

Noah Schurr

Theory of Understanding – Positionality and Identity in a Social Context

My name is Noah Schurr, and I am a White, Jewish, Middle-Class, Queer, cis man from Brooklyn, New York. Since I could walk and talk, I attended a secular Jewish afterschool, with a strong focus on social justice and developing community. This Jewish school strongly shaped my identity as a Jew, as I have been part of this secular Jewish community since I was three years old, and led me to believe that as a Jew it is my job to work for social justice. Every year during our Passover seder, we say a phrase: “B’chol dor vador,” meaning in every generation. It is part of a longer sentence, saying effectively that in every generation, it is our duty to consider ourselves as if we had come forth from slavery in Egypt. I take this to mean that the legacies and effects of oppression are handed down from generation to generation, and that we must treat the struggles of our ancestors as if they are our own. This goes hand in hand with a quote from Emma Lazarus that we were always taught, “until we are all free, none of us are free.” These principles instilled in me that whether fighting for your own struggle or a struggle that you are not connected to, it is your personal responsibility to continue the fight for justice. Even as a class of 7 and 8 year olds, they encouraged us to find a movement that we wanted to support, but didn’t directly relate to us. We chose a group of striking Car Wash workers a couple blocks away from the school, and went to support them on the picket line and bring them food. We continued until the strike was done. By then the workers had gotten to know us and our parents, and they expressed their gratitude for our outside support. Although it may not have been the most comprehensive approach to organizing, it started to teach me the importance of solidarity and getting involved with the community around you.

While I was growing up and attending this Jewish afterschool, I was also attending regular public school on the Upper East Side, a very wealth neighborhood. I lived around an hour away in Brooklyn, across the street from a large public housing project, where many people faced housing insecurity. Seeing every day the contrast between the neighborhood I went to school in and the neighborhood I lived and grew up in, as well as the contrast between

the lives of the people around me and myself, gave me an opportunity to witness inequity in the communities around me. Spending time in such different communities and questioning why things were the way they were led me to see that the oppression people in my neighborhood were facing was interconnected. The places where people were segregated by race and class, other related issues like over-policing, housing and food insecurity concentrated. There was a seemingly constant stream of officers and floodlights near my home, and rarely any police outside of the subway station near my school, yet the only place I was the victim of a crime was 5 blocks away from my school. Living in these environments helped me start to develop an understanding of insider/outsider relationships and made me rethink how I was in relationship with the different communities I was a part of. It made me want to help the community I lived in, not as an outside savior who sees the community as something needing fixing, but as a peripheral community member who feels the value and love of the community and wants to improve it in any way possible. These experiences also made me want to work specifically on affordable housing, as I was presented simultaneously with the absolute necessity of housing, and with the reality of poor material conditions when affordable housing is made badly and serves to concentrate poverty.

Growing up with these experiences, and knowing that I wanted to continue working towards social justice as part of my life, shaped how I think about identities in general. Identities don't define who someone is entirely, but does influence experiences they have, how they process and move through the world, and how others respond to them. I grew up surrounded by many people holding similar and the same identities to me, and while that did mean we most likely shared common experiences and elements of culture, we all were incredibly different people who went on to develop a variety of beliefs and pursue a myriad of different paths. However, I do believe identity can strongly influence beliefs. The Jewish school I attended was originally (100 years ago) an offshoot of Workmen's Circle, a leftist group of Jewish laborers. The influence of their origin led us to learn extensively about struggles for workers rights and solidarity across groups of workers. Growing up in this environment, despite being a middle-class child, I strongly identified with the history of Jewish labor organizing presented to me, and this shaped how I processed the world. I am not saying that it made me think I was a

worker struggling for rights, but it made me begin to think about the news and the world around me in terms of work and class. Learning about the causes of labor struggles was my first direct introduction to thinking about sources of inequality and oppression in a way that was deeper than interpersonal bias.

It was a product of my intersecting privileges that I was first able to conceptualize identities in terms of personal experiences and beliefs, rather than in terms of treatment by others and oppression/privilege. Similarly, it took me a long time to learn about intersectionality, and my understanding of intersectionality helped me start to understand my privilege. I have always presented as straight and started to identify as queer later in life, and I grew up in loving communities not struggling financially, overall leading a privileged and comfortable life. I learned about oppression through books, discussions, and observations, having the privilege to not learn from firsthand experiences. I had heard about privilege and oppression, but I didn't have a developed understanding of either, both in their causes and how they manifest. Oppression was originally presented to me in a way that centered class almost entirely, acknowledging other forms of oppression and oppressed groups, but always circling back to the centrality of class within other struggles. Centering class in my understanding of oppression gave me a superficial understanding of intersectionality, and it wasn't until later in life—once I became involved in spaces dedicated to racial reflection and learning—that I developed a more useful and genuine understanding of intersectionality that has really helped me make sense of the world. Learning how people experience oppression through the lens of their intersecting identities forced me to reflect on my own identities, and start to recognize my own privilege.

My identities and experiences didn't just lead me to the work I want to do, they also inform how I think about the work and my relationship with it, and what kind of activist/worker I want to be. Because I am White, Middle-Class, and attend a private university I must do a lot of self-reflection, unlearning, and creating and holding space for people with different identities, for me to not approach work with a White-Savior mindset and to not cause harm to the communities I wish to work with. I must be careful to not fall into a traditional positivist research paradigm, and try to center the community I am attempting to help in all aspects of my

work. I think that community-based activism is extremely necessary for creating social change that is actively helpful to the most marginalized in society, and that often social change efforts can end up doing harm to the communities that they are trying to aid. This accidental harm is something I need to constantly try and avoid, and it will require a lot of reflection, planning, and unlearning in order to ensure that I am not accidentally inflicting harm.