Identity & Impact

There are many aspects that make up who we are as a person. A fundamental skill for managing oneself is being aware of how our identity influences our biases, assumptions, and perspectives. It’s also important to understand how our identity impacts our relationships with others and sense of community. Without introspection and a deeper understanding of ourselves, we cannot fully understand how we perceive and are perceived by others.

In this toolkit, we explore the different components of our identities and how they inform how we interact and engage with others.

**CONTENTS**

Five Components of Identity ................................................................................................................. 2
Social Identity ............................................................................................................................................ 3
Identity & Power ......................................................................................................................................... 4
Exercise: Social Identity Profile .............................................................................................................. 9
Applying the Learning ......................................................................................................................... 10

**Reflecting on identity and inequities in the U.S. today:** Transformative action begins with critical consciousness, with the **understanding of what is** so that we may change it. It is critical that we as healthcare professionals today understand our own identities and how they inform our perspectives and actions. Failing to engage with the work of understanding ourselves and our communities has grave ramifications. It is what helps to perpetuate systemic inequities and oppression. **Relational Leadership demands that we take the time to generate that awareness, to understand how we both shape and are shaped by our culture, experiences, and social identities.**

This Toolkit has a variety of resources to explore, including a few exercises to help you better examine your own identity (pg. 8) and some recommendations on how to apply this learning in action (pg. 10). It’s also important for us to acknowledge that this tool is not designed to fully address systemic racism and injustice. It is a tool to help start dialogue and reflection, and to explain some key concepts. The work to truly dismantle inequity and improve our society is an enormous undertaking and one that requires all of us to work together.
FIVE COMPONENTS OF IDENTITY

Identity is not static or clearly definable; rather, it evolves and shifts over time and depends greatly on context. Through these different pieces of identity, we construct internal narratives that influence our biases, perspectives, and what we believe to be true. **Identity is how we define not only how we are unique as individuals, but also how we define our “community,” our collective or shared sense of identity.**

**EXPERIENCE AND HISTORY**
Things we’ve been through that influence how we view the world. (ex: being a veteran, growing up in a city, having been bullied).

**PASSIONS AND INTERESTS**
Activities or topics that call to us. This includes both hobbies and professions. (ex: healthcare, rock-climbing, reading, dance).

**VALUES AND BELIEFS**
Ethics or morals that guide our behavior or perceptions of others’ behavior. (ex: integrity, commitment, humanitarian, pragmatist).

**PERSONALITY AND INTRINSIC QUALITIES**
Qualities or characteristics that individuals are born with or develop that are unique to themselves. Often identified through assessments like 5 Dynamics or Myers Briggs. (ex: introvert, “high explore”).

**SOCIAL IDENTITIES**
Defined categories or identities that are socially constructed, *but have very real socio-political status*, which create barriers/opportunities for certain groups. (ex: race, sexual orientation, religion).

These identities influence one another and are not strictly distinct. One’s religion may play a significant role in shaping our values, for example. How we identify is in constant fluctuation, not only in what we label ourselves, but in how significant these qualities feel at any given moment.
SOCIAL IDENTITY

While all of five aspects of our personality influence who we are and how we engage with others, social identities play a larger role in shaping power dynamics between individuals. Social identities are ways in which individuals are identified as belonging to a particular social group based on physical, social, or mental characteristics. These may be self-ascribed identities or they may be created and ascribed by others. Whether conscious or unconscious, individuals are deeply influenced by their own and others social identities.

The categories identified below list some of the primary social identities and some examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RACE</td>
<td>group based on skin color</td>
<td>Asian, bi-racial, black, white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETHNICITY</td>
<td>cultural tie by ancestry</td>
<td>Italian, Korean, Palestinian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GENDER</td>
<td>identity related to the social construct of sex</td>
<td>female, male, non-binary cisgender, transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</td>
<td>identity related to the gender to which you are attracted</td>
<td>bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual, queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATIONALITY</td>
<td>country of citizenship</td>
<td>Honduran, U.S., Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRIMARY LANGUAGE</td>
<td>language spoken at home/language of greatest fluency</td>
<td>Arabic, English, Quechua, Spanish, Tagalog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGIONAL/TRIBAL AFFILIATION</td>
<td>region of cultural significance, within or crossing nation state boundaries</td>
<td>European, Bostonian, Maori, Midwestern, Mohawk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELIGION</td>
<td>spiritual belief or practice</td>
<td>Atheist, Buddhist, Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL CLASS</td>
<td>status by economic and/or cultural standards</td>
<td>blue-collar, elite, middle-class, poor, working-class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION LEVEL</td>
<td>level of education completed</td>
<td>college, GED, high school, none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td>length of time lived, generation</td>
<td>adult, child, millennial, senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABILITY</td>
<td>state of body and bodily functions</td>
<td>able-bodied, chronic illness, deaf, disabled, dyslexic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPEARANCE</td>
<td>how well we conform to societal standards of beauty</td>
<td>attractive, heavy, short/tall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IDENTITY & POWER

The various pieces of our identity hold different levels of power in different contexts. We are often most aware of the pieces of our identity which experience oppression and least aware of aspects of our identity that experience power. Power is intimately tied to privilege even if we are unconscious of it, because it influences how society views us and how we perceive others.

WHAT IS POWER?

For an individual, power is the ability to do something or act in a particular way freely, and the ability to direct or influence the behavior of others. It is to be seen, heard, valued, and listened to.

There are many ways we gain power. Most easily visible is formal power, the power given by official titles, sometimes referred to as “big L” leadership. Experiential power refers to the power we have from past experience, training, and study. Relational power is our ability to network and connect to others. However, the most subtle type of power is cultural or systemic power, which is unearned and related to an individual’s social identities.

Systemic power refers to one group’s ability to establish and directly benefit from institutions, laws, customs, and policies. It includes access to resources and decision-makers. Essentially it is to establish the standard by which everyone else abides. Systemic power is so deeply entrenched in the way that society operates that we assume that, “it’s just the way that things are done” or that it’s the “right” or “best” way.

Think about different aspects of your identity:

- Do you often see or hear positive depictions of your identity in the media?
- Can you think of more than a dozen of characters from famous films, books, or art that share this identity?
- Can you count the number of times you have been the “only” one of your identity in a room?
- Do you generally feel safe in most circumstances?
- Do people tend to give you “the benefit of the doubt”?
- Are holidays that are important to you also official paid days off?
- Are you or those who share this part of your identity easily able to access, navigate, and thrive in public institutions (education, hospitals, legal services)?

If you said yes, your identity may be reflective of dominant culture, which may mean cultures/policies/norms are constructed to accommodate your identity. By having society constructed in this way, you may have more power inherently connected to this aspect of your identity.

Because our identities are intersectional, there are pieces of our identity that may experience privilege and oppression differently in different contexts. A white cis-gendered woman may experience less power in a group of white male colleagues, but more power in a mixed race, non-binary space.
THE CULTURE OF POWER

The dominant culture or “culture of power” is that which is the most powerful, widespread, or influential within a social or institutional space. In this context, culture refers to expectations and standards related to language, values, rituals, and social customs. It is often so ubiquitous that it is almost invisible; behavior which is viewed as “normal,” “good,” or “well-behaved.”

People whose identities are not included in the dominant culture often “code-switch” — they change their mannerisms, behaviors, or dress to conform to the customs of the dominant culture. Everyone code-switches to some extent (e.g., speaking differently with friends than in a work situation). The less a person needs to code-switch, the closer their identities align to the culture of power. This is sometimes referred to as “cultural capital.” The unseen advantage and ease of being praised and promoted for simply “being who you are.”

The more a person needs to code-switch, the more daily stress and anxiety accumulates for the individual from the effort required to adapt to the dominant culture.

Code-switching is an essential skill to thrive in the culture of power. There are three main reasons individuals code-switch:

**a) To achieve some level of power or respect**
Modifying behaviors to conform to the dominant culture often allows a person a better chance to be recognized for their efforts and talents or to be promoted in their job, which usually bring with it, additional economic privilege, power, and freedom.

**b) To appear more/less “threatening” to avoid violence**
Shifting posture, dress, changing accent, or mimicking traditional gender characteristics can reduce the threat of attack from dominant groups and/or police suspicion and brutality.

**c) To assimilate or blend in**
The environment sends implicit communications about what’s expected or socially acceptable. Individuals may internalize that these qualities are somehow inherently “better” and attempt to assimilate and adopt these identities as their own in order to achieve a greater sense of belonging or inclusion.

Choosing not to code-switch, or being unable to code-switch, can have far-reaching ramifications with career opportunities, financial stability, social standing, and physical safety. However, there is also a huge cost to code-switching. In addition to the energy required, there is an implicit de-valuing of a person’s identity that is a result of forced assimilation. It also means the loss of that culture’s perspective in society.
INTERSECTIONALITY

Our identities are intersectional; the different parts of our identity do not exist in isolation from one another. The parts of our identity stack to create interdependent systems of social advantage or disadvantage.

Intersectionality is a lens that takes into account people’s overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of privilege or oppression they face.

For instance, according to U.S. Census Data, in 2017 a black man and a white woman made $0.73 and $0.82, respectively, for every $1.00 earned by a white male. By comparison, black women made only $0.68 for every $1.00.

There are aspects of our identities that experience privilege while some aspects of our identities that experience oppression. Being aware of how these impact how we walk through and experience the world will, over time, also teach us how we can harness any power or privilege we have responsibly to benefit the collective good. It also helps us empathize and connect with others, finding common understanding while acknowledging that our experiences are not equivalent.

Understanding intersectionality is essential to understanding how social determinants of health and systemic inequities impact a person’s health and well-being.
POWER & MAJORITY

There are certain situations in which it appears that power dynamics have reversed from those determined by the dominant culture. Examples of this could be situations where men occupy traditionally female roles or spaces, or when white individuals end up in communities or spaces with predominantly people of color.

In these moments where dominant identities are in a minority, power can shift in a specific space or community. It does not change the larger systemic power that plays out in society, but it does create opportunities to disrupt such systems. This is keystone of grassroots advocacy movements — we are stronger together.

Systemic power comes from identities we have no control of, but power of majority is one type of power which we can influence. Bringing people with common identities together can amplify their voice and help them be seen, heard, valued, and listened to.

A NOTE ON REVERSE DISCRIMINATION | Discrimination and mistreatment have the potential to exist in all power dynamics. In places where power shifts to favor a marginalized group there can sometimes be discriminatory or disparaging comments, attitudes, or treatment towards traditionally dominant groups. This is separate from the “isms” of systemic oppression because laws, policies, and societal norms still favor the dominant culture.

POWER OVER VS POWER WITH

One final distinction of power is how it is used. While we cannot control what gives us power as individuals, we can control how we use that power. Power over occurs when power is used to control another person or group. It is what is found in most traditional hierarchies, where those who lead are those who set the standards, policies, and processes for others to comply to.

Power with is both relational and collective. It leverages the power we have to provide space and empower others to offer their perspectives, insights, and experiences. It dismantles traditional hierarchies and looks to work collaboratively and highlight the talents and skills of the group.

It can be helpful to reflect on our unearned power and privilege as moments where we stand as gatekeepers and decision-makers and use the opportunity to bring others into dialogue.
EXERCISE: SOCIAL IDENTITY PROFILE

Self-awareness is a life-long process. Healthy teams make sure that all members can openly and safely discuss and raise issues, ideas, and reflections with one another. One way to begin to create space for discussions of identity and power is the following exercise.

This is an exercise that requires a certain amount of trust and openness on the team and should be approached with sensitivity.

**Step 1** | As individuals, complete the form on the following page in 5-10 minutes, or have everyone complete it prior to a meeting. Let everyone know that they are not required to share this worksheet, but that topics from the worksheet will be discussed.

**Step 2** | Divide the room as though preparing for “speed dating” with two rows facing one another. Pairs will be across from each other. Make sure that each pair is far enough away from others that they can have a somewhat private conversation.

**Step 3** | Ask each pair to take five minutes to discuss what came up for them when thinking about the first three columns from the worksheet. Rotate partners by having one row shift to the right. Have the next pair discuss columns 4-5 for five minutes. Rotate partners again and discuss the last two columns for five minutes.

**Step 4** | Return to a large group discussion for 15-20 minutes. Consider: How did it feel to complete this worksheet? What was it like hearing from others in the group? What questions are you left with? How might identity and power dynamics impact how we work together?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL IDENTITY</th>
<th>USE A SPECTRUM TO ANSWER (1- not at all, 5- definitely)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>feel free to self-identify with</td>
<td>you are more aware of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your own language below</td>
<td>you are less aware of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>you have the earliest memories of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>greatly affects how you view yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>greatly affects how others perceive/treat you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gives you power/privilege in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>oppresses/disadvantages you in society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **RACE**
- **ETHNICITY**
- **GENDER**
- **SEXUAL ORIENTATION**
- **NATIONALITY**
- **PRIMARY LANGUAGE**
- **REGIONAL/TRIBAL AFFILIATION**
- **RELIGION**
- **SOCIAL CLASS**
- **EDUCATION LEVEL**
- **AGE**
- **ABILITY**
- **APPEARANCE**
APPLYING THE LEARNING

Though self-awareness around identity may seem theoretical, there are actually several steps we can take to apply this knowledge in our daily lives:

**Acknowledge and Name Difference** | It is important to understand that people experience the world differently based on their own complex identities. One of the ways we continue to feed systems of oppression is that the dominant culture teaches that it is “rude” to formally recognize others’ difference. People are uncomfortable naming their own or another person’s perceived race, or asking for someone’s preferred pronouns. However, we must recognize these identities as a way to step beyond our assumptions that our experience is common.

**Model Norming Behaviors** | Create policies and norms that help build safer spaces. For those from the dominant culture, naming your own race or affirmed pronouns creates a norm for others to do so if they so wish, so that there isn’t an “othering” moment where only certain people are questioned (ex: “Where are you from?” is something many people of color experience).

**Avoid Oversimplified or General Language** | It is also important to steer clear of language that refers to an assumed common identity. Expressions that speak for an entire group “immigrants all feel...” alienate those who don’t resonate with the statement and reinforce biases and assumptions.

**Analyze the Space You Occupy** | Do the work to understand your own identity and the role you play in your community, institution, or home. Take the Social Identity Profile to unpack how your specific social identities give you advantages and disadvantages. How is that showing up in your relationships, work, and viewpoints?

**Check for Assumptions and Bias** | We all hold biases. In order to deepen self-awareness, explore how your identities might be impacting your perceptions of others. Implicit bias includes all attitudes or stereotypes, both favorable and unfavorable, that we hold even without conscious awareness. Taking tests online, like the ones suggested in the resources list on page 11, can provide opportunities to grow.

**Observe Your Surroundings** | As you practice self-reflection, begin to observe the communities you engage with in personal and professional capacities. Diversity of all kinds matter in your workplace, activism, community spaces, and more. Are there ways to increase diversity or include more voices?

**Seek Other Points of View** | Encourage discussion and operate from a place of curiosity and humility, inviting others’ opinions and perspectives on issues.

**Get Comfortable with Discomfort** | For some individuals, being aware of identity and systemic oppression has always been part of their lived experience. For others, particularly those from the dominant culture, this may be a new process, one that brings up resistance, guilt, and many other negative emotions. It is important to stay engaged and keep trying to grow, even when it asks us to enter difficult discussions.

“Without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle.”

Paulo Freire
AFFINITY GROUPS

People coming from identities/cultures of power and those from marginalized identities/cultures each have work to do separately and together. Affinity groups, or caucuses, provide spaces for people to work within their own identity groups.

Let us look at one social identity: race.

A caucus for white people provides an opportunity to work explicitly and intentionally on understanding white privilege and systemic racism, and to increase one’s critical analysis around these concepts. It also puts the onus on white people to teach each other about these ideas, rather than constantly relying on and expecting people of color to teach them.

For people of color, a caucus is a place to work with their peers on their experiences of internalized racism, for healing and to support one another, without having to defend or justify their experiences and perceptions.

People from dominant cultures are often uncomfortable with the idea of meeting separately as part of identity and equity work. A common assumption is that diversity must be better for understanding; that we all must learn together. It can feel uncomfortable to separate by identity; to have men and women meet separately to discuss sexism, for example. Yet such separation occurs naturally in real life, without being acknowledged or questioned as it is when participating in an affinity group.

Ultimately, affinity groups from identities of power often express more vulnerability and accountability with one another, and their learning does not come at the expense of oppressed and marginalized communities. Whatever your identities, affinity groups can be powerful opportunities to connect, reflect, and grow together.

Remember that while these caucuses may meet separately, they also come back together for collective work.
REFERENCES


hooks, bell. Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. New York: Routledge; 1994


ADDITIONAL PCP RESOURCES

For more support around equity concepts, see our Equity Toolkit.

Implicit Bias tests available at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html. * Taking the IAT without an opportunity to debrief may deepen some individuals’ confusion or stress around these issues. Make sure to create opportunities to discuss and share the process with others, ideally in affinity groups.

ABOUT RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP™

Relational Leadership™ is a healthcare leadership competency model built upon decades of social psychology research into people, their motivations, how they learn and work, and the unique ways in which they influence and are influenced by others when in groups. It is ultimately a strategy to work together to achieve better results, grounded in the premise that all team members should grow and develop as leaders, working together interdependently towards a common vision. Each of the four Relational Leadership™ domains — Manage Self, Foster Teamwork, Coach & Develop, and Accelerate Change — operate on the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels to change how we approach learning, work, and collaboration.

COMPLETE LIST OF RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP TOOLKITS

Relational Leadership™ Framework  Conflict Transformation Toolkit  Leadership Transitions Toolkit
Team Starter Kit  Teaming Toolkit  Active Listening Toolkit
Team & Project Launch Toolkit  Meeting Management Toolkit  Coaching Toolkit
Narrative Leadership Toolkit  Team Building Toolkit  Training Toolkit
Identity Toolkit  Collaborative Decision Making Toolkit  Change Framework Toolkit
Equity Toolkit  Facilitation Toolkit  Decision Makers Toolkit
Resilience Toolkit  Team Effectiveness Toolkit

ADVOCACY PROJECT RESOURCES

Communications Strategy  Community Convening  Action Planning
Community Inventory  Project Sustainability  Health Equity & Social Determinants of Health