



Positionality: Working across Difference Part 1

The “Positionality” curriculum was designed by the Participatory Action Research Center for Organizing (PARCEO), an independent center that supports community groups in their work and organizing. All of PARCEO’s trainings are based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) and popular education, which value and center the leadership and experiences of those most affected by injustice as we collectively work to affect change and build community power.

This training grew out of the needs of SAPNA, a PAR-based health organization (formerly Westchester Square Partnership) based in the Bronx, NYC. The SAPNA parent’s group asked PARCEO to facilitate a workshop to explore how individuals from varied backgrounds and with different levels of participation can work together to build their organization and community. Together, we explored the ways that understanding one’s positionality and identity is a meaningful way to approach collaboration and work with people from different backgrounds or communities. The curriculum continues to be edited and updated to reflect the feedback and needs of workshop participants.

The “Positionality: Working across Difference” curriculum is the first of a three-part series, followed by “Building Community” and “Outreach and Coalition Building.” We recommend starting with “Working across Difference,” where participants examine the complexity of their own identity and consider how it relates to race, class, power, gender, and privilege. Through sharing and valuing different perspectives and stories, participants consider the importance of building connections across differences and commonalities.

Goal of this training: Participants gain an in-depth understanding of their own identity, particularly in relationship to their communities and communities that are not their own. Through sharing stories, participants identify the importance of recognizing differences in order to value all voices and experiences. All of our trainings end with collective reflection, where participants have a chance to share what they learned from the training and what they hope to continue to explore after the training.



Objectives:

- Understand how PAR values all experiences
- Understand your own identity in relation to race, class, power, gender, privilege, role and position
- Authentically recognize difference and building on similarities with others
- Examine our own identities and how that influences our work
- Meaningfully connecting and contribute to community-led work



Table of Contents

Curriculum	4
Additional Resources	11
Overview of PAR Handout	12
Identity Handout	13
Additional Resources	14
Audrey Lorde Quotes Handout	15
Evaluation Form	16

Positionality: Working across Difference

(2.5 hours)

Goal for this session: Participants think about their identity and how it relates to race, class, power, gender, and privilege. Participants reflect on and acknowledge individual differences in relation to their community-based work. Participants gain an understanding of how their individual experiences connect to others, their community, and how to build a strong foundation for work that values all voices, experiences and differences.

Materials

- Markers for facilitators and participants
- 8.5 x 11 paper
- Chart Paper
- Pens
- Handouts, enough copies for each participant: [attached with curriculum]
 - Overview of PAR
 - Identity Worksheet
 - PAR in Action Handout
- Posters/written out (taken from curriculum):
 - Definition of PAR (from Overview of PAR)
 - Definition of Postionality
 - Agenda
 - Audre Lorde quotes
 - Instructions for Interactive Icebreaker
 - Guiding Questions for Identity discussion
 - Migration Story Questions
 - Guiding Questions for Why Stories Matter

Agenda

1. Welcome and introductions
2. Introduction to PAR
3. Examining identity
4. PAR in relationship to race, class, power, gender, and privilege
5. Sharing our stories
6. Why do stories matter? Acknowledging differences and similarities
7. Closing
8. Resources



Interactive Icebreaker Preparation: facilitator activity

(5 minutes)

Action: Facilitators write session agenda, Audre Lorde quotes, and instructions for the interactive introduction on chart paper/board so that participants can start to work on their introduction piece as they trickle in.

- Create a paper-size poster to introduce yourself, your name, your organization/affiliation and response to **Guiding Question:** “How do your experiences connect to the Audre Lorde quotes? What is one question that you have?”

Welcome and Introductions

(15 minutes)

Framing: **Facilitators** welcome the group, guide introductions, and provide a brief overview of the training. Participants collectively establish guidelines for the session. This supports an inclusive space and mutual respect during the training.

Positionality

is a word we use to reflect on how you enter a space, the position or role you hold and how that affects others and the space. Some participants may not connect to the word positionality or have other ways of explaining the idea. It's worth spending a minute or two coming to a collective understanding of the word, its meanings and uses.

Action:

1. **Facilitators** welcome the group, go through the agenda and any housekeeping items like bathroom location, use of photography, etc.
2. Share a bit about who you are as facilitators
3. Guide introductions through the interactive icebreaker



Talking points: **Facilitators** ask participants to go around the room and share:

- Interactive Icebreaker:
 - Name
 - Organization or affiliation to group
 - Connection to Audre Lorde quote
 - One question you bring to the session

Discussion Guidelines

(8 min)

Framing: *Creating discussion guidelines is important for all group meetings, but particularly important when reflecting on positionality/difference/privilege, and for sharing migration stories.*

Action: **Facilitators** ask participants to brainstorm guidelines for how to engage with each other in this training. **Facilitators** take notes and refer back to the guidelines as needed throughout the training. Guidelines may include agreeing to disagree, confidentiality, respecting each other's ideas, gender pronouns and the right to choose not to answer a certain question.

*In an ongoing group,
you would also consider consequences or
how to deal with conflict or participants
who don't follow group-generated
guidelines.*

Community

(10 minutes)

Framing: *We consider our own communities and how they are represented. Participants establish an understanding of what, where and who they mean when they say community.*

Action: **Facilitators** write *Community* in the middle of a large piece of chart paper/board and explain activity: participants popcorn responses to the guiding questions about community. List participant responses around the word *Community*.



Talking point: Facilitators lead a discussion based on **Guiding Questions:**

- What comes to mind when you hear this word?
- What communities do you belong to?
- How are your communities represented?
- What is a place you feel/felt like you belonged?

Connection to next activity: *Group-generated definitions of community show the variety of communities that we belong to and bring into a space. We consider the multiplicity of our identities- as a group and as individuals with multiple identifications and representations- and how PAR helps us recognize, activate and explore our identities.*

Overview of PAR

(10 minutes)

Framing: **Facilitators** give an overview of PAR to establish common themes and terms of PAR. How participants identify themselves, exploring difference and recognizing commonalities, understanding their own position and intention, and valuing individual stories and experiences while building a foundation for all voices, experiences and perspectives, is all rooted in PAR. A big part of PAR is continual reflection. It's a circular process of action, reflection, revision, action. This process keeps the focus on the who and how in the work. The process is just as important as, and often is, the outcome.

Action: **Facilitators** give an overview of PAR based on the **Overview of PAR Handout**. In pairs, participants reflect on the key points of the handout and consider the **Guiding**

Question: "How can this framework help you think about how to enter a space or how to establish collaborations?"

Action: Bring the group back together and guide a short discussion drawing connections between the **Audre Lorde Quotes**, PAR, and the purpose of recognizing difference.

Connection to next activity: *Participants think about PAR in relation to their identities.*

To further illustrate the concept of PAR, share a few of the examples from the **PAR in Action Handout**.



PAR in Relationship to Race, Class, Privilege, Gender, and Power Exercise (30 minutes)

Framing: Using the [Identity Handout](#), participants reflect on the complexity of their own identity and how it relates to race, class, power, gender, and privilege. Participants consider how valuing differences in their own identities connects to valuing different perspectives and stories. This is important for creating an inclusive environment. If we don't reflect on our own identity and how we enter and influence a space, we can unknowingly perpetuate inequality and oppressive power structures.

Individual Reflection (15 min)

Action: **Facilitators** pass out the [Identity Handout](#); participants answer the questions.

Encourage participants to read through all of the questions first. They probably won't have time to answer them all in depth, but can return to the questions at a later point.

Large Group Discussion (15 min)

Talking Points: **Facilitators** guide discussion on the [Identity Handout](#), with additional framing based on **Guiding Questions**:

- What stood out to you about this process or your responses?
- What was surprising or hard?
- How might these reflections influence your work?

Action: Participants reflect individually and then share with the whole group as a popcorn discussion.

Connection to next activity: Migration stories exemplify our expertise, knowledge and understanding of ourselves and our identities. Write **Migration Question** prompts on chart paper. Facilitators break participants into groups, point to the question prompts, and encourage participants to think about their migration stories before the break.



BREAK

Migration Stories: Sharing Your Story

(25 minutes)

Framing: *Sharing a part of their own journey, participants think about how their individual stories connect to their identities. Participants recognize that they are experts in their own lives and that their stories, differences and similarities impact their work. This activity also shows how stories can be used to name and document oppression, a powerful tool in making change.*

Encourage an environment of confidentiality and trust. This includes active listening and recognizing each person's story and experience as true, not just assuming you know their story because of outside research or statistics. Also, if participants do not want to share, that is okay. This time frame in this curriculum is not always long enough for the deep sharing that this activity generates. If your group has time, the exercise may be extended over multiple sessions. For instructions on how to facilitate Migrations Stories over several sessions, see the note at the end of the curriculum.

Actions: Participants break into small groups. **Facilitators** point to the **Guiding Questions** on chart paper and explain the activity.

Talking Points: This activity builds on how our individual stories and experiences are a part of our identities. In small groups, participants take a few minutes for reflection. Each person shares their own story through a short narration of their personal or family's migration history.

Guiding Questions:

- Why did you/your family come here?
- What was your process of coming here?
- Who did you come here with?
- Who or what did you leave behind?

Connection to next activity: *Participants use their migration stories to further recognize identity differences and similarities within the group. After sharing stories, we think about why stories matter and how to build on our similarities and differences.*



Why Do Stories Matter? Acknowledging Differences and Similarities

(15 minutes)

Framing: Through a group reflection on the process of sharing stories, participants acknowledge differences and build on commonalities within the group. This process make it possible for people to build connections and think about how stories drive the work that we do and shape who we are.

Talking Points: **Facilitators** guide discussion based on **Guiding Questions:**

- What did you learn from listening to these stories?
- Why do stories matter?
- Why is it important to build on commonality?
- How do you acknowledge difference?
- What are challenges to acknowledging difference?
- How can you create space to acknowledge, discuss, and reflect on difference in ways that allow a person's full self to be present.

This exercise offers an opportunity to validate stories that may conflict with our own experience of a place of situation. During the discussion, spend time addressing challenges of "differences" in language, race, gender, class, and how to work through challenges.

Connection to next activity: Participants consider how their own story connects to their identity, self and community knowledge. They also think about resources to help support this conversation.

Resources and Closing

(10 minutes)

Framing: We close the session with an open discussion to address any questions, issues, or ideas that came out of the training or that we would like to add. We also collectively share resources.

Action: As a group, brainstorm positionality/power/anti-oppression resources. **Facilitators** take notes on chart paper/board so that participants can build information together and leave with extra resources and ideas for this ongoing work.

Talking Point: In addition to sharing resources, participants reflect on how positionality affects their work process. Each participant shares one thing that they are taking with them, will be thinking about more, or any questions that come to mind.

See resource list at the end of the curriculum for ideas.



Evaluation

(5min)

Action: **Facilitators** pass out evaluation and address any last questions or thoughts.

Extended Migration Stories

Framing: *If your group is meeting over an extended period of time, it can be helpful to divide the telling of migration stories to allow for deeper sharing.*

Action: Explain the activity using the framing for the original activity and invite 2-3 people to sign up to share their migration story at each gathering. Let participants know that they'll have 5-10 minutes to share their story in response to the same guiding questions utilizing whatever format they choose (free-form talking, a poem, video, etc). The stories are not meant to generate conversation about the particulars of the individual experiences, but about larger similarities and differences among the participants. If participants want to continue talking about the particularities of their stories, encourage them to do so at a later point.

Additional Resources

These are some of the resources that we collectively assembled at a PARCEO workshop:

- *Race Forward: [Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation](#)*
- *White Awareness Handbook*
- *Aorta*
- *Western State Center*
- *Coalition of Communities of Color*
- *An Oppression Line*
- *Phenomenology of Whiteness*
- *Border Crossers*
- *Facing History and Ourselves*
- *Inst. for Democratic Renewal and Project Change Anti-Racism Initiative*





What is PAR?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a framework for engaging in research and organizing for social justice that is rooted in a community's own knowledge, wisdom, and experience. PAR recognizes that those most impacted by systemic injustice are in the best position to understand and analyze their needs and challenges and to organize for social change.

In a PAR-generated process:

The outcomes can [take many shapes](#) and forms depending on what the group determines together, but it is the group's own agenda and not someone else's.

We engage in [collective research and organizing](#) to build community and make change.

The work is about [generating and building knowledge together](#) in order to define the change we seek to make. This begins with telling our own stories, which centers our own experiences.

[Community members are recognized as experts](#), and all participants are considered both teachers and learners. Too often, outside "experts" come in to identify and address a community's problems, and PAR challenges this notion of who has the expertise.

We work intentionally and always think carefully about [whose voices are being heard, who is making decisions, and how we are moving forward](#). We consider our roles, position, and privilege in relation to changing conditions of injustice.

Like popular education, it is a broad framework that is [participatory, collective, critical, and reflective](#), building from the work of Orlando Fals-Borda, Paulo Freire, and many others. It is not a neutral process and actively builds community strength and leadership to change unjust conditions.



Identity Handout

1. What are ways you identify yourself? What communities do you feel a part of?

2. Are the ways you identify yourself visible or not, and why?

3. How do the ways you frame, understand, or name your identity(ies) change in different contexts? What influences this decision?

4. Consider an experience in a particular work situation or group setting where you were conscious of your race, class, gender, migration status, sexual identity, or any other part of your identity(ies).
 - What made you think about it, and how did it play itself out?
 - How did the visibility (wanted or unwanted) make you feel?

5. How do your identity(ies) impact the roles or positions you hold in group settings or organizational structures? Does this change in different groups or group formations? If so, why?

6. Environments that promote notions of "diversity" and "inclusion" often perpetuate dominant structures and end up privileging certain experiences and lives. How can we imagine and foster alternative environments?



Questions and Resources to Consider Positionality and Equity

With your Group and your Community

- What are some issues in your communities?
- What are some issues that are currently being addressed in your community and how?
- What other groups work in your community?
- Are there other groups that do similar work or have similar missions and goals?
- Is it considered important to connect with other communities? Why or why not?
- How do you make meaningful connections with other communities?
- What are some things your group can do to connect more with others?
- How can you make relationships with other communities or groups stronger?

Within your Group or Organization

- What was your organization's process of developing the mission/vision? Who was included in the process?
- How is your organization structured?
- What is the division of labor in the organization?
- What types of knowledge and skills are valued? Which are not valued?
- Are there types of work that are unpaid? What types are they?
- Who are the faces of the leaders of the organization? How did they get there?
- Who holds the power in the organization? Whose opinions and voices matter most?
- Who are considered the 'experts'?
- How are different voices and experiences integrated into the mission and everyday activities of the organization?
- How do issues of race, class, gender equality enter into your work process? How is language around these identities addressed?

You with your Organization

- How do you engage with people with different identities, roles, positions, privilege?
- What influences how you work with others? When are those situations different? Why?
- How does your identity impact the roles or positions you hold in your organization?
- Do you see a connection between your race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, ethnicity, or any other part of your identity and your role or position?
- Sometimes the personal views we have might not be reflected in the organization's view, how do you or how does your organization deal with this?
- How do you negotiate individual and group differences without imposing values or opinions on others?
- What does the process of connecting the values of the individuals and those of the organization look like?



Audre Lorde Quotes Handout

Quotes are from *Age, Race, Sex and Class: Women Redefining Difference*; Audre Lorde. Paper delivered at the Copeland Colloquium, Amherst College, April 1980; Reproduced in: *Sister Outsider* Crossing Press, California 1984

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions, which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation.

- Audre Lorde

Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections.

- Audre Lorde



