

## **How Higher Education Helped My Positionality**

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## Positionality

During my positionality journey, I have discovered how my experience with going to college for my undergraduate had set the foundation of who I am today and who I want to continue to be. Being a first-generation college graduate who is a Chicana feminist, I still have a lot of learning and unlearning to do from the “epistemic frames that have shaped and continue to shape colonial trajectories” in the epistemology of education from the K-12 setting (Patel, 2015, p. 31). Throughout my essay, I am unmasking my internal struggles, difficult situations and breakthrough moments that shaped my positionality.

In my first two years of college, I struggled keeping up with not only my academics from being a first-generation student but trying to fit in with my roommates. My roommates and I had numerous similarities, but one disparity I could not hide was my financial status. My roommates had supportive parents who were very affluent and did not have to worry about staying on budget throughout the semesters. This was the first time I acknowledged how my social class was different and my opportunities were limited because I was not financially independent compared to my roommates. My roommates and I were all first-generation college students and came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, but another dispersity we shared was college readiness. I came from a low-income, minority, public school education and my roommates came from a middle-class, white affluent, public school education and the difference was accessibility to resources. My roommates were taught how to study and take notes based on their learning abilities, they were academically challenged to fit the needs in a college setting. Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R (2017) argued how the knowledge we are taught in school affects the way we continue to learn (p. 31). I was not taught or challenged to get me through college from high school based on academics or life skills and I still struggle with the implications from the socially constructed college readiness in the public K-12 education.

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I would like to believe my feminism started before college but learning the history and understanding of intersectionality through my women studies classes grew my advocacy of standing up for myself and correcting learned behaviors of sexism. I would get into many arguments with friends and family members who would make sexist comments, several of which were males. My dad is one of my biggest supporters in receiving a higher education, but I like to call him a “machismo feminist”. A machismo in Spanish is someone who takes pride in their masculinity and feels the need to protect and to be the head of household. I call him a feminist because how he raised me to fight for my place in male dominate spaces. Growing up my maternal grandfather would throw family barbecues and when it was time to eat, the men would sit at the table first while my mom and aunts would serve them. My dad would pull up a seat and have me sit with him, my uncles and grandpa at the table. To my dad his actions might not have a meaning, but to me it was him breaking generational of sexism and being an ally for feminism. I grew now to pick my battles and just correct my family and friends on factual statements and educate on how they can unlearn their behaviors. Stated in Hooks, B. (2014) my feminist positionality was shaped before college but being in women studies classes helped implement theory and stories to build my confidence in dismantling the cycle of generational sexism (21).

In the last two year of my undergraduate, I grew an immense appreciation for my culture. While registering for classes that will support my women studies minor, I came across numerous Mexican American classes that sparked my interest. The way my Mexican American professors structured the class was so welcoming and engaging. I was able to dig deep into my identity, become vulnerable, share my emotions, create history with art, and cultivated a small community of belonging. Throughout my college journey, I assimilated to what my parents, college advisors, and society suggested for me. Until I got into my Mexican American studies class, I found a

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connection from a book that had my last name. Till this day, I get really excited when I go souvenir shopping and find a magnet that has my name. You will think Trisha is a common name, but it is not. So, seeing my minority last name in a history book gave me such a sense of belonging and gratitude for my family history. In reading Walker, A. (1983), I connected how she felt when reading authors from her ethnic background and wanting to create her own family story so it can be shared throughout generations. I hope in later years, I will get the encouragement to write my family history and share their experiences so future generations do not have to wait till college to see themselves being represented.

During my undergraduate, I read on white supremacy and had a couple of discussions on how they erased history on indigenous communities but until I enrolled in my graduate courses, I have learned how higher education is reflected on colonial ideologies and the systemic view of educational inequity (Patel, L., 2015, p. 16-17). Throughout the past year, my frustration and anger has grown with white supremacy and white fragility not just because I have been reading and watching from past events, but I am currently living in these experiences. In my recent discussion post I have mentioned during the Black Lives Matter movement, my white female CEO decided to have a meeting for us to discuss racial disparities. She did not say the word racism, she used semantic substitutes to describe the unjustified police brutality of white cops killing black males and females. This was my first encounter with her announcing her white supremacy by trying to compare her story to white cops killing innocent black males and females. In the recent month, I have witnessed multiple situations where my white CEO and predominant white director ask or make white fragility/racist questions and comments towards myself and other women of color colleagues. Previously in class, I enclosed how my CEO asked if I could find out the family background history of two students who are Indian. She kept

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insisting to find out which part of India the parents and/or the grandparents immigrated from so she can glorify a sad story to the national organization CEO to sell the girls to get into a competitive program. The situation made me uncomfortable to ask my students the question and later internalized that my CEO used me as a scapegoat. Just recently, I learned that the CEO asked my colleague, who is black “how do you feel being the only black person in the office and if you have always been the only black person in previous jobs”, and my colleague stated she was uncomfortable and tried to change the subject. She also concluded during her interview with the director that she made a comment that her being black will be a good representation of the students from the East side of San Antonio. The East side of San Antonio is predominantly black and has students from low-income families. Stated in DiAngelo, R. (2018) white fragility will form an act of bullying by showing their power and control of a situation. My CEO and director made their entitled position and history known when speaking to their employees and will make the work environment unbearable to the staff who calls out or questions their motives.

Why am I still working in that type of work environment? I see the impact of my work being needed with the students and I get to practice my research that I am learning during graduate school. During my recent program meeting with my students, I asked what could be done to create change in sexism. All the girls had so much to discuss, and they were having such engaging conversations with each other on the topic. The conversations were organic, and we got into book recommendations, one of my seniors mentioned *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa and one of my freshmen mentioned *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism* by Robin DiAngelo. Hearing the girls talk about these books that I have read or currently reading that was part of my undergraduate and graduate assignments give me such hope for the future generations. These young girls are learning what I

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have learned in college. I will continue to share power and expand possibilities to future generations so they will have a good foundation to start when going to college.

If someone would have asked if I wanted to be an educator after graduating with my Bachelor's, I would have laughed and said I hate kids. Reflecting back to how the different experiences in my life shaped my positionality, it has reminded me on what kind of Chicana feminist I strive to be. This past year in the pandemic, it has shown me the difference I can make and the opportunities I can create to form progressive environments that will lead to "fundamental change" in future generations (Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R., 2017, p. 28). My positionality also has shown me that I need to stand up for myself and have those difficult conversations with people in leadership roles that need to unlearn their behaviors of white supremacy and white fragility. In order for change to happen, we need to keep evolving.

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## References

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