

Who Am I?

My life experience and identity directly relate to my positionality and how I view the world. As a white, queer, neurodivergent Jewish woman, I see the impact that my identity has on issues I hold near to my heart. As a young adult, I have formed my own identity, and my identity continues to form around me. Who I am is directly related to my life experiences and how I am positioned within society. In my youth, I struggled with issues across all barriers, ranging from school, familial, and social. Since I was working in every aspect of my life, I felt like my failures were my identity. My identity could have been described as a failure and a letdown. Growing up in a school system that repeatedly destroyed my self-esteem was a reason that I felt like my failures defined me. Test after test, I would get back covered in red marks, which further concluded the thoughts swirling around my head that I was and forever would be a failure. I was unable to sit. Still, I would constantly be in trouble and sent out of the classroom to receive extra help from teachers' assistants. I would stare at the sheets of paper, watch the words dance, and mock me across the page. After years of silently struggling and failing, one teacher finally realized what was happening. She saw how much I struggled and how close I was to giving up on my education. She pulled me aside and helped me individually for hours until I finally understood the content. She helped set me up with the special education teachers to have me retested for learning disabilities; after years of not being heard, I finally got a diagnosis of ADHD. I learned about what ADHD was, how my brain functions, coping skills I can learn, and how to learn in a way I could understand. I stopped comparing myself to everyone else. I stopped following everyone else's journey and started creating my own.

I am entirely grateful to my parent for doing everything they could to give me opportunities. We moved as a family, specifically to a town with the best education system, so my brother and I would receive a good education. They did their best to ensure that my brother and I were both set up for success. Growing up in a middle-class environment, I learned a lot about connections and how success is often rooted in the people you know. The kids I went to school with had parents who were usually business owners, lawyers, or doctors; their kids were all conditioned to take over their parents' jobs someday. With one call from their parents, my peers could get into any job they wanted. I worked at a grocery store when my peers were interning at big companies.

My positionality and how my experiences shape the world are directly related to my identity and experiences—growing up in a predominantly conservative household engraved hateful and toxic thoughts into my brain, which it has taken me years to unlearn. Getting out of my house and my town's bubble through jobs I have held, volunteering, friends, and attending college helped me understand the world and how hate consumes everyone. Redefining my family and who they wanted me to be is something that I work towards every day, undoing ideas that were pushed onto me and that I disagree with. Growing up in a predominantly white town that refused to talk about important issues such as race, sexual identity, and sexual health, I had to leave my town to understand how things worked in the real world. How do I have difficult conversations, form my opinions, and participate in the change?

I also need to continue to acknowledge my privilege in the opportunities I have and what opportunities have come to me because of my skin color and where I live. I would be in a very different place if I didn't have the chance to have a teacher to look out for me. It is also a privilege that I was able to be tested and diagnosed with ADHD and to learn about it. I was

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allowed the opportunity to be medicated and had a team of people supporting me in my journey.

So many children have felt the same way I have, and didn't have the opportunity to learn about themselves. Many aren't taught how to speak up and advocate for themselves like I was, or taken seriously by adult members of our society. Because of the privilege I had of learning about ADHD, I was able to stay in school, get an education, and find something that I am passionate about. Because of how I grew up and my experiences, I learned how to fail and then get back up and try again. I learned how to be a hard worker and create change. However, none of that would have been possible without my privilege and the chance that someone had decided to help me.

As humans, we are so afraid of what is different from us. We create barriers that push people into boxes and stereotypes because we feel most comfortable with those who look the most similar to us. How we grow up, the media, and who surrounds us directly relate to our interactions with ourselves and our peers. Growing up in a household that didn't support being queer put harsh ideas in my mind that because I am queer, I am not valid or loveable. Examples like these push people away and create a hateful divide. People aren't taught to have difficult conversations or to hear from those who may be different, have different ideas, and grew up differently. In our society, we don't listen to people. We make assumptions and label them. Everyone has their own world experiences, thoughts, actions, and ideas. How someone grows up relates to how they view their peers and the world.

Growing up in a hostile community made me search for the opposite. I looked for and surrounded myself with people who were kind and open. I looked for people with different life experiences from my own and various views on the world. Even though our stories may have been vastly different from one another, we would still find ways to connect and similarities between us. Someone you may think is the complete opposite of you may be more alike than you

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may realize. Combining my social identity and journey, and those I have met along the way, made me want to make the world a different place.

I may think some pieces of my identity are more important to me than others because some are prominent in my daily life, and I must constantly think about them. For example, as a woman, I am afraid to walk anywhere at night without pepper spray. Because I am a woman, I have been told to be more careful at night, so I have to think about that part of my identity constantly. I am more aware of parts of my identity that may not be accepted in today's society than other parts that I do not have to worry about. Because I am a queer woman, I am constantly worried about being accepted in society; because this is something I feel that I have to worry about, I consider it a prominent part of my identity. Things that are different about me may make me stand out, and it can be terrifying to be in a room full of strangers, not knowing their reactions.