

# Social Identity Map: A Reflexivity Tool for Practicing Explicit Positionality in Critical Qualitative Research

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## Abstract

The way that we as researchers view and interpret our social worlds is impacted by where, when, and how we are socially located and in what society. The position from which we see the world around us impacts our research interests, how we approach the research and participants, the questions we ask, and how we interpret the data. In this article, we argue that it is not a straightforward or easy task to conceptualize and practice positionality. We have developed a Social Identity Map that researchers can use to explicitly identify and reflect on their social identity to address the difficulty that many novice critical qualitative researchers experience when trying to conceptualize their social identities and positionality. The Social Identity Map is not meant to be used as a rigid tool but rather as a flexible starting point to guide researchers to reflect and be reflexive about their social location. The map involves three tiers: the identification of social identities (Tier 1), how these positions impact our life (Tier 2), and details that may be tied to the particularities of our social identity (Tier 3). With the use of this map as a guide, we aim for researchers to be able to better identify and understand their social locations and how they may pose challenges and aspects of ease within the qualitative research process. Being explicit about our social identities allows us (as researchers) to produce reflexive research and give our readers the tools to recognize how we produced the data. Being reflexive about our social identities, particularly in comparison to the social position of our participants, helps us better understand the power relations imbued in our research, further providing an opportunity to be reflexive about how to address this in a responsible and respectful way.

## Keywords

positionality, standpoint, social identity, qualitative methodology, qualitative research tool, reflexive, reflexivity

## Introduction

In qualitative health research, the goal is to understand how people interpret and find meaning in their everyday lives and identify social and political forces which shape lived experiences and health. In critical qualitative health research, the goal expands as critical researchers “question the conceptual and theoretical bases of knowledge and method . . . ask questions that go beyond prevailing assumptions and understandings, and . . . acknowledge the role of power and social position in health-related phenomena” (Centre for Critical Qualitative Health Research, 2018, p. 1). Critical qualitative health research, and those who align themselves with this epistemological foundation, not only explore health phenomena through qualitative methods but also engage in an exploration of self-critique, which is “a critical posture vis-à-vis qualitative inquiry itself” (Centre for Critical Qualitative Health Research, 2018). Foundational to this is developing self-reflexive

analysis of how, why, and in what ways research is conducted and an understanding of the role of power, privilege, and visibility in the research process.

When learning about critical qualitative health research, one of the basic elements of reflexivity that is taught is positionality (Day, 2012; Gastaldo, 2015; Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2007). Some of the many facets that make up our social identities include but are not limited to class, citizenship, ability, age, race, sexual orientation, cis/trans status, and gender (Collins,

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2015; Dhamoon & Hankivsky, 2011). These factors—whether one is young, old, a woman, a man, nonbinary, cisgender, trans, a Canadian, an Emirati, White, Black, lower middle class, wealthy, able, with a disability, heterosexual, homosexual, pansexual, and so on—affect the way that we see and interpret the world around us, and how the world sees and interprets us (Day, 2012). It is already known that the researcher is one of the main instruments for generating and analyzing data (Leibing & McLean, 2007; McLean, 2007). Thus, it is important to highlight researchers' motivations for conducting research and how one's background and experiences impact this motivation.

It is known that the way that researchers perceive the social world is largely dependent on their position within it, which further impacts the way that the research is approached, interacted with, and interpreted (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Smith, 2005). Understanding our position, particularly in comparison to the social position of our participants, helps us to better understand the power relations imbued in our research and provides an opportunity to be reflexive about how to address this (Day, 2012). Not only that, being explicit about our positions in our work allows those who read our work to better grasp how we produced the data (Finlay, 2002). No matter the research tradition, it is beneficial to reflect on positionality and how one's social identity impacts the research (Einstein, 2012). Therefore, we view positionality as a research tool. Dr. Joan Eakin, in a personal communication, aptly described an important function of positionality—knowing what we are bringing to the research critically helps us see our data in productive, insightful ways and immeasurably furthers our capacity to do creative analysis and theorization.

Despite what is already known about positionality, there is a current gap in the literature for addressing how to help novice critical qualitative researchers practice positionality. This article adds to the current literature on positionality since we not only argue that practicing positionality is a complex task, but we also propose the use of a novel tool we have developed to help researchers *begin* to map their social identities and be reflexive about their positionality. The Social Identity Map enables researchers to visually see how their positions impact the research process, while having the potential to reduce bias and promote a better understanding of health phenomena through participants' lived experiences. We hope that this map will help researchers take abstract ideas about their positionality and understand them in more tangible ways.

### *Addressing the Complexities of Positionality*

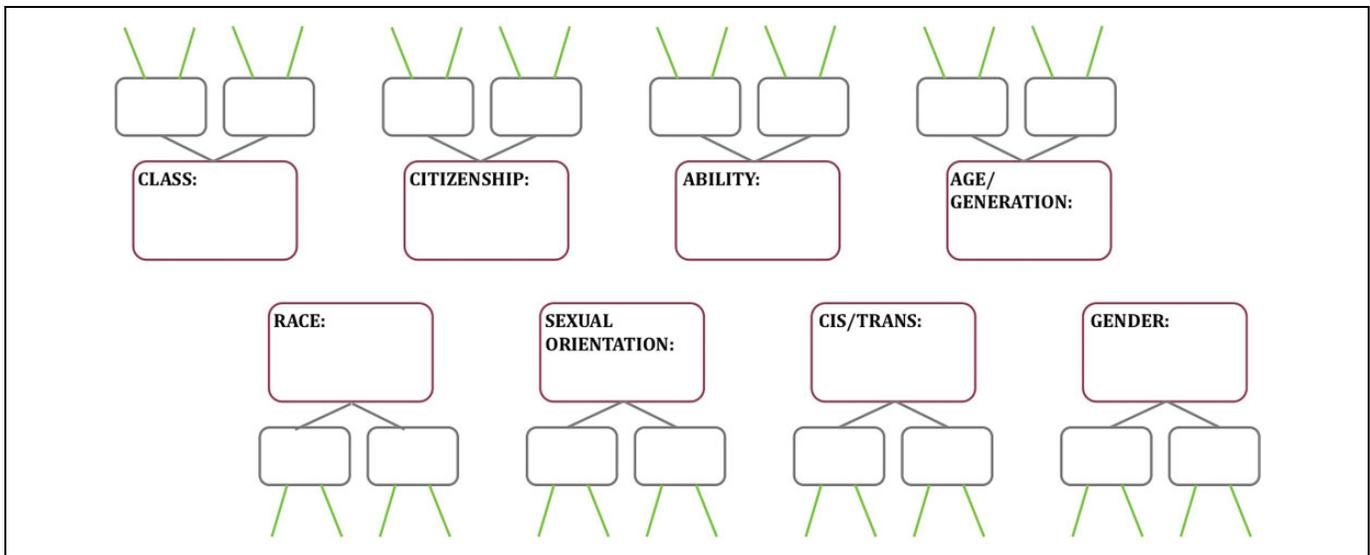
There are many layers of complexity involved in positionality (Day, 2012), especially since our identities develop and change over time (Naples, 2003). We argue that continuously developing a better understanding of our positionality and how it may impact our work is no simple or straightforward task. It is complex and can be daunting for novice critical qualitative health researchers to parse out which elements of positionality are most important. The complexity deepens with countless factors that contribute to this and countless approaches

(theoretical and methodological traditions) that can be used to enter into research. Although we do not propose the answers to these complexities, we do however trouble the current status quo of practicing positionality. Some layers of complexity that we address in this article include: (1) the fluidity of our ever-changing social identities; (2) the abstract, intangible nature of our social identities; (3) the difficulty of knowing which facets of our social identity are more influential over time and place; and (4) how our social identities impact the research process.

Even when named, the countless facets that contribute to our social identity are always in motion; or, in other words, are fluid (Day, 2012), “shifting over time and place” (Naples, 2003, p. 198). For example, age shifts according to *when* we are in the world. A young individual may have less experience and feel self-conscious due to this position, whereas an older individual may be more experienced but could feel the stigma of aging. It is important to turn the debate inward toward ourselves on the differing perspectives within any one facet of social identity and how it may impact how someone approaches their research. We must reflect on how our own unique perspectives which are made up by, but not limited to, each facet of our social identity, impact how we approach, conduct, and interpret our research. Although scrupulous and at times abstract, the complexity of naming and understanding our social identities which develop over time (Naples, 2003) is an important part of being reflexive about our positionality.

Part of what can cause confusion in the abstraction of social identity for novice researchers is that often social structures in which identities play out are perceived as relatively fixed (Burke, 1980), and the aspects that contribute to social identities themselves are sometimes static (Yilmaz, Unal, Gencer, Aydemir, & Selcuk, 2015). Author DJ reflects on her public school education as a child, being taught that identity is rigid—you are a boy or a girl, you may be attracted to either boys or girls, you were born with XX sex chromosomes so you are a girl, you are born in Canada and therefore you are Canadian. As children in the public school sector of the Greater Toronto Area, we (authors DJ and NM) were not taught explicitly that our identities can and will change (other than our age). Differently, when we learned about positionality in higher education, we began to realize that often there is a fluid nature to our identities and the social spaces we traverse. Therefore, it is no wonder that the instinct of many students learning about positionality is to resist or struggle with the notion of potentially complex, fluid social identities.

It is difficult to know which facets of our social identity are more influential than others during specific times and in specific places. For example, we (authors DJ and NM) notice that currently there is a specific emphasis on the importance of sexual identity, gender identity, and racial or cultural identity. Right now, these facets of social identity may be given more sociopolitical salience than other facets. Further, understanding the effects that each of these facets has on the way that we as researchers approach, interact with, and interpret the research is all the more perplexing. These instances are not linear but rather intertwined with one another. Knowing when and where



**Figure 1.** Blank positionality map.

which facets of our social identities are more influential is key to understanding how they contribute to our positionality and impact our work—and vice versa. It is important for novice critical qualitative researchers to bear in mind that the facets of social identity, which are most salient at the time and place they are being reflected upon, are largely impacted by the social and political climate that the researcher is located in.

We believe that the current practice of conceptualizing and understanding positionality has to date only been conceptual because positionality is intangible—we cannot see our social identities like we can see our computers in front of us. However, we argue that the current practice of positionality, although suitable for critical qualitative research experts, lacks a tangibility that could help novice critical qualitative researchers begin to work through their social identities and better understand their positionality and its relation to their research.

## Mapping Our Social Identity

Author DJ first drafted the Social Identity Map to conduct a doctoral-level facilitation for a qualitative health research class taught by Dr. Denise Gastaldo at the University of Toronto. DJ was struggling to clearly understand and express how the facets of her social identity impacted her on multiple levels. DJ's experience learning about institutional ethnography inspired her to draft a personalized map of social identity. DJ was influenced by the way that creating a map of social relations helps researchers understand the social organization and coordination within an institution (Campbell & Gregor, 2002; DeVault & McCoy, 2006). Thus, she developed a map of social identity to *begin* to understand and visualize her positionality in more explicit ways.

The aim of the facilitation was to reflect on the interconnections between facets of our social identity. It covered how social identity informs the way we view and interact with our

environment, how identity cannot be isolated from research practice (Day, 2012), and how researchers are often outsiders to participants, without firsthand understanding of the unique social experiences or potential oppression they may face (Collins, 1998; Watts, 2006).

This facilitation was then converted into a workshop and presented at the Critical Pedagogies Symposium at York University in October 2018 by DJ and NM. It was adapted to suit a broader range of critical qualitative health researchers from a critical pedagogical lens. The workshop focused on identifying participants' social identities and how they may pose challenges and aspects of ease within the critical qualitative research process. We (authors DJ and NM) aimed to help workshop members to practice being explicit about their positionality in their work as well as identify age old and new challenges facing researchers today. Our critical pedagogical approach included collective discussion of these challenges and brainstorming approaches to navigate them. Reflections from the facilitation and workshop will be examined in the Discussion section of this article to expand on the complexity of practicing positionality.

## How to Use the Map

Mapping our social identity is by no means the end to understanding our positionality but instead is a starting point and a tool to help researchers be explicitly reflexive about their positionality. Because this map is a starting point, we encourage the learner (the individual using the map to reflect on their social identity) to begin their mapping by identifying their class, citizenship, ability, age, race, sexual orientation, cis/trans status, and gender (see Figure 1). Those using this map are encouraged to add to it by creating additional groupings (Tier 1; see Figure 1) that they identify as important contributors to their unique social identity as well as removing any they feel do not

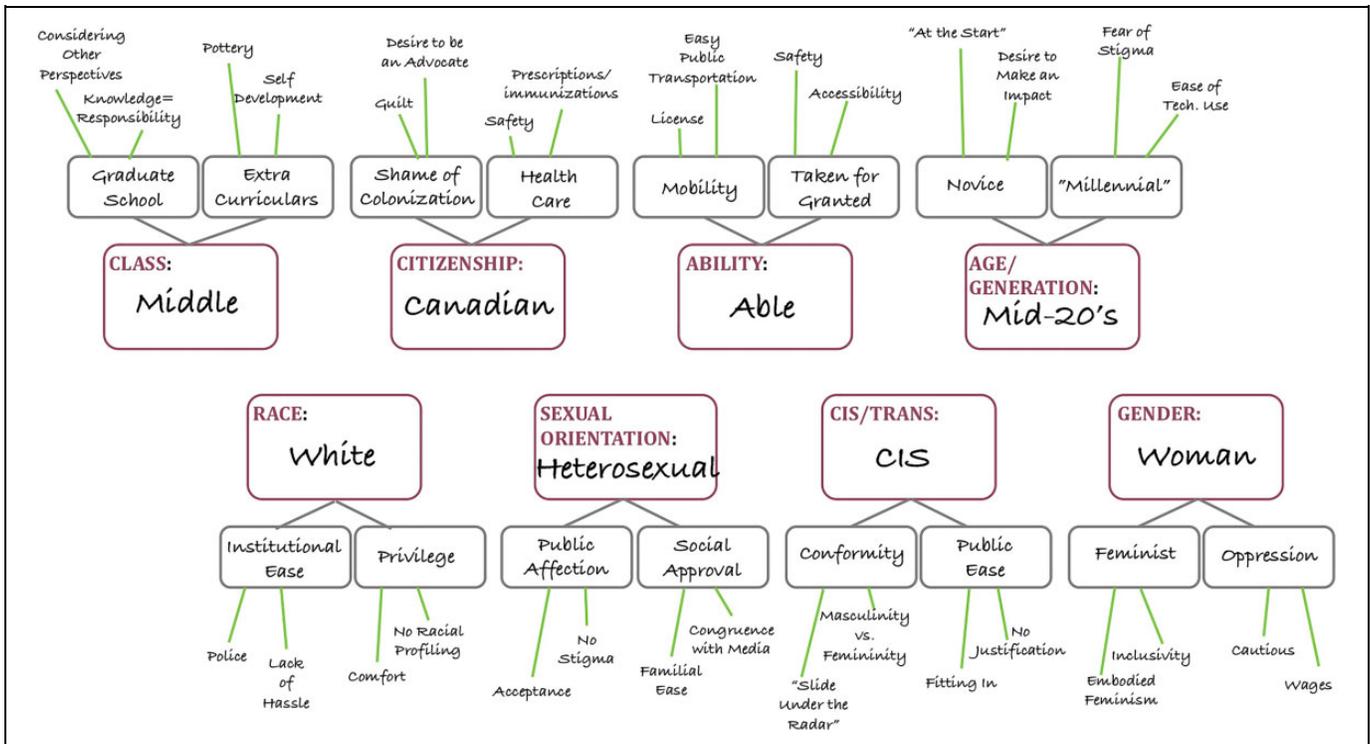


Figure 2. Completed positionality map (DJ).

apply. Some may benefit from adding more Tier 1 groupings to the map including immigration status, religion, relationship status, employment status, political affiliation, or commitment to social change. We encourage learners using this map to not take it as concrete but instead make it their own to develop over time and place. The important part is reflecting on our social identities, being able to look at our Social Identity Map and ask ourselves: How do these facets of my identity (in combination with other facets) impact the way I approach, interact with, and interpret my research? How do these facets impact the way I understand and interact with my participants?

There are three tiers on the map of social identity (see Figure 1). The first tier asks learners to identify the broader facets of social identity such as class, citizenship, ability, age, race, sexual orientation, cis/trans status, and gender. This tier may be challenging, especially for novice critical qualitative researchers reflecting on their social identity for what could be the first time. It may be difficult to identify and put into words how we identify ourselves as well as to make aware which category/categories we feel best describe our being in the world. When we (authors DJ and NM) were working through our own social identity maps, we experienced some tensions, which will be elaborated on in the Discussion section of this article.

The second tier asks learners to go beyond these groupings by identifying how these positions impact their lives. Recognizing how our social identities impact our lives is a first step in developing our recognition of, and reflection on, how our social identities impact our research. This may include positions that one may hold within each facet of social identity, values

intrinsically attached to these identities, or even interpretations of events or interactions because of the learner's social position. For example, as women, we (authors DJ and NM) highlighted on our maps that we experience oppression because of this identification (see Figures 2 and 3). This is because when we think about being women, we often think about the historical fight for equal rights including social relationships that are gender equal (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2011) and the current need for equity (Olesen, 2005). Although this is a simplistic explanation of why we have placed the word "oppression" in the second tier of our social identity maps, it highlights for us a large and meaningful part of what it means to be a woman. We see the world through the eyes of individuals who are, and have been treated by those around us, like women.

The third tier asks learners to reflect further and go into even more detail to identify emotions that may be tied to the details of their social identity. This may include details that the individual senses or feels because of their social identity or position. For example, we (authors DJ and NM) reflect that we approach the world in a more cautious way because of the oppression that we experience as women (see Figures 2 and 3). When completing our social identity maps, we discussed that growing up, we were both warned not to be alone, mostly at nighttime, to avoid being raped. Because of this, when walking home or to the bus station from campus after dark, we often find ourselves walking very briskly with one of our keys lodged between our fingers, since we have been trained to be careful as women; that it is our responsibility to avoid assault when walking alone at night. This significantly informs how we approach

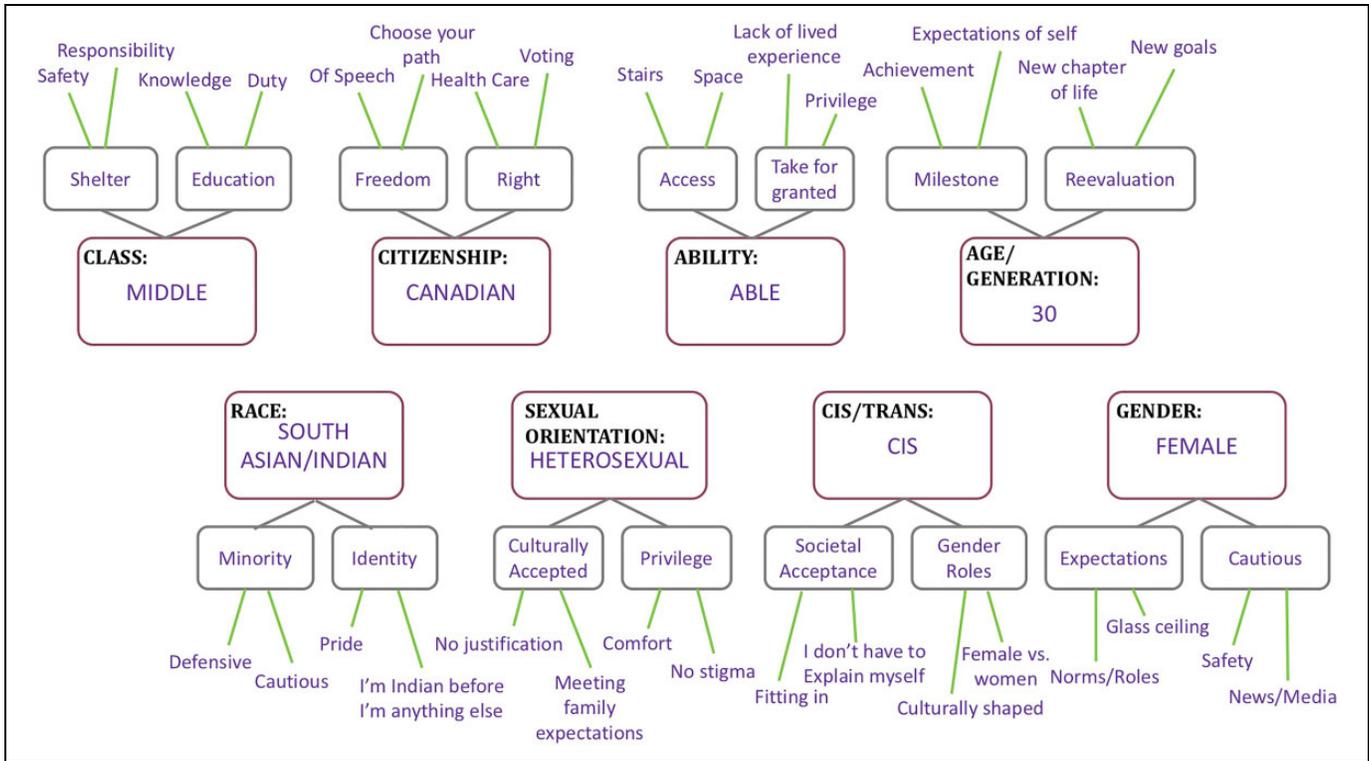


Figure 3. Completed positionality map (NM).

the world—as cautious women. Identifying how we approach the world as cautious women not only allows us to reflect on how we are perceived and how others interact with us, but more importantly, how this facet impacts how we position ourselves, approach and interact with our research, and interpret our data.

The third tier also goes a step further, allowing us to critically think about how being a woman impacts how we interact with study participants. For example, if we are conducting research with a vulnerable group of women, our own personal experiences of being a woman may be advantageous in understanding the lived experiences of our participants. Perhaps after using the map to self-reflect, we may realize that we are more aware and conscience of the challenges and difficulties our participants may endure in their daily lives because we have, or have had, similar experiences. On the other hand, perhaps we may come to be aware that although we share experiences as women, participants who have other vulnerable aspects of their social identity which we do not share may create a feeling of separation and warrant gentle and respectful prompts to understand their experiences.

The tiers may be interpreted in varying ways according to the unique individual working with the social identity map. For NM, the third tier allowed for a more in-depth understanding of identities, especially in terms of realizing which parts of her identity are most prevalent in the process of self-understanding (see Figure 3). For example, NM noted in the Tier 1 category for race that she is South Asian/Indian. In the second tier, she noted that this was the first part of her identity that came to mind when asked about who she is. The third tier allowed NM

to delve deeper and question the importance of race in her life. The self-realization that occurred on the third tier revealed to her that *she is Indian before she is anything else*. NM realized that her past encounters and experiences have made this part of her identity extremely prominent, as it takes precedence over other categories on her map.

For NM, race was one facet that seemed to have more influence or weight on the way that she positioned herself in her research due to the particular time and place she was reflecting on her social identity. Grappling with the conceptualization of race was fueled by the sociopolitical climate of being an Indian woman in Canada along with the lived experience of this social identity. Because NM’s research focuses on women who are also of Indian background in Canada, this mapping activity, as well as the realization of the importance of race in her life, allowed her to reflect on how her participants may understand, identify, and experience this facet of their identity as well. This allowed for further reflection from NM on how her participants’ understanding of race shapes their experiences as minority, immigrant women in Canada.

NM feels that this reflection is advantageous in better understanding the lived experiences of women in her study. The mapping activity for NM fostered self-reflection, which has the power to reduce particular biases and assumptions toward her participants (Galdas, 2017). Having lived through the immigrant process and dealing with challenges that minority women encounter herself enabled an understanding and deep discussion with participants about this particular history. Perhaps a researcher without the lived experience of immigration, on the

other hand, may have approached the topic and participants in the study differently and may have had different assumptions about what it means to be an immigrant woman.

For researchers who have spent some time reflecting on their social identities, another way of completing the third tier of the map is to consider how the particular facets of social identity may impact what topics are of interest to them for exploration, how they approach their research, how they interact with participants, how they interpret data, and how they disseminate knowledge. For example, NM is now aware that the way she interacts, speaks, and behaves around her participants is heavily guided by their common racial identity. We expand on the benefits of the Social Identity Map for researchers specifically below.

The Social Identity Map is meant to be a fluid and flexible starting point. Although the Social Identity Map has boxes to fill in for visual clarity, we encourage the learner using this map to think outside of these boxes and to not feel limited by them. Some may feel they would like to stick to the map as it is, while others may feel they would like to add new boxes to Tier 1 or 2, new lines of thought to Tier 3, a new tier altogether, or even show interconnectedness among the tiers. The map is meant to become each researcher's unique tool. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to be creative with it, to reflect on it, and be reflexive about their own social identity. Deviating from the confines of the map according to each individual is encouraged. After mapping their social identity, it is important for learners to ask themselves: How do these facets of my social identity (also in combination with other facets) impact the way I approach my data, interact with participants, and interpret and disseminate my research?

## How to Use the Map in a Research Context

It is important for researchers to use the Social Identity Map to reflect on their positionality and apply these reflections directly to the research context. Approach to the research, data collection, and interpretation are each distinct parts of the research process, but these aspects become connected and intertwined when it comes to thinking about how the researcher's positionality impacts their work. For example, the way a question is asked, based on the researcher's social location, previous experiences, and history, may bear on how participants are interacted with, which may impact what data are generated.

To better describe how this map can be practically used during the research process, we will discuss its use during design and preparation, data collection and analysis, and findings and interpretation. We discuss this process with some linearity for the purpose of clarity for the novice researcher, but we acknowledge that in everyday research practice, reflecting on positionality in action may not be as linear or clean cut.

### *Approach to Research (Design and Preparation)*

Even though it is recommended that reflection and reflexivity begin when the research is envisaged (Finlay, 2002), we add

that researchers must reflect on instances that occurred even before the research is envisaged, so that they can better understand and be aware of their own motivations and intentions. For example, DJ conceptualized her research on how women with female genital cutting interact with reproductive health care in Toronto in the first year of her PhD program. DJ completed the Social Identity Map through the lens of her research project to reflect on and be explicit about her motivations and approach to the research. DJ reflected that her problematic experiences helping her mother traverse Toronto's health care from 2011 to 2016 motivated her to study and work toward improving women's health-care experiences in Toronto. This consideration came from mapping her class and gender and reflecting on experiences pertaining to these aspects of her social identity. The Social Identity Map thus enables researchers to go beyond the literature and into their real-life experiences to better understand how their social identity impacts their research design and preparation.

### *Methods and Data Collection*

In qualitative research, often researchers can only anticipate where their study may go, rather than prescribing a plan, like in most forms of quantitative research (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). The iterative nature of qualitative work makes it extremely important to continue to use and develop tools like the Social Identity Map to reflect on positionality and its impact on research design and preparation. The use of the Social Identity Map is especially salient since the outcome of qualitative research is considered to be created by researchers, participants, and their relationship (Finlay, 2002). Reflecting on positionality using the Social Identity Map includes a reflection on how facets of one's social identity may (or may not) influence research interests, which questions are asked, and which methodologies are chosen.

Drawing on NM's doctoral research on the lived experience of chronic pain among immigrant Indian women in Canada, study design and methods were chosen based on the literature in this area and also through a process of self-reflection on behalf of the researcher using the Social Identity Map. Initially, a body mapping exercise was chosen for the study, however, after reflecting on both her and her participants' social identity, NM decided against this method. NM, being a woman of Indian background herself and being raised with reservation and shyness around her own physical body, realized that this activity would not be comfortable for middle-aged immigrant women from India due to cultural norms, beliefs, and religious values. Instead, NM chose a photovoice method to better suit the overlapping culture of herself and participants, which captured lived experience without drawing explicit attention to participants' physical bodies. The Social Identity Map's tier of race/religion/cultural background facilitated this deep thinking in order to arrive at the best data collection method for this particular group of women.

### *Interaction With Participants*

The use of the Social Identity Map can be relational at all research stages since it can be used to reflect both on one's own and participants' positionality. It can be used to anticipate dynamics between the researcher and participant with the goal of using it to explicitly reflect on how to be most sensitive and respectful to the participants being interviewed. Being aware of positionality through the use of the Social Identity Map can bring latent power dynamics to the forefront, which provides the opportunity to begin to acknowledge and mitigate these.

During data collection, the Social Identity Map can be used to reflect on how the differing and/or overlapping aspects of each party's respective positionality impacts the research interaction. For example, having aspects of one's social identity that overlap with participants' may be beneficial, especially during interviews. A study conducted with age- and gender-matched researchers and participants found that these commonalities made both groups feel more comfortable, leading to a more concrete discussion during interviews (Manderson, Bennett, & Andajani-Sutjahjo, 2006). The same study matched women interviewing women, men interviewing men, and women interviewing men. It was found that women interviewing women was characterized with interactional feedback and extended responses, men interviewing men was characterized with minimization of pain/emotions and an emphasis on agency, and women interviewing men was characterized with men avoiding the discussion of emotion and women encouraging men to open up (Manderson et al., 2006).

When reflecting on relative social identity using gender as an example, we see that there is complexity. The conclusion is not as simple as saying it is better for women to interview women and men to interview men. There are both advantages and disadvantages depending on the embodiment of gender stereotypes, societal expectations surrounding gender, and the topic of research itself. The Social Identity Map is beneficial here as it creates an explicit and intentional space for researchers to reflect on the positionality of themselves and participants. The map also enables researchers to think about the overlapping and/or different social identities of both themselves and participants, which potentially create power dynamics in the relationship. It is important to acknowledge that although previous research has discussed different combinations of men and women interviewing each other, there is not explicit work on interviewers or interviewees being gender nonconforming individuals. This is another area that can be reflected on using the Social Identity Map which does not limit gender identity to only female and male.

It has also been described that race, sexuality, and religion of women interviewing women adds further complexity to the interview interaction (Warren, 2011). Although both interviewer and interviewee may be women, each has their own unique social identities which may present differences that are important to consider when reflecting on how the positionality of the researcher and participant shape the generation of data and results. For example, if both interviewer and participant are

women, but one is a White woman and one is a Black woman, power dynamics based on race enter into the interaction and may impact the data generated; differently than if both interviewer and participant were Black women. The openness of the discussion and comfort level of both women may be impacted by this power dynamic. The Social Identity Map, therefore, allows for an explicit awareness of and reflection on these social and power dynamics and enables reflexivity, especially in relation to participants.

### *Data Analysis and Interpretation of Findings*

It is also important to consider social identity (of both the researcher and participant) when discussing and interpreting findings. A study which investigates race and class bias within qualitative research highlights the need to give adequate reflection to race and class when interviewing women. Without this, conclusions drawn may not accurately reflect the data and thus may bias the production of the research (Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988). The use of the Social Identity Map in research can help researchers to curtail assumptions that they may have when analyzing and interpreting data by being explicit about their social location, how they relate to participants, and how it may have implicated the data.

Drawing on NM's research experiences with minority immigrant women, we see that reflecting on race, culture, and immigration are intrinsically linked to the interpretation of study findings. When filling out the Social Identity Map, NM reflected on race as a dominant identity in her life and reflected on the challenges her and her family endured arriving to a new country as immigrants. This reflexive exercise was valuable to NM's research, since the women in her study shared similar immigration stories and difficulties adjusting to a new country because of their racial and immigrant status. These experiences became the forefront of the discussion when conducting interviews. Although NM's research is grounded in participants' lived experiences, her own history and story shaped the interviews, analysis, and interpretation of findings in regard to larger issues of immigration, acculturation, and settlement. The Social Identity Map allowed NM to be explicit about these issues and bringing them into the discussion helped to ensure that conclusions drawn from the research accurately reflected the data.

Although the aforementioned research is not framed from a positionality lens, it takes advantage of being reflexive about researchers' and participants' overlapping social identities in order to promote a richer qualitative interview and interpretation of data. Being explicit about relational social identities by using the Social Identity Map helps researchers to better understand the social dynamics that lead to their generated data and how they interpret it. The above examples delve into gender and race and how reflecting on these aspects of our social identities helps us to better understand how our data is produced and interpreted. This process of reflection can (and should) be done with other key aspects of social identity relevant to each researcher's particular

work using the Social Identity Map. By using the Social Identity Map, researchers can reflect on how any single social location (which is often intertwined/interconnected with other social locations) could present advantages and/or disadvantages in the data collection process.

The use of the Social Identity Map goes beyond only naming one's own social identity. Its purpose is to reflect on one's positionality and how it becomes implicated in action during research as well as to hold researchers accountable to a high standard of social and moral responsibility before, during, and after their research. The use of the Social Identity Map promotes social justice-oriented research by encouraging researchers to deeply reflect on how their positionality impacts the individuals they directly work with, the research they produce, and how that research impacts the studied populations and societal perceptions of them.

## Discussion

Our social positions influence how we approach, investigate, and analyze data; it determines the lens through which we see the world. We come apart at the research process. There is nothing wrong with seeing the world in a particular way, but it is important to be reflexive and explicit about how it may impact our work (Day, 2012). We have argued that this is complex work, especially for novice critical qualitative researchers, and propose the use of the Social Identity Map as an interactive exercise to help researchers be reflexive about positionality by making the concept of social identity more tangible. It is valuable to be explicit about our perspectives and also acknowledge that there are other (equally valid and real) perspectives too.

Because the Social Identity Map evolved out of the need for novice critical qualitative researchers to have more tangible strategies to learn to be clear about their social identity in a classroom and workshop setting, it is important to be explicit about the reflections that have come from these intellectual gatherings. We will first discuss lessons learned from both settings that helped to evolve this map and will then discuss reflections on mapping our own social identities in an attempt to parse out the complexities in the practice of positionality.

### *Reflection on the Social Identity Map From the Classroom and Workshop Settings*

Awareness of social organization is important to understand the power that researchers bring to their work when constructing knowledge (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). In the classroom setting, students expressed that the Social Identity Map allowed them to better reflect on and visualize how the power dynamics they are entangled in may impact their work. For some, this was focused on reflection of the colonial implications of being White and researching indigenous groups, while for others the focus was on reflection of Canadian citizenship and being an outsider to participants' cultural experiences as minorities. Even slight differences in social identity impacts the way we

view an issue or relationship from different perspectives—a thought consistent with the concept of standpoint (Harding, 2004; Olesen, 2005; Smith, 2006). Being explicit about our social identity and intentions by naming and being reflexive about them can begin to mitigate the power imbued in the researcher's position, so that knowledge can lean toward co-construction in a reflective setting (Blix, 2015). The Social Identity Map enables researchers to begin to think more deeply about these dynamics and complexities.

For some, certain facets of social identity (those that seem fixed from their perspective) may be more difficult to complete on the social identity map. For example, although DJ was taught as a child that certain aspects of identity are more rigid (like gender and sexuality), as a late teenager she observed her peers exploring the fluidity of their sexuality and gender. Being exposed to those around her experiencing the fluidity of their identities allowed DJ to reflect on these specific facets of social identity as less rigid than she was previously taught. Differently, those participating in the workshop who were older reflected that it was difficult for them to fill out Tier 1 of the Social Identity Map since they did not grow up reflecting on certain identities like gender and cis/trans status. While some boxes for them (like gender) were perceived as being more fixed, other boxes (like class or citizenship) were perceived as changing often over time and place. This shows how certain facets of our social identity, in this case age, impact the way we see, interact with, and interpret the world around us.

How we perform these social identities over time and place depends largely on who we are interacting with, especially keeping participants in mind. The element of social identity performance adds another layer of complexity to positionality since it not only delves into how we see the world but also begins to open up the conversation of how those in the world see and interact with us. The performance of both researchers' and participants' social identities has been discussed in the literature as a dialogue implicating power (Day, 2012). No matter how we believe we are presenting ourselves, our social identities shine through our exterior. Day (2012) aptly points out that we may present ourselves as credible (Watts, 2006) or inexperienced (Hoffman, 2007), and our participants may present themselves accordingly, responding to us researchers as their audience (Murray, 2003). Because our positionality is impacted by our social identities, the way in which we act is impacted by where we stand in relation to the research.

An additional layer of complexity comes into play when thinking about performance of our social identity. This was demonstrated in the workshop setting. While some were concerned that performance of social identity can be viewed as being manipulative and deceitful, others argued that our performance may simply be our social identities in action, different from the work an actor does to put on a play. These perspectives highlight how our differing social identities contribute to the ways in which we each uniquely interpret concepts within our everyday lives. Our positionality, including our history, background, and experiences, influences the way we approach research and understand and interpret concepts—

including performance of our social identities. As time, place, and those we interact with (especially our participants) shift, our social identity (and the so-called performance of it) develops, changes, and colors our perspectives that are influenced by the many facets that make up our identities.

Day (2012) parses out performance of our social identity by identifying identity as “one’s being” or “what one is” and our performance as “one’s doing” or “what one does” (p. 71). She suggests that this division between one’s being and one’s performing may not be necessary since one’s being and one’s doing inform one another, as social identity is co-constructed over the research process (Day, 2012). Differently, Butler (1988) discusses the performance of social identity by focusing on gender as a construct. She draws on Merleau-Ponty’s work by explaining that the body and its expressions become entwined with meaning based on the social and historical context it is viewed in. Butler (1988) describes how gender is instituted by performing acts that have been socially constructed to indicate the particular gender of the individual actor (Butler, 1988). Whether one views their social identity as performed or in action, as one’s being/one’s doing, or as heavily influenced by a specific construct like gender, the most important element is understanding the complexity that where we stand in what society impacts the way that we present ourselves, interact with participants, and interpret the meaning of our data.

The way we perceive ourselves often differs from how participants perceive us (Leibing & McLean, 2007). Mapping our social identities can be helpful to parse out this complexity and better understand how we may present ourselves as researchers and how we may be perceived by participants. This is important since displaying cultural competency contributes to how participants perceive our competency as researchers and thus may impact the richness and quality of our data (Mertens, 2012). This is not only important as researchers but also as analysts. Beginning to develop an understanding of how participants see us, regardless of what we think we are projecting, is a reflexive task (Day, 2012). The Social Identity Map helps to further develop researchers’ reflexivity skills and practice positionality as a source of insight and awareness of the social relations within our work that we may previously have been blind to.

### *Development of the Social Identity Map as a Tool: Personal Reflections*

When filling out the map ourselves, we (authors DJ and NM) experienced some tensions. For facets of our social identity in which we experience some form of oppression, there were some tensions when completing the first tier. For example, for the box that asks the learner to identify their race, NM felt it was difficult to decide whether her race would be classified as South Asian or Indian. Although personally she feels more comfortable identifying as Indian, she felt the need to note South Asian as well, because historically, politically, and socially, “South Asian” has been the large category used to

group individuals from this part of the world. NM has always had a difficult time with this categorization, as she feels countries within South Asia are so large and diverse that homogenizing these areas into one large group is problematic and even oppressive to some degree. Despite this tension, she chose to note down both terms on her map in order to (1) share her thoughts on this issue more broadly and (2) reconcile some of these tensions within herself (see Figure 3). Therefore, the positionality map not only aids in understanding tensions felt with certain identities but also gives a platform to discuss these tensions and discover ways to begin to move forward.

Differently from the tensions at the first tier, we noticed that for the facets of our social identity in which we experience some form of oppression, there was ease when completing Tiers 2 and 3 of the map. This may be because those with the burden of oppression are often forced to explain themselves and why they make certain choices in social and political contexts. This may influence us to be more aware of our reflections on our social identity and position. Time and time again as women we have had to justify our humor, our ideas (radical or not), and even why we deserve equal pay. These justifications may have encouraged us to think more explicitly about how being a woman (or any other heterogeneous group that experiences oppression) impacts our experience. Having thought extensively about this facet of our social identity may ease the process of mapping this part of ourselves.

For the facets of our social identities in which we experience some form of oppression, it may not be difficult to reflect explicitly on the details that encapsulate them. However, for the facets of our social identity that we experience privilege, it may be more difficult to complete the second and third tier. For example, it was difficult for us (authors DJ and NM) to complete the cis/trans extension of the second and third tier (see Figures 2 and 3). This is a facet of our social location that we had not previously reflected deeply into because we have the privilege of being born with XX sex chromosomes and identifying as women. Our gender, or gender identity, has not been questioned and we feel ease in society because of this piece of our social identity. Due to this experience, we had not previously reflected on what it means to be a cisgender woman and thus struggled to identify how being a cisgender woman impacts the way that we see and interact with the world around us.

The way that each individual works with the Social Identity Map to better understand how their positionality impacts their research will indeed vary. There are three tiers to the map, but how the tiers relate to each other will be different depending on how the learner interprets and completes each of them. For some, the tiers may be more hierarchical, with Tier 1 being a specific overarching facet of social identity and Tiers 2 and 3 being increasingly detailed about the ways in which this overarching facet impacts the way that the learner sees, interacts with, and is treated by the world around them. Underlying this type of hierarchical interpretation may be a history of White colonial patriarchy that the individual has grown up in and been exposed to, or instead may be something completely different.

For others, the tiers may not be hierarchical at all but instead delineated to be more interconnected. These interpretations may have additional connecting lines, phrases, or identifiers added to the map. Alternatively, some facets may be more heavily weighted if the learner feels that, on that particular day and in that particular place, it has more bearing on their social identity. Therefore, we encourage the learner to ask themselves when completing the map: How do the tiers of the Social Identity Map relate to each other on your unique map? Are they hierarchical? If so, what underlies the hierarchy? If not, is there another type of organization better suited to you? We encourage the use of various colors, font sizes, and even imagery on the map to begin working through the complexities of each learner/researcher's unique positionality.

### *Intersecting Social Identities*

Because the Social Identity Map is intended for the novice critical qualitative researcher, in this article, we have focused on deepening reflection on multiple aspects of our social identity one at a time, while thinking about each aspect's connection to other pieces of one's social identity. Going a step further and drawing on intersectionality framework, we know that it is not enough to identify social categories, but it is even more important to analyze the intersections of these social identities that contribute to our own unique experiences (McCall, 2005). When aspects of our social identity overlap, intertwine, and interconnect, we may experience "interlocking systems of privilege and oppression" (Bowleg, 2012, p. 1267).

We propose that a next step in the process of positioning oneself is to critically explore how these social identities are related to, informed by, and overlap with one another, which create our unique experiences. An important aspect of this work is understanding that not all social identities on the Social Identity Map (including ones added or taken away by each unique learner according to their own identity) generate equal impacts on the research process. Determining which aspects of social identity are key to each individual's particular research is a vital task when reflecting deeply about how the interconnection of our social identities contributes to our positionality and further impacts our work.

Although it is not the only way to begin this process, researchers may assess which aspects of their social identity are most relevant in their work by asking themselves how their social identity is different and also similar to participants. This is a reasonable starting place since it is the researcher's moral and social responsibility to ensure participants' well-being during the research interaction. Not only that, if there are particular aspects of social identity implicated in the research topic, this may be a good starting point of reflection. For example, if a researcher studies the impact of policy changes on low-income neighborhoods in a predominantly Sri Lankan area, then the researcher may choose to begin reflecting on their own socioeconomic status and nationality to better understand how these facets impact the work.

However, because of the iterative nature of qualitative work, there may be times when a researcher believes that particular aspects of their social identity will generate more impact on their work than others but later learn to their surprise that it was actually a different unexpected aspect that had a greater impact. The importance is not within the accuracy of which aspects of social identity will impact a researcher's work. Instead, the importance is within active reflection on which aspects of social identity greatly impact the work throughout the research process—even if emphasis on certain facets change along the way. If researchers come to realize that unexpected aspects of their social identity impact their work or that different aspects of their social identity are more relevant during one stage (i.e., design and preparation) than another (i.e., data collection), it is indicative of the researcher's reflection on positionality and is encouraged.

We urge those who are more advanced in their reflection (and even those who are novice researchers and up for a challenge) to begin to explicitly map the connections and overlapping areas that color their perspective. For example, to begin this more advanced process, researchers can create color codes to track which aspects of their social identity are more prevalent at certain stages of research. Researchers may choose to divide each box in half to reflect in one half on their own social identity and in the other half how their social identity relates to that of participants. Researchers may choose to add boxes to Tier 1 (and further reflection in Tiers 2 and 3) to indicate the interaction between two or more aspects of their social identity. For example, there may be more nuanced or different reflections on a researcher's experience of their gender than the interaction of their gender and race. These are only some suggestions on where to begin to explicitly map more complex dynamics and interaction of aspects of one's social identity and are not meant to be prescriptive. These suggestions are instead meant to strike motivation for the researcher to choose what best suits their own identity, the identity of their participants, and their research process.

As noted above, positionality is not a task that takes place at the beginning of a researcher's study or career, but rather develops throughout the research process, allowing awareness of how assumptions that are inherent in our positionality manifest during the research process. Researchers' identities are also informed by and through their work, and so social locations and relations, as well as the values placed on them, grow and evolve over time. It is therefore important to continuously be aware of this growth and critically understand how our identities are connected to one another in the process. This will benefit both the quality and rigor of our work, as well as our journeys as critical qualitative researchers. The Social Identity Map we propose is an important step in this direction.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of mapping our social identities is paramount in critical qualitative research. Positioning ourselves makes explicit both the apparent and hidden identities we embody,

while allowing us to understand how these impact our research. This process also allows researchers to better understand the lived experiences of their participants as they acknowledge how their own experiences have shaped their understanding of the research topic. Explicitly identifying one's social position in qualitative research is a mechanism to make us aware of our own assumptions and biases, which is an important step toward improving the rigor and trustworthiness of our qualitative work (Galdas, 2017).

In this article, we have troubled the current approach to positionality, which can be abstract and difficult to grasp in practice for the novice critical qualitative researcher. We have argued for a creative way to *begin* to make our social identities more tangible and visible. Positionality is conceptual and practicing positionality is not a straightforward process. It is instead a very complex element of reflexivity since our identities develop over time. We see an opportunity to extend the current discourse on positionality in the form of this proposed research tool—the Social Identity Map. The use of the map is beneficial as it gives form to an abstract, fluid, and changing part of the research process. It can be used as a tool to add rigor and trustworthiness to qualitative studies, especially for novice researchers who are learning how to position themselves in their work and how their positions impact their research.

Although we note that the Social Identity Map is a starting point and building block in the process of identifying social locations and positions, we do acknowledge that, at first, it may seem to be categorical. This, however, we feel is necessary (at least initially) to begin thinking about who we are, how we identify, and how this may impact our work. Once researchers use this map and outline broad social categories they identify with, we encourage an ongoing process of positioning oneself, which encompasses a thorough, integrated, and interconnected understanding of social identity.

The implications and benefits of using this mapping tool for qualitative research are multifold. Although many researchers identify their positionality in their work, often times how this directly impacts their research is unclear, not deeply discussed, or left out altogether. This tangible map has the potential to aid novice researchers to be explicit about where and when they stand in what society. It is a preliminary tool for drawing out issues of identity, which helps researchers to think through their positionality in relation to their research. This is beneficial as it enforces a form of accountability in qualitative work by explicitly asking researchers to locate themselves and actively think about how this impacts their work. Instead of positionality being used generally or as a blanket concept at the beginning of a study or article, this tool allows for a more concrete and interactive understanding of positionality. Moving from a more conceptual understanding to a tangible and continuously evolving conceptualization of positionality is not only advantageous for researchers but also for the audience who reads their work to better understand how findings and conclusions have been derived from the research.

By mapping our social identities and visually exploring how we approach, understand, and interpret our work through the

use of this mapping tool, we begin to go beyond our immediate identities and may discover other social forces that shape how we approach our research topics. For example, by identifying and deeply thinking about our race, class, and age, we may begin to see how larger systems of privilege and oppression play out in our work. We may identify and question larger forces such as racism, classism, and ageism and begin to see in which ways they impact and interact with who we are, who our participants are, and how this becomes embedded within the research. In the same vein, using the Social Identity Map as an exercise may also help researchers become more aware of stereotypes and assumptions that are rooted in their social identities and question how they may come into play when conducting research. The map allows researchers to think deeply about how their assumptions translate into discussions with participants, influence their understanding of participants' experiences and lives, and how this impacts the way they code, analyze, and interpret findings. Therefore, this mapping tool opens up the discussion of positionality conceptually and visually, allowing us to see forces at play that otherwise may be lost or left dormant in our work.

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