

Chapter 48. Learning How Much to Say and Troubling Positionality as a Form of Disclosure

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I am drafting yet another version of a diversity statement for yet another job application. The prompt for the statement is vague and unhelpful, asking me to, “describe my commitment to diversity and equity” and “my experience working with diverse students.” I can detail my work at community colleges, my research working alongside students to understand issues of inequity, and my administrative work advocating for resources and more just approaches. “My commitment to diverse students comes from my experience growing up in a poor, rural town in a blue-collar family,” I write. I could continue on. I could describe my high school, the overcrowding pushing us all into trailers in the parking lot, the way all the teachers knew my last name because my family had preceded me. I could describe the town, the shops dead for years, the people nodding out on the front stoops of the main drag. I could tell you what it was like after leaving, the family who thought I was a snob for going to college, the many classmates who died of overdoses—but I don’t. You don’t need to say so much.

In my experience claiming or centering positionality, there is a fine line between naming our identities and experiences and exemplifying them in detail. It often doesn’t seem enough to say that the town I grew up in was poor and rural, so I tend to add details that bring these ideas to life but leave the listener more comfortable. I will typically reference the Billy Joel song, “Allentown,” to convey to people the image of the dying factory town set in the valleys of the Appalachian Mountains but leave the visceral details to the side. This is the complicated nature of disclosure in a positionality statement. What should we reveal and what should we leave out? In this case, I consider the comfort of the reader or the listener, but how do we account for our own comfort in how much of our story we reveal?

The practice of exploring your positionality as a researcher and academic is crucial, for it reveals our humanity and how our very real experiences impact the work we do in Higher Education. As a part of the diversity statement, it isn’t generally a requirement. In fact, most diversity statements are prompted in a way that asks very little by way of disclosure or details of personal identity. However,

I continually struggle with how to glaze over my positionality and the ways it has informed my work and commitment to diversity. I read Tuck and Yang's (2014) "R-words: Refusing research" and their discussion of humanizing research reminds us of "the fixation social science research has exhibited in eliciting pain stories from communities that are not White, not wealthy, and not straight" (p. 227). I wonder if I am playing into this paradigm. I want to be authentically who I am in these moments, and I want to own my experiences; they are so formative to the work I do—but I am always wondering if it is too vulnerable.

When my faithful second reader looks over the diversity statement for obvious errors or things I have missed, he corrects "poor" to "socioeconomically disadvantaged." Then, we argue. I didn't feel disadvantaged—I felt poor. Scraping food together, hand-me-downs from cousins, heating the house by wood fire poor. My father breaking his back on a roof and coming home smelling like tar. My mother up all night slinging drinks and returning as we wake for school. He knows all this, but he reminds me: you don't need to say so much.

Disclosure is a complex practice that a person doesn't really have to consider unless the information being disclosed is somehow dangerous or precarious. There is, of course, the personal danger of being found out in academia as something outside the norm. I practiced this form of strategic disclosure for many years; before I even had the words to describe myself as a first-generation student, I was hiding this information about myself. People would talk about where their parents went to school, and I would simply go quiet. The further I have gone along in my work as a teacher and graduate student, the less concerned I became with this disclosure. Yes, first-generation—proudly. But other parts, I still can't quite claim in the same way. The personal danger that disclosure exposes you to can leave you vulnerable to a number of assumptions by people, which make you want to carefully craft your personal narrative. When people have learned about how I grew up, they have made assumptions about my parents, my relationships with my family, and my understanding of the world. I spent an entire graduate course countering the idea that growing up poor and going to college meant that I was the pride and joy of my community; those who were used to a specific narrative about poverty and education as the means to socioeconomic improvement did not want to hear how leaving for college had actually made me a pariah.

The second danger in disclosure comes to those who are outed in your own revealing of information. How do I explain my complicated relationship with the term "first-generation college student," without revealing very specific information about my family? Even now, I toe the line for what I say directly and what I leave buried. Disclosure, in this case, extends beyond the personal—it is communal and shared. I do not solely own every story I tell, no matter how much

it impacts me. Am I then using my families' and communities' stories to make myself worthy?

I have just completed my qualifying exam and advanced to candidacy. I see my Dad afterward, and I am crying from relief. He's so proud, and when I explain why what I just did feels so incredible, he is angry, deflated, betrayed. I try to contextualize and provide statistics about the likelihood that a child of a parent who did not complete high school would be on their way to a doctorate. "It is just so unlikely that I would get here," I say, but all he can hear is his failure. All he can hear is me having to live past his failure. I don't need to say so much, I tell myself.

Moments like these have taught me about the complicated nature of disclosing this information, among other things that I cannot and will not detail here. There are things that deeply impact my identity that I would like to speak to, but I do not own these alone. The call for positionality in research statements, while important and well-intended, does not always consider the way positionality is owned by many people and the way it may not be a personal imperative. To this point, why disclose at all? At whose benefit do I share these stories?

On the other hand, I find trouble in disclosure as a form of currency. This is the third danger in disclosure: how does sharing a particular identity grant me access to certain spaces and do I use it inappropriately? I am reminded of conversations with my sister who is disabled and has spent a lifetime considering disclosure about disability. We talk about the utility of disclosure, how it can grant you access or cause you to be excluded. She reminds me of the privilege to hide an identity—something she hasn't been able to do in her own disability—and the ways in which accessing certain spaces as a person with a disability is fraught with tension around what can be seen and what can't. When I read a text about it, I send her this quote: disclosure is complex, contextual, and can "become strategic to accomplish certain goals" (Miller et al., 2017, p. 124). What does disclosure get us that we are not entitled to?

I am in a meeting for first-generation graduate mentors, a program I've been paid a small stipend to participate in. I am there with the other graduate student mentors who are talking about their intersecting identities, telling stories of immigration, recounting their experiences with racism, and speaking to their exhaustion with needing to sound a certain way as a multilingual person. I sit there in my English native speaking whiteness. I wonder whose space I've taken up by being there. They ask me about my experiences as a first-generation student, and I am brief and hesitant. I don't need to say so much.

When we ask people to reveal slices of their identity, especially the easily hidden or obscured parts, we are asking them to participate in a particular process

of disclosure. Positionality, then, becomes a process of navigating particular dangers: dangers to oneself, danger to the community, danger in invading spaces that are not really yours. I champion those who choose to engage in this form of disclosure and who can own their truths without fear; I similarly uphold the sanctity of privacy for those who choose otherwise and who question the airing of personal stories for the sake of credibility or access. Positionality is a tool in many parts of academia as it allows us to locate our personal contexts and to hold us accountable for how our lived experiences may or may not align with the intellectual work we create. It can also be a weapon that is wielded against you or those who trust you and this requires careful consideration of how much to disclose and for what reasons.

I finish my diversity statement, even though I'm uneasy about how much to disclose. I've labored over the exact wording for hours. I've consulted friends in how they wrote their own and am only more confused by how some people choose to say everything, while others nothing at all. Surely the people hiring me need to know this part of me, right? It's such a large part of who I am as a scholar, a teacher, a human. It drives so much of my work. The Word Document has the squiggly lines under certain phrases and words. It underlines "socioeconomically disadvantaged" and suggests "poor." Ok, I think. I'll say that much.

References

- Miller, R. A., Wynn, R. D., & Webb, K. W. (2017). Complicating "coming out": Disclosing disability, gender, and sexuality in higher education. In S. L. Kerschbaum, L. T. Eisenman, J. M. Jones, D. T. Mitchell, & S. L. Snyder (Eds.), *Negotiating disability: Disclosure and higher education* (pp. 115-134) University of Michigan Press.
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