

Chapter 42. Evolution of Positionality: A Personal Journey Towards Social Justice in Research and Teaching

Hua Wang
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

On a Saturday evening in December 2019, due to severe back pain, I went to the ER at a small local hospital, where I was diagnosed with a slipped lumbar disc pressing on nerves. After staying in the ER overnight, an emergency surgery was arranged with a neurologist at a larger hospital two hours away. I was transported to the hospital by ambulance around noon and waited in the ER the entire afternoon. As an international PhD student, lying alone in the ER far from my university, I found myself without any company.

The neurologist, a middle-aged white man, with his assistant, eventually came in to discuss my scheduled surgery. During the conversation, I noticed that the neurologist did not make eye contact. He spoke with his head tilted away at a 30-degree angle, which initially didn't concern me, but, as time passed, I became increasingly uncomfortable and upset, as I had never experienced a situation where someone did not maintain eye contact while speaking to me. In the evening, when the physician assistant came to my room for my physical checkup, I couldn't help but ask her why the neurologist didn't look at me, which I found rude. She explained that it was his social style.

The next day, as I was wheeled into the operating room, I noticed that the neurologist was already there, engaged in conversation and laughter with other medical staff. I observed that he did maintain eye contact when speaking with them. This led me to believe that he held racial biases and was prejudiced against me as an Asian woman. The following day, during his routine visit after the surgery, I intentionally asked him about the pronunciation of his last name and whether he or his parents originated from France, given the French resemblance of his last name. My intention was to initiate a friendly conversation in the hope that he would make eye contact when speaking with me. While he did answer my questions, the level of eye contact remained somewhat distant. When I shared my unpleasant experience with my American friends, they expressed sympathy and told me that some medical professionals were notorious for their interactions with patients. This prompted my curiosity about racism in American healthcare.

Upon conducting a search on racism and healthcare, I found that the results were shocking: a plethora of scholarship highlighting how people of color have been subjected to unfair medical treatment in the USA over the past decades. This revelation served as a pivotal moment of awakening for me, igniting a passion

to become a feminist scholar. With this renewed perspective, I embarked on a research journey enacting social justice through academic research. Realizing that my experience could serve as a bridge to understanding the struggles faced by marginalized Chinese women, I felt inspired to advocate for their voices to be heard and recognized in academic discourse. I began researching how Chinese women with constrained rhetorical agency leverage social media to assert their rhetorical agency and promote social justice. My work has been published in prestigious conference proceedings, journals, and books. As a new faculty member in the College of Engineering at an Ivy League university, I noticed a gap in the exposure of engineering students to underrepresented groups and social justice issues and started engaging my students in community-based learning practices, investigating how engineering and technology have negatively impacted marginalized cultural groups and raising awareness of ethics and societal impacts among my students. As a teacher-scholar, my positionality has been dedicated to social justice practices in both my research and my teaching.