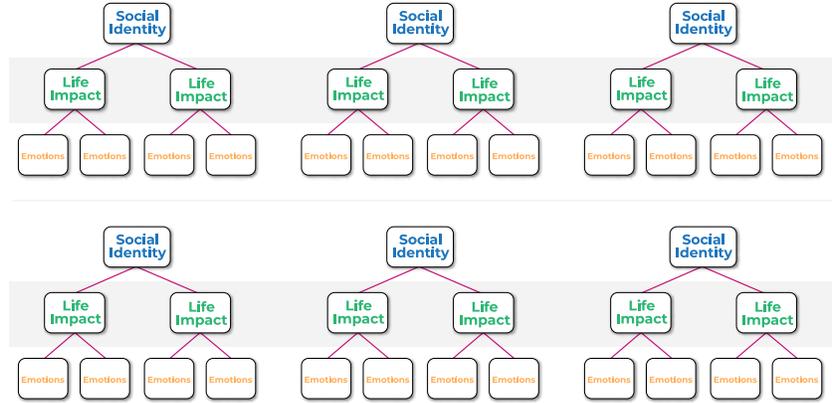
Starting with one of your social identities (Tier 1), such as race, gender, etc., you then consider the life impact of that identity (Tier 2).

1. What opportunities or positions does it enable?
2. What are the values attached to the identity?
3. How might you interpret events or interactions through the lens of the identity?

Next, for each life impact, you'll identify the resulting emotions or feelings (Tier 3). You may have more than two life impacts per social identity, and two emotions per life impact.

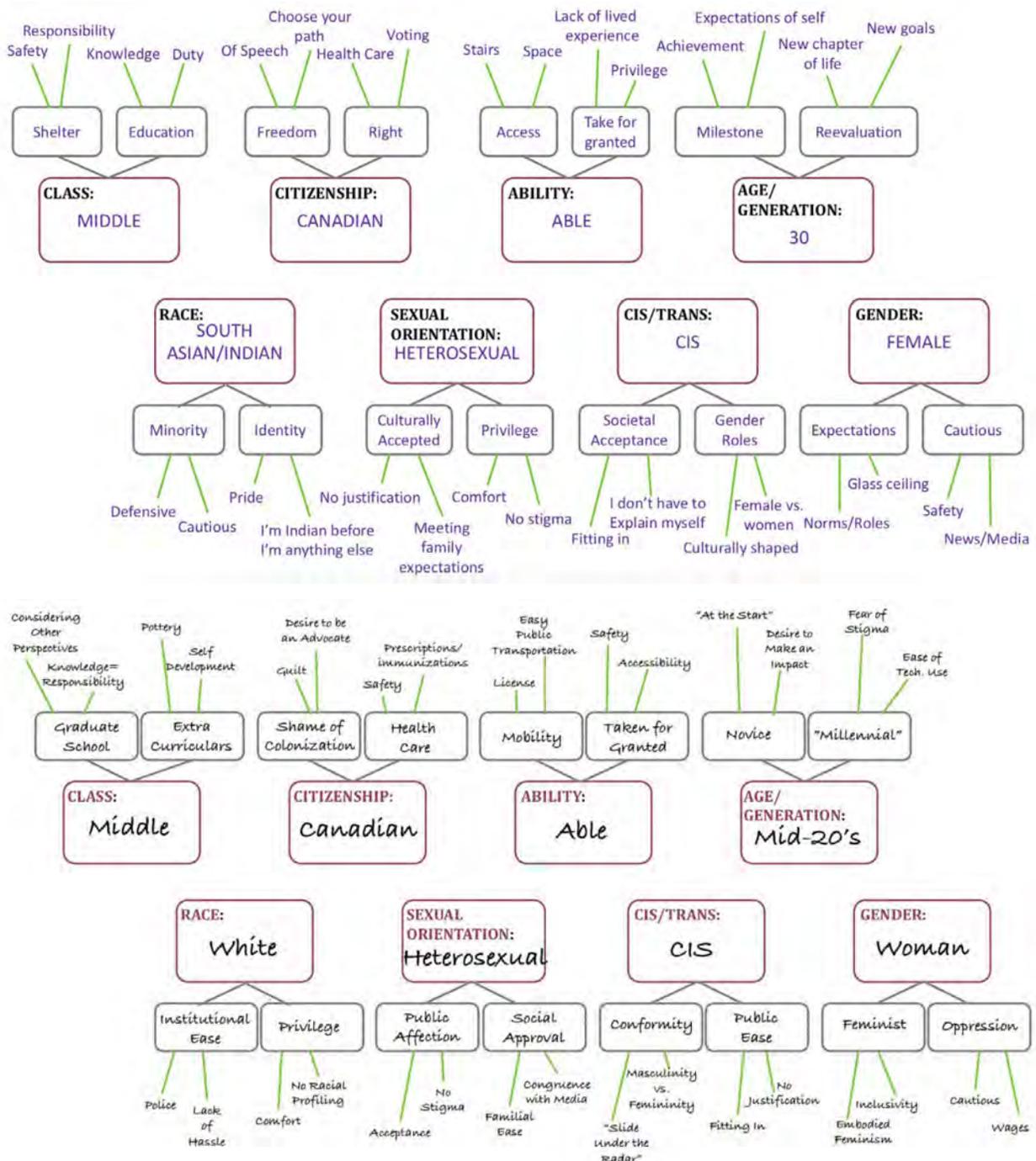
<sup>1</sup> Jacobson D, Mustafa N. Social Identity Map: A Reflexivity Tool for Practicing Explicit Positionality in Critical Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. January 2019.

A completed **Social Identity Map** consists of multiple, cascading tiers. You can map each out in various ways, including a tree diagram, wheel diagram, or in a simple table as provided on the following pages.



## Sample Completed Positionality Maps

The following two figures are Social Identity Maps created by the authors of the model.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Jacobson D, Mustafa N. Social Identity Map: A Reflexivity Tool for Practicing Explicit Positionality in Critical Qualitative Research. International Journal of Qualitative Methods. January 2019.

TIER 1 SOCIAL IDENTITY	TIER 2 LIFE IMPACT	TIER 3 EMOTIONS
Race		
Ethnicity		



TIER 1 SOCIAL IDENTITY	TIER 2 LIFE IMPACT	TIER 3 EMOTIONS
Gender		
Socioeconomic Status		

TIER 1 SOCIAL IDENTITY	TIER 2 LIFE IMPACT	TIER 3 EMOTIONS
Ability Status		
Age		

TIER 1 SOCIAL IDENTITY	TIER 2 LIFE IMPACT	TIER 3 EMOTIONS
Citizenship		
Sexuality		

TIER 1 SOCIAL IDENTITY	TIER 2 LIFE IMPACT	TIER 3 EMOTIONS
Religious Beliefs		
Marital Status		

TIER 1 SOCIAL IDENTITY	TIER 2 LIFE IMPACT	TIER 3 EMOTIONS
Education		
Political Ideology		



TIER 1 SOCIAL IDENTITY	TIER 2 LIFE IMPACT	TIER 3 EMOTIONS
Appearance		
Geographic Location		

TIER 1 SOCIAL IDENTITY	TIER 2 LIFE IMPACT	TIER 3 EMOTIONS
add your own		
add your own		



TIER 1 SOCIAL IDENTITY	TIER 2 LIFE IMPACT	TIER 3 EMOTIONS
add your own		
add your own		





# REFLECT ON YOUR LENS

## INSTRUCTIONS

After exploring your positionality, reflect on the following:

1. How does my social identity (including either privilege or oppression) affect how I see and understand the world (your lens)?
2. In what ways are my interactions, decisions, and interpretations affected?
3. How can I minimize how my biases affect my interactions, decisions, and interpretations?

Race

Ethnicity

Gender

Socioeconomic Status

Ability Status

Age



*continued*

**Citizenship**

**Sexuality**

**Religious Beliefs**

**Marital Status**

**Education**

**Political Ideology**



*continued*

## Appearance

## Geographic Location

add your own

add your own

add your own

add your own



# POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

## INSTRUCTIONS

Positionality affects research, teaching, leading, policymaking, as well as common interactions.

While it is a best practice for researchers to write a positionality statement, there is a growing need for each of us to prepare a statement that we can share with others or review and remind ourselves when needed.

# Further Reading

*If you'd like to learn more about positionality, the following peer-reviewed papers are a good place to start.*

Hampton, Cynthia & Reeping, David. (2019). Positionality: The Stories of Self that Impact Others. 10.18260/1-2--33177.

Holmes, Andrew. (2020). Researcher Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide. Shanlax International Journal of Education. 8. 1-10. 10.34293/education.v8i4.3232.

Jacobson D, Mustafa N. Social Identity Map: A Reflexivity Tool for Practicing Explicit Positionality in Critical Qualitative Research. International Journal of Qualitative Methods. January 2019.

Secules, S, McCall, C, Mejia, JA, et al. Positionality practices and dimensions of impact on equity research: A collaborative inquiry and call to the community. J Eng Educ. 2021; 110: 19– 43. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jee.20377>