“I’M UNLEARNING!”
APPLYING REFLEXIVITY TO HIGHER EDUCATION DISABILITY SERVICES AS A TOOL FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

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LEARNING GOALS

Understand the concepts of positionality, reflexivity, and intersectionality as they relate to higher education disability resources

Consider the implications of personal engagement with positionality as a disability resource professional
1. Introduce today’s speakers
2. Define foundational concepts (intersectionality, positionality & reflexivity)
3. Explore findings from recent research on positionality and disability resources
4. Engage with our own positionalities
5. Discuss the relevance of positionality to disability resources
6. Connect positionality to reflexivity as a tool for equitably working with students with intersectional identities
SPEAKER INTRODUCTIONS
FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS
Your ‘lens’ for everything (i.e., a personal framework)
- Composed of the multiple, interrelated components of ourselves (e.g., identities, experiences, beliefs)
- Impacts choices, interactions, biases, perceptions, judgments, truths, etc.
Positionality is fluid and everchanging

The prominent, most influential components of positionality at any given time can also be context-dependent

Thinking about positionality is complex and may be daunting – that’s okay!
INTERSECTIONALITY

- Framework for understanding the way in which a person’s identities intersect
- Used to describe someone’s experience with multiple identities
- Can include: race, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, ethnicity, etc.
- Acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences related to discrimination and/or oppression
MORE ON INTERSECTIONALITY
Reflexivity is the act of going inward and deeply thinking about your positionality.

- Holding up a mirror and examining the intricacies of how positionality acts as a lens.
- Making the implicit, explicit.
- Examining internal thoughts/reactions, and managing them while redirecting external actions.
- Learning about identities and experiences that we may not have known were influential/created a bias.
- Different from reflecting.
BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Positionality

Intersectionality

Reflexivity

Reflexivity

Reflexivity

Reflexivity

Reflexivity
HOW DO THESE APPLY TO DISABILITY RESOURCES?

FINDINGS FROM A RECENT RESEARCH STUDY
**Purpose:** To investigate disability resource professionals’ perceptions of positionality in relation to accommodation decision-making

**Method:** Quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (follow-up interviews) methods to understand accommodation decision-making processes and the relationship between positionality and working with students with disabilities
Positionality is influential to disability resource professionals (DRPs)

- Identities and experiences “guide how [DRPs] work with students”
- Positionality shapes “how [DRPs] make decisions or respond to certain situations”

The influence of positionality can be for better or worse

- Positionality is a “big reason” why DRPs “end up on that spectrum with accommodation decisions”
- Certain “assumptions” stemming from positionality can “create a bias towards individual students,” which may be “good or bad”
- Regardless, the influence of positionality can “have a veil of professionalism over it”
Positionality “impacts how any of us make decisions,” but DRPs are “just not always cognizant of it in a particular moment.”

“...it’s okay that [positionality] influences [accommodation] decisions, it just has to be done in a way that’s effective.”
“...the more self-awareness we have about our own identities and biases...the better service we provide.”
ENGAGING WITH OUR POSITIONALITIES

PRACTICING REFLEXIVITY
STEP ONE
LOOK INWARD TO IDENTIFY THE VARIOUS COMPONENTS OF OUR POSITIONALITY
EXAMPLE: MORGAN’S WHEEL
YOUR TURN!
POSITIONALITY ACTIVITY

Spend 10-15 minutes completing your own positionality wheel

Think about identities, experiences, beliefs, dispositions, and contexts that influence your day-to-day life

Use either this QR code, a paper version available at your table, think on your own, or talk with a partner

We will walk around the room to support, as needed
SHARE OUT
REACTIONS, THOUGHTS, OR EXAMPLE IDENTITIES/EXPERIENCES
RECOGNIZING HOW POSITIONALITY WORKS IN DAY-TO-DAY INTERACTIONS AS A DISABILITY RESOURCE PROFESSIONAL
Convergence in identities/experiences with students

- Helpful to “understand and relate” and “know what [students] are going through”
- Allow DRPs to “tap into” their own positionality to support accommodation decision-making
- Create a sense of “trust,” impacting reception of students’ self-report
- May lead DRPs to “over-encourage or over-accommodate,” or even “under-support” students
Divergence in identities/experiences with students

- When identities/experiences differ, DRPs may “just assume” certain experiences and have “difficulty relating” to students.
- DRPs are ”limited” in their ability to understand students' identity-based experiences.
- Divergences require DRPs to “constantly keep in check” their assumptions and biases about students’ identities.
SO WHAT?

STEP 3: REFLEXIVITY
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- When thinking about the items on your positionality wheel, which are most prominent to you right now? When you are relaxing at home? When you are in DRP mode?

- When facilitating the accommodations process, which identities/experiences rise to the top for you? Why? How do they influence your choices, reactions, and decisions?

- How does your positionality, overall, shape the way you understand disability? Other identities?
REFLEXIVE ACTIONS

- Pay attention to your ‘gut’ – what drives it when making accommodation decisions/working with students?
- When working with students, think about what you do/don’t know about their positionality, what you do/don’t have in common, and monitor how this impacts your reactions
- Unpack these ‘gut’ reactions and where they came from
- Think deeply about when you feel assumptions/judgements/biases as a DRP, if there is a pattern to it, and how you could minimize their impact in your actions
- Consistently spend time thinking about your positionality as it changes and evolves to stay in tune with its role in your work as a DRP (e.g., update your wheel or write it out)
**REFLEXIVE STRATEGIES FROM PARTICIPANTS**

- “Ask more questions” and listen deeply to students’ experiences rather than relying on your own assumptions

- “Accept that you are going to be imperfect” and take care in “recognizing your biases”

- When an internal response occurs (e.g., judgement, bias), “take a step back,” “process” that response, question it, and “check” your external response

- When in doubt, talk to someone else if you feel you are “too biased”

- Recognize if you need to "unlearn" some of “the things [you] grew up with or were taught”
“It's incredibly important to understand and have engaged in this self-reflection so that you can understand where you're coming from, what are your values, what are your biases, and take note in the very least, of them, as you support students with disabilities.”
QUESTIONS?
THANK YOU!

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Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don’t: Researcher’s position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 15*(2), 219-234.


http://engineerinclusion.com/what-is-positionality/