



# Difficult Conversations: Navigating Social Identity and Politics

Aminah Long, M.S.Ed.

# Overview

- I. Assessing the Situation**
- II. Engaging in Conversation**
- III. Taking Accountability**
- IV. Scenarios**
- V. Q & A**

## Community Agreements

**During our time in this space, we agree to:**

- » Listen actively and attentively.
- » Use “I” statements.
- » Challenge ourselves – “step up or step back”.
- » Lean into discomfort.
- » Be comfortable with silence.
- » Ask for clarification.
- » “Clean up our mess”.
- » Avoid assumptions.
- » Take care of ourselves and each other.

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## Pair & Share

How would you **define** a “difficult” conversation?

What are some things that might make a conversation “difficult” **for you**?

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# Assessing the Situation

## Assessing Yourself

### **Before the conversation, think about your **capacity to engage:****

- Do I have enough time to carefully engage and give the other party/issue deserved attention?
  - Energy?
- Am I equipped with the language and knowledge to fully and inclusively talk about these issues?
- Do I possess the authority to speak on such issues?
- Are there any topics that I am uncomfortable (or triggered by) discussing?
  - “The most difficult part about discussing \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_.”
  - Socratic Method

## Fight or Flight?

(Fight or Flight) is the response of the sympathetic nervous system to a **stressful event**, preparing the body to fight or flee, associated with the adrenal secretion of epinephrine and characterized by several **physiological effects** including increased heart rate and blood flow to the brain and muscles.

## Fight or Flight?

You might find yourself engaging in **fight mode** if your immediate response to confrontation is to...

- **Attack (someone's character and/or ideas)**
- **Defend (the harmful actions at play)**
- **Yell (to assert dominance)**



## Fight or Flight?

You might find yourself engaging in **flight mode** if your immediate response to confrontation is to...

- **Shut down (via compliance and/or \*emotional performance\*)**
- **Withdraw (physically and/or emotionally)**

# Fight or Flight?



## Assessing Your Positionality

**Target:** refers to social identities that are discriminated against, marginalized, disenfranchised, oppressed, exploited by an oppressor and oppressor's system of institutions.

**The target group's culture, language and history is misrepresented, discounted or eradicated, and the dominant group culture is imposed.**

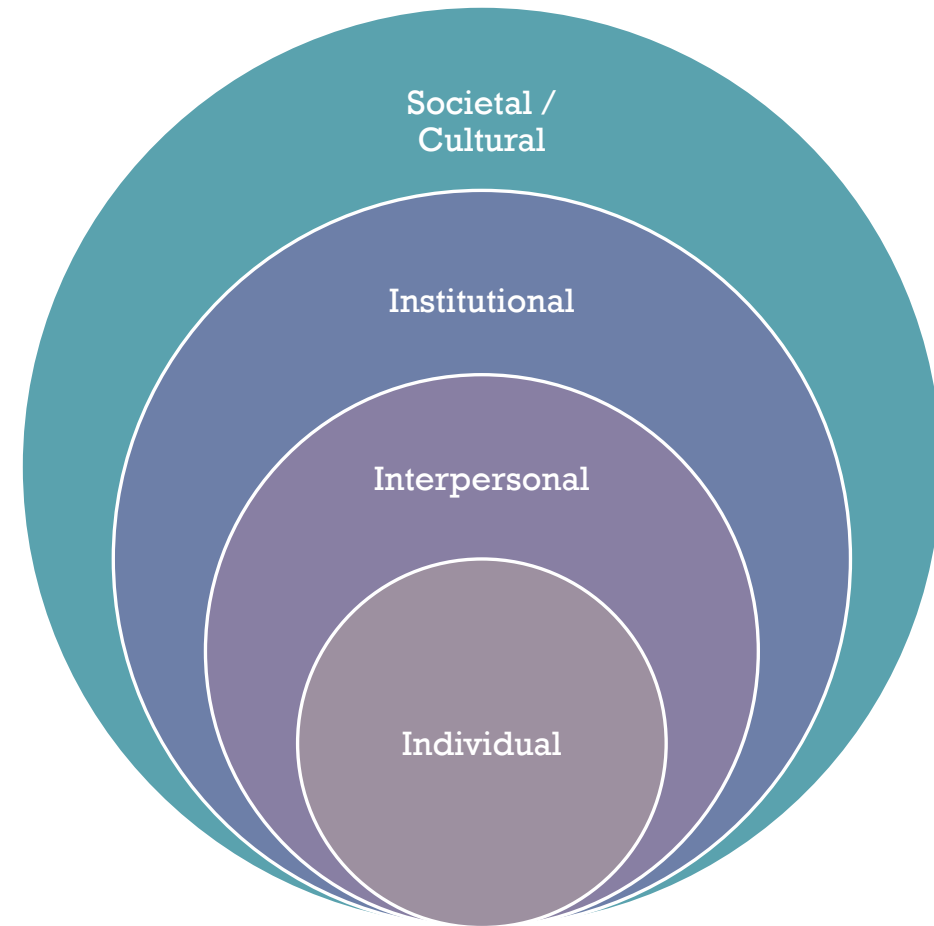


**Agent:** refers to social identities that are privileged by birth or acquisition who knowingly or unknowingly exploit and reap unfair advantage over members of the target groups.

**An agent group has the power to define and name reality, and determine what is normal, real and correct.**

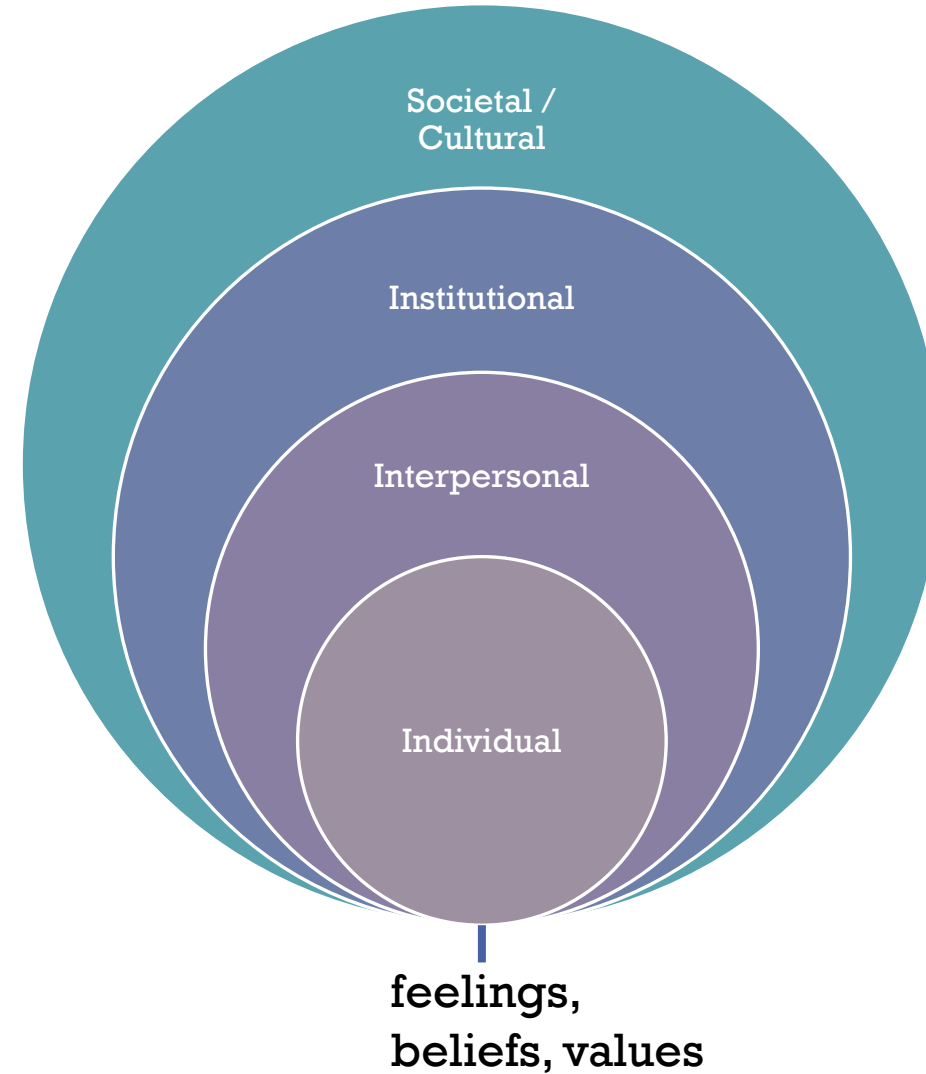
Oppression (the “ism’s”) happens at all levels, reinforced by societal norms, institutional biases, interpersonal interactions and individual beliefs.

## Navigating Our Positionality



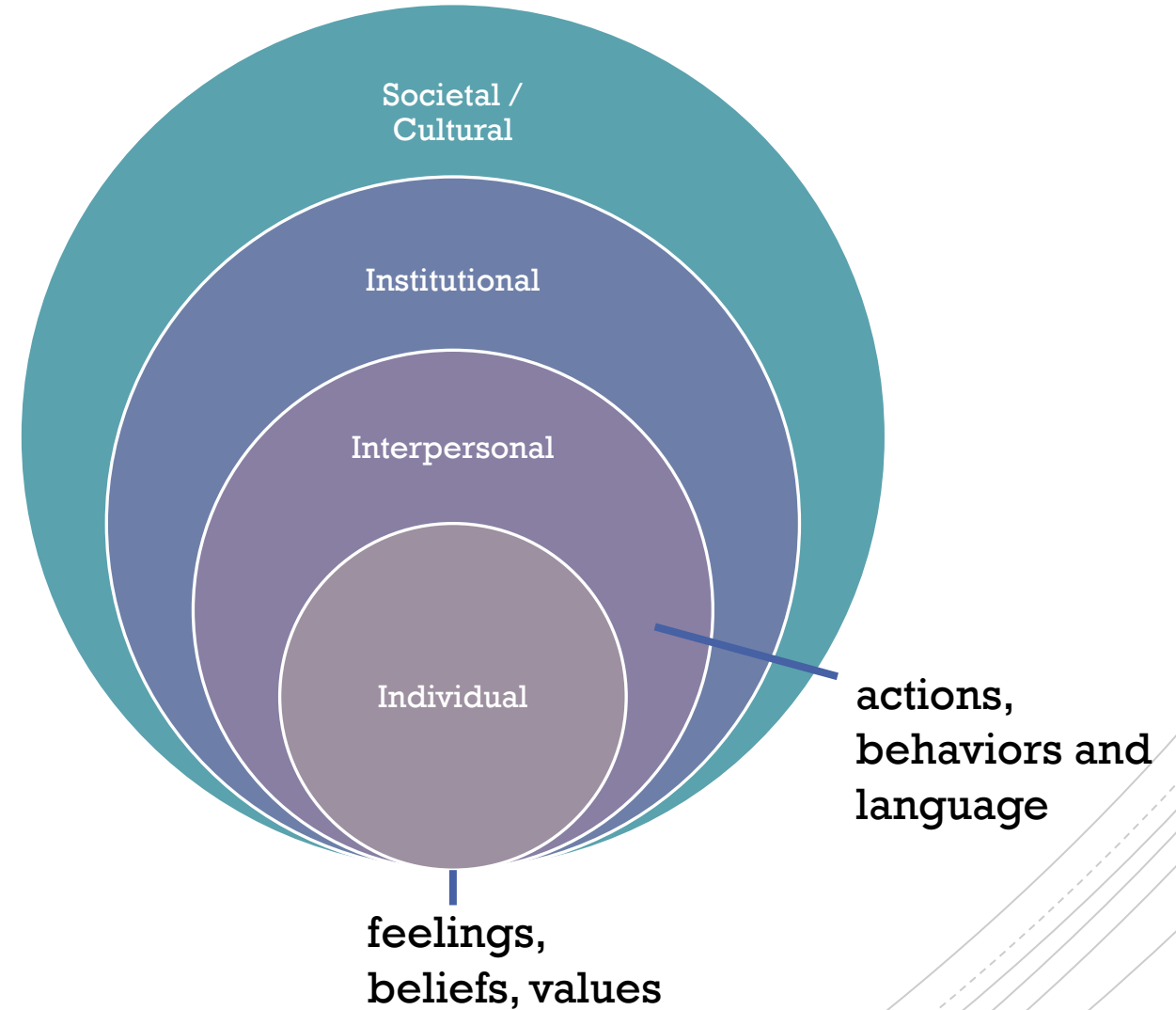
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## Navigating Our Positionality



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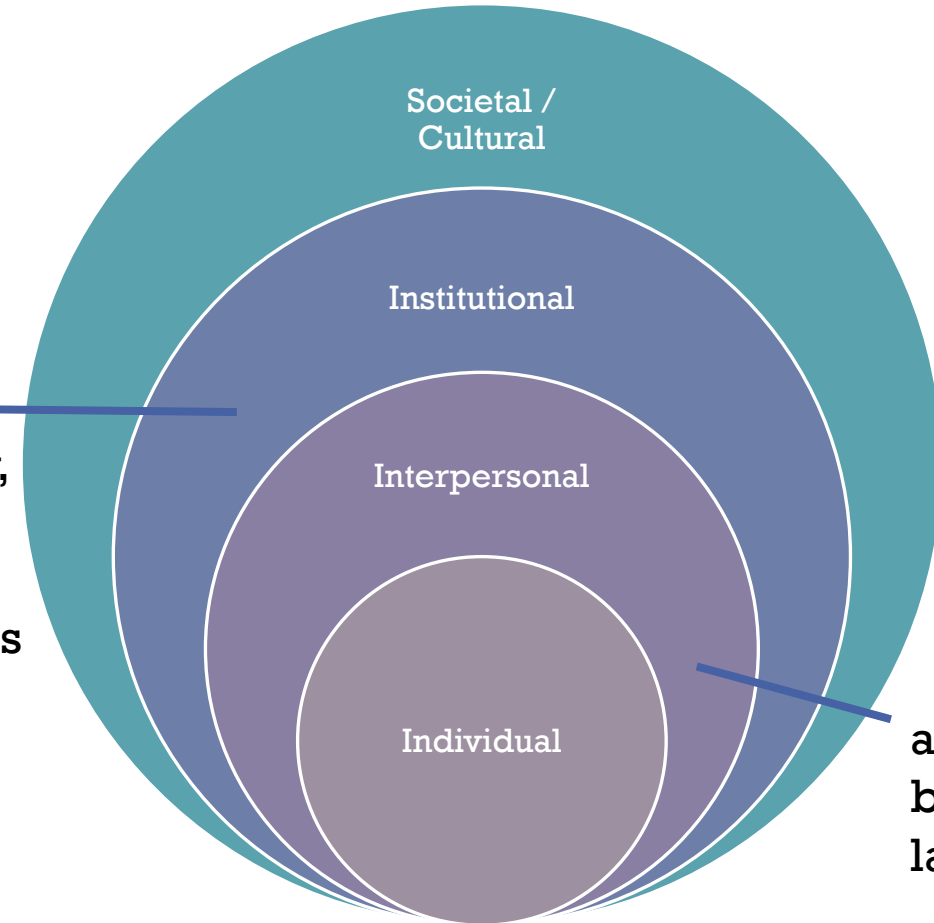
## Navigating Our Positionality



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# Navigating Our Positionality

legal system,  
education  
system,  
public policy,  
hiring  
practices,  
media images



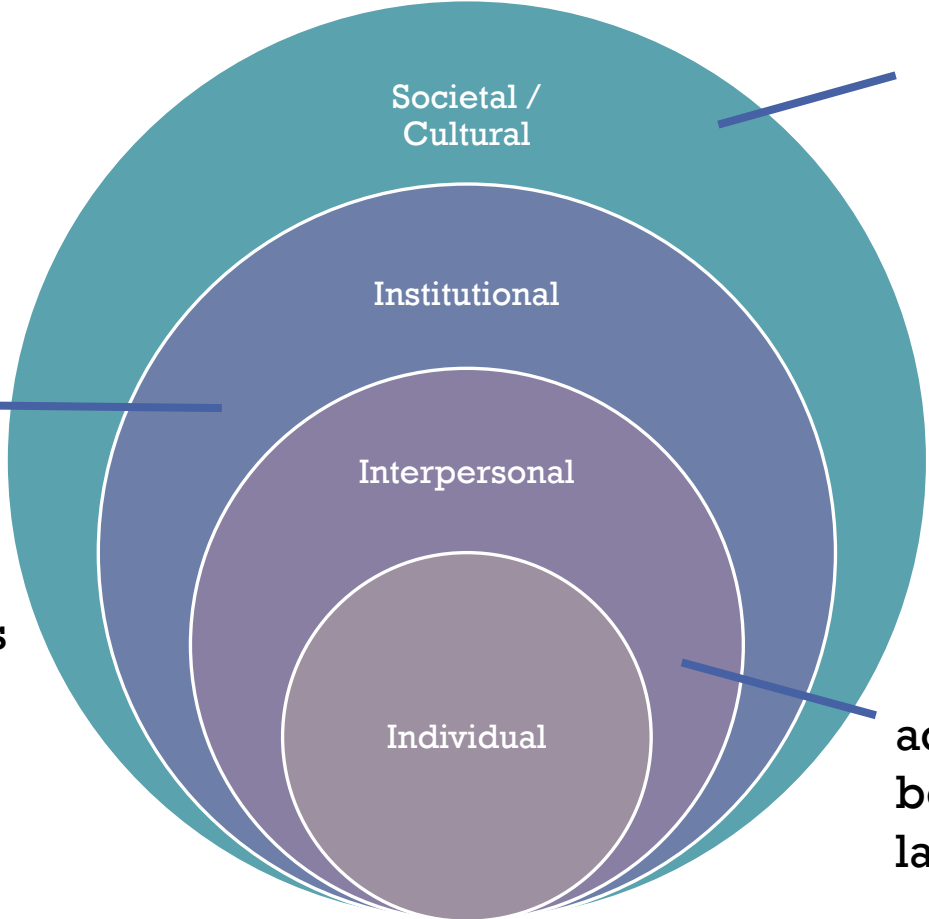
actions,  
behaviors and  
language

feelings,  
beliefs, values

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# Navigating Our Positionality

legal system, education system, public policy, hiring practices, media images



collective ideas about what is “right.”

actions, behaviors and language

feelings, beliefs, values



## Assessing Your Positionality

**Before, during and after engaging in the space of conversation, ask yourself:**

- Which social identities are most/least salient to me (e.g. think about the most, am most sensitive to)?
  - In this particular situation?
- Given the identities of the other party, am I in a position of dominance?
  - How might this impact the dynamic within the space?
- Will this conversation impact my safety and security (e.g. job stability)?



Engaging in  
Conversation

# General Guidelines

1. Outline the ideal outcome(s) of conversation.
2. Listen (actively)!
3. Sit with your discomfort.
4. Avoid assumptions.
5. Make dialogue the goal, not debate.
6. Speak from first person—own the stories you create.
7. Focus on the impact of the situation instead of intent.
8. Don't tone police.
9. Understand that “ally” is a verb.
10. Remember: only you are responsible for regulating your emotions.
11. Take accountability.

## Taking Accountability

- Recognizing and holding yourself responsible the energy you bring to the space.
- Acknowledging the harm done.
- Ask if your understanding is on par with the other party.
- Stop the harmful behavior.
- Make amends for the harm caused.
- Configure alternative behaviors and actions.
- Repeat.

## In Sum

- **Ask yourself: How might x,y,z identities and positionality influence the engagement dynamic in this space?**
- **Avoid tone policing and/or asserting positional authority—do not limit individuals' right to be angry, upset, frustrated or emotional.**
- **Negotiate emotional labor—don't be afraid to ask if it is appropriate to take space for yourself**
  - **Example:**
    - **“I value this engagement and want to make sure that I have enough time to process this. Can we continue this conversation later?”**

## In Sum

- **Remember: Impact > Intent**
- **Follow up—recognize that the work towards understanding does not end with one conversation, this is your opportunity to take it upon yourself and unlearn many of the ideals that cause harm.**

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Scenarios!

## Scenario #1

- Maisha is a Black woman recently hired at a consulting firm.
- During her interview and onboarding process, she wore her hair in a straightened style.
- Recently, she's been wearing her hair in its natural state—which can be described as a coily and/or kinky texture.
- Upon her arrival to a presentation, Maisha wears her hair straighten again to which her co-presenter and colleague, Erin, a white woman exclaims: “Oh! Your hair is back to normal.”
- Maisha follows up by requesting a meeting with Erin to discuss recent comments about her appearance.



## Scenario #2

- It is the holiday season.
- This year, festivities will be hosted at your extended relative's home.
- You've noticed via social media that one of your closest cousins has recently shared overtly sexist and transphobic ideologies.
- You want to confront them in person as this might be the only opportunity– your cousin will be off to college soon.

## Scenario #3

- Ramón, a white passing student was recently accused of being racist by one of his peers, Brianna.
- During class, Ramón made a generalization about the Latinx community.
- According to Brianna, Ramón has “no right to comment on the Latinx experience because he is basically white”.
- Deeply perturbed, Ramón asks Brianna to meet him after class in hopes of coming to a resolution.

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# References

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