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CYES Praxis

### Positionality and Identity in the World

Social identity plays a significant role in society and how you are perceived. Your identity can provide you with a sense of belonging, whether with friends, community, class, sexual orientation, or anything along those lines. Social identity can affect who you surround yourself with and who you choose to align with.

Throughout my life, I have been very fortunate and privileged to experience various forms of community engagement. Coming from Freeport, a small town in Southern Maine with a population of around 10,000, our community was strong and close. My main experience with engaging with the community was through sports, as I attended a lot of sports camps run by either the high school, middle school, or the general school system, when I was younger. Growing up in a predominantly white town in Maine, I was surrounded by white peers and educators. My early experiences were built on privilege. Since my parents were divorced and both educators themselves, and had three kids, money was not a constant. Although my family was considered low-income, I rarely felt targeted because of it. One moment when I did feel targeted was during a college tour with my friends. A majority of them were discussing that they would go wherever they wanted with no financial restraints. This was not the case, for me, I was going to go wherever gave me the best financial aid package. I realized my decision did not have to do with preference, but instead it was based on the financial aid offered. This moment highlights how economic differences shaped my experiences compared to those around me. I understand the town I live in is vastly different from Worcester in many ways. One of the most

noticeable differences between the two is the diversity, or lack thereof. Worcester is the second biggest city in New England, with a population of around 200,000. While I have definitely struggled with income for most of my life, it has certainly been a different experience than some of the Worcester community. That being said, it is vital to take into account the intersection of race and class when considering my positionality as well. I have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to compete in the sports I love. It started as a kid in Maine, and has blossomed to college, where I find myself the President of Clark Club Basketball. Since I have been at Clark, I have experienced various leaders of this team, and I have seen how the club has evolved over the past four years. Sports have played such an instrumental part in my life, and the relationships that I have created in these spaces last a lifetime. As an athlete, I have been a part of a copious number of teams, whether baseball, basketball, soccer, or any other sport I played. I have been able to understand sports as more than just competition. They have been a space of connection, belonging, accountability, and inclusiveness. My identity as an athlete has been shaped by early access to my local sports programs, which were often run through our school system in my small town. This accessibility allowed me to grow in a system that was built for me, a white cisgendered man in a predominantly white community. I also recognize that sports often reflect broader systems of privilege, and my presence in athletic spaces is rarely questioned. While I have faced challenges related to class, such as affording registration, gear, or travel opportunities, I have still benefited from a culture in sports that center people like me. At Clark, continuing as an athlete has exposed me to the ways that athletics can create community, but also how they can unintentionally exclude. An example of this is seen in Club Basketball. Everyone who participates in the club has to fill out a form for safety reasons, stating that if they get hurt, they can not take legal action against Clark. Occasionally, at club practices, we would have Clark

students who just wanted to compete with us, and we had to tell them they could not unless they filled out this information. Recognizing this has pushed me to think critically about how I can use my role as an athlete not just to compete, but to advocate for more inclusive spaces.

As the president of the Clark Club Basketball team, I carry an added layer of responsibility in how I represent the club. This position places me at the intersection of leadership and organization. I have had to navigate an inconsistent practice schedule, budget restraints, and finding a balance between the president of the club and just another participant. That power dynamic has been prevalent, particularly at the beginning of this school year, with the influx of first-year students joining our club. I could sense that some of the first years would not play as competitively against me compared to the other members of the club. That is not what I wanted as the president of the club; I wanted everyone to treat me the same as they were treating everyone else, but I also understood that as the president of the club, that is not something that I should have, but rather something that I need to earn. Additionally, holding this role has made me more aware of the structural limitations that exist even within an institution and how they can prevent meaningful community engagement. The leadership role that I have been put in has made me reflect on whose voices are included in decision making, and how power operates even in club sports. I have made a conscious effort to make sure all voices in the club are heard. I view my position not just as a logistical or organizational role, but as a space to create a more inclusive and safe space to compete.

At Clark University, I have grown as a person in a way that I can feel proud of. My perspective has broadened significantly. The university and the Worcester community have exposed me to the idea of critical thinking and critical consciousness. These encourage me to reflect on my position in the world and community in ways I never did in high school. Courses

like *Fundamentals of Youth Work*, *Youth Participatory Action*, and *Civics in Action* allowed me to hear diverse stories and lived experiences that differed from my own. Therefore, it gives me an understanding of how others experience the world differently from me. I have been fortunate enough to be in educational and non-educational spaces where there are dialogues about the importance of hearing different lived experiences. These conversations emphasize the importance of recognizing privilege and how society favors certain identities over others. I'll never understand what it is like to be discriminated against for my race, class, or gender identity. As an outsider to Worcester, it is my responsibility to learn from and actively listen to those who have different lived experiences from mine.

As I work on this project, I understand that my gender and whiteness may provide me with a platform or voice that others may not have. Additionally, I recognize that in academic conversations regarding community engagement, my voice is more likely to be heard due to biases. Hearing and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities in Worcester is crucial for conversations around community engagement. My experience with financial insecurity has given me empathy towards others who may face similar or worse struggles to my own. Furthermore, this perspective forces me to consider how economic barriers impact community engagement from all sides.

Ultimately, critical consciousness has been the most influential aspect of my identity. Clark has taught me to reflect deeply about structures in place meant to keep those in power, powerful, and those not in power, powerless. Along with how important it is to understand how privilege operates. All these experiences have affected me in a way that I can learn from. Since I graduated from high school, I have become a strong listener and observer. I believe this has allowed me to sit back and notice things that I would have previously missed. Reflecting on my

positionality and identity is vital when considering how I have engaged with my praxis project.

My whiteness, gender, social class, athletic experience, and critical consciousness all contribute to how I interact with the world, shaping what I see as important and how I show up.