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## POSITIONALITY

Positionality is a critical understanding of the role a scholar's background and current (socially constructed and perceived) position in the world plays in the production of academic knowledge, particularly in qualitative research in the social sciences. Multiple epistemologies—ways of knowing or understanding the world—exist as researchers come from varied vantage points. Undermining positivist constructions of knowledge, the theoretical construct of positionality refutes dominant notions of objectivity in the academy. Instead, it highlights that the way an academician is situated in space and time fosters a specific understanding of social reality. Positionality provides a space to critically interrogate the researcher's motivations, assumptions, and decisions at each and every stage of the research process. It explores how, and under what circumstances, a scholar has chosen the topic under investigation as well as the ways the research design was created.

In light of the complicated and hierarchal relationship between the researcher and the “object” of study, the scholar has a powerful and privileged role in creating knowledge about communities. Shaped by political motivations, whether implicitly or explicitly acknowledged, a researcher navigates a complex social and political landscape while researching and writing. Historically, the academic literature on disenfranchised communities has produced damaging or colonizing knowledges that have pathologized aggrieved communities, such as racialized, gendered, and sexualized minorities (Tuck, 2009; Smith, 1999; Kelley, 1997). In response to this “damaging” literature, scholars in ethnic studies, feminist studies, queer studies, and other fields draw on positionality to discuss the political dimensions of academic projects. As feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) states, “There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship” (p. 62). Knowledge is not totalizing but a series of particular knowledges offering a multiplicity of understandings, or situated knowledges, contributing to rich and nuanced understandings of social phenomena (Haraway, 1988).

The concept of positionality also adds a nuanced meaning and fuller understanding to “insider researcher” and “outsider researcher” that is commonly used in the social sciences, especially when conducting ethnographic research. An insider (partially) belongs to the community under study, and an outsider does not. For example, an insider may be privy to glean the cultural nuances of the community practices, gestures, and expressions that an outsider may simply

gloss over. However, an insider's positioning within a community is complex as he/she is immersed in an intricate social web of relations while in the "field." A community is a collective social construction that brings people together around central interests, identification, or categorization. Failing to (fully) capture the rich heterogeneity of people's backgrounds, a community also has exclusionary features by unevenly marginalizing—or outright excluding—individuals who do not fit the criteria for belonging. Thus, multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing factors complicate the nature of an insider researcher. Interlocking socially constructed categories—including race, class, gender, and sexuality—all work together to disrupt the narrow designation of insider researcher. Moreover, the dynamic nature of community can reposition a researcher from insider to outsider or vice versa. As gender studies scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha (1997) has explained,

The moment an insider steps out from the inside then she is no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. (p. 418)

Identities and communities are fluid constructions, changing over time and across space, inevitably impacting the degree and duration of the insider researcher status.

The construct of positionality pushes both producers *and* consumers of academic knowledge to be vigilant of the process of knowledge creation, especially about underprivileged communities. Critical reflection, for example, can disclose a researcher's relationship to the community under study and problematize any assumptions made while researching and writing. Still, reflections may not be sufficient for one to fully understand the privileged role of the researcher in producing and circulating knowledge. Critical reflection helps identify the (hyper)visibility of specific problems posed in the research as well as examine the way they are framed. This, in part, depends on the types of questions being posed (or not), the nature and scope of the study, and what is taken as given categories or as "facts," and the depth of the contextualization and specificity of the experiences being investigated. The idea of positionality challenges authors and readers to examine why specific issues, perspectives, and experiences are examined or rendered invisible. For these reasons, ethnic studies, feminist, and queer scholars would argue that the critical understanding of positionality functions as a political call to action to decenter pathological or damaging research that fails to provide a deep understanding of the multiple oppressions aggrieved communities encounter in the everyday. This is a significant perspective for academics, educators, students, policymakers, community members, and others to keep in mind when creating and reading academic knowledge.

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## PREMENSTRUAL WOMEN

Premenstrual women are often portrayed in popular culture as dangerous, menstrual monsters, crippled by their “raging hormones.” Cultural products, such as cartoons (a man thinks he is safer in the ocean surrounded by sharks than on a small desert island with a premenstrual woman), bumper stickers (“A woman with PMS and ESP is a bitch who knows everything”), buttons (“I’m premenstrual and I have a gun—Be very scared”), and greeting cards (PMS victims should not be allowed to carve pumpkins at Halloween) depict premenstrual women as moody, easily enraged, violent, and out-of-control. Some depictions warn that women should not be allowed near weapons, as they are likely to turn violent at any moment (Chrisler, Rose, Dutch, Sklarsky, & Grant, 2006). Rarely is the menstrual cycle mentioned in the media or other forms of popular culture in any positive way or as a normal biological event to which women adjust well and learn to control. Women who are premenstrual are depicted particularly badly, as “hormone hostages,” as if they should be expected to change at this point in the menstrual cycle from their “normal,” calm, feminine selves to “crazy” people or monsters such as Dr. Jekyll’s “Ms. Hyde” (Chrisler, 2002; Chrisler & Caplan, 2002). How did these ideas originate?

Robert Frank, an American gynecologist, first introduced the diagnostic category of “premenstrual tension” (PMT) in the 1930s. He wrote that some women become anxious and tense in the days before menstruation begins and tend to engage in “foolish and ill-considered actions” (Frank, 1931, p. 1054). Feminist scholars (such as Martin, 1988) have pointed out that Franks introduced PMT during the Great Depression, and it might have been a convenient way to suggest that women do not belong in the workforce. The jobs that were available during that time of significant unemployment were best given to men. A few decades later, after the end of World War II, a time when many women were in the workforce but governments wanted to encourage them to leave their jobs for military men returning from wartime duties, British endocrinologists Raymond Greene and Katharina Dalton (1953) introduced the term *premenstrual syndrome* (PMS). PMS is a much broader term than PMT; it includes a myriad of physiological (e.g., bloating, acne), psychological (e.g., sadness, irritability), and behavioral