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# Training Guide: Power and Privilege in Social Research



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# Training Guide: Power and Privilege in Social Research

Power and privilege are important concepts to understand when it comes to planning, conducting and communicating research. Power and privilege are intertwined in everything that we do as researchers, from the recruitment of participants, to the selection of research methods, data collection, analysis and the presentation of findings.

As researchers, it is crucial to understand the dynamics of power and privilege, where and how these exist, and how they shape the research. This is important so that research is ethical and respects all those involved.

# What is power?

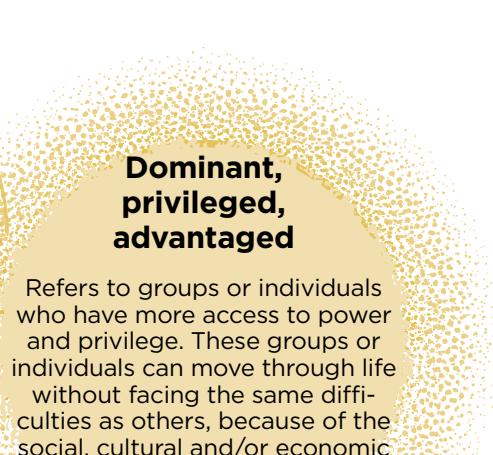
Power is defined as the ability or capacity to act in a particular way, and influence the behaviours of others or events.<sup>1</sup> It exists and operates through our relationships with people, places and objects. The nature of power is fluid, as it constantly shifts and changes in different contexts. Power exists within all individuals and is expressed through actions and words in different ways - directly (i.e conflict) and indirectly (i.e manipulation). Not everyone has the same amount of power and for some individuals it is easier to obtain and use power than others.

When we talk about how power operates among groups and in society, we use the following terms:<sup>2</sup>



**Disadvantaged, minority, marginalised and oppressed**

Refers to groups or individuals who have less access to power or privilege. Often those who have been exploited, ignored and dehumanised.



**Dominant, privileged, advantaged**

Refers to groups or individuals who have more access to power and privilege. These groups or individuals can move through life without facing the same difficulties as others, because of the social, cultural and/or economic advantages that they have.

Whether certain people or groups are in a position of disadvantage or dominance in society is socially constructed. It is not 'natural' or 'normal' for any one group to have more or less privilege or power over another.

As researchers, we need to make sure that power dynamics do not cause harm to participants or disrespect their rights, or lead to unreliable data. To effectively do this, researchers can draw on strategies to achieve fair and just practices.

Some examples of relationships in research where one party may have more power than another:

→ **Interviewer and participant.**

A participant may feel the need to respond in a certain way to please the researcher, due to their perceived authority.

→ **Young researcher and senior researcher.**

A young researcher may tend to agree with the decisions of a senior researcher, even if they disagree.

→ **Parents and child participants.**

A child's parent has the power to provide consent, so has direct influence over whether they participate in the research or not.

→ **Between participants.**

A strongly opinionated participant in a focus group may influence the responses of other participants, or discourage them from contributing.



These relationships of power can change based on different settings and contexts. Can you think of situations where the power balance might shift? What would it mean for the senior researcher if the young researcher had lived experience on the research topic, and they did not?

1 Lexico, n.d, Power. In [Lexico.com dictionary](https://www.lexico.com/dictionary/power), accessed 20 May 2022

2 University of Colorado Denver (2022), *Diversity, Enquiry & Inclusion 101*, Office of Equity, accessed on 13 May 2022



# What is privilege?

Privilege is defined as “a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available to a particular person or group.”<sup>3</sup> It also refers to the “degrees of prestige and respect” that people experience because of their identity.<sup>4</sup>

Individuals or groups can experience oppression as a result of privilege being

intentionally or unintentionally executed on others. However, privilege does not mean that people do not experience hardships, or that the individual or group did not work hard to get to the position they are in.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding your privilege is not only important in research, but an important part of creating

a more inclusive society. You can take an online privilege walk [here](#), to understand the gap that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.



Your level of power is based on many different factors of your identity, from what you look like, to your abilities and where you live. Where do you fit in this wheel? As you relate to the different categories, notice how your level of power and marginalisation shifts.

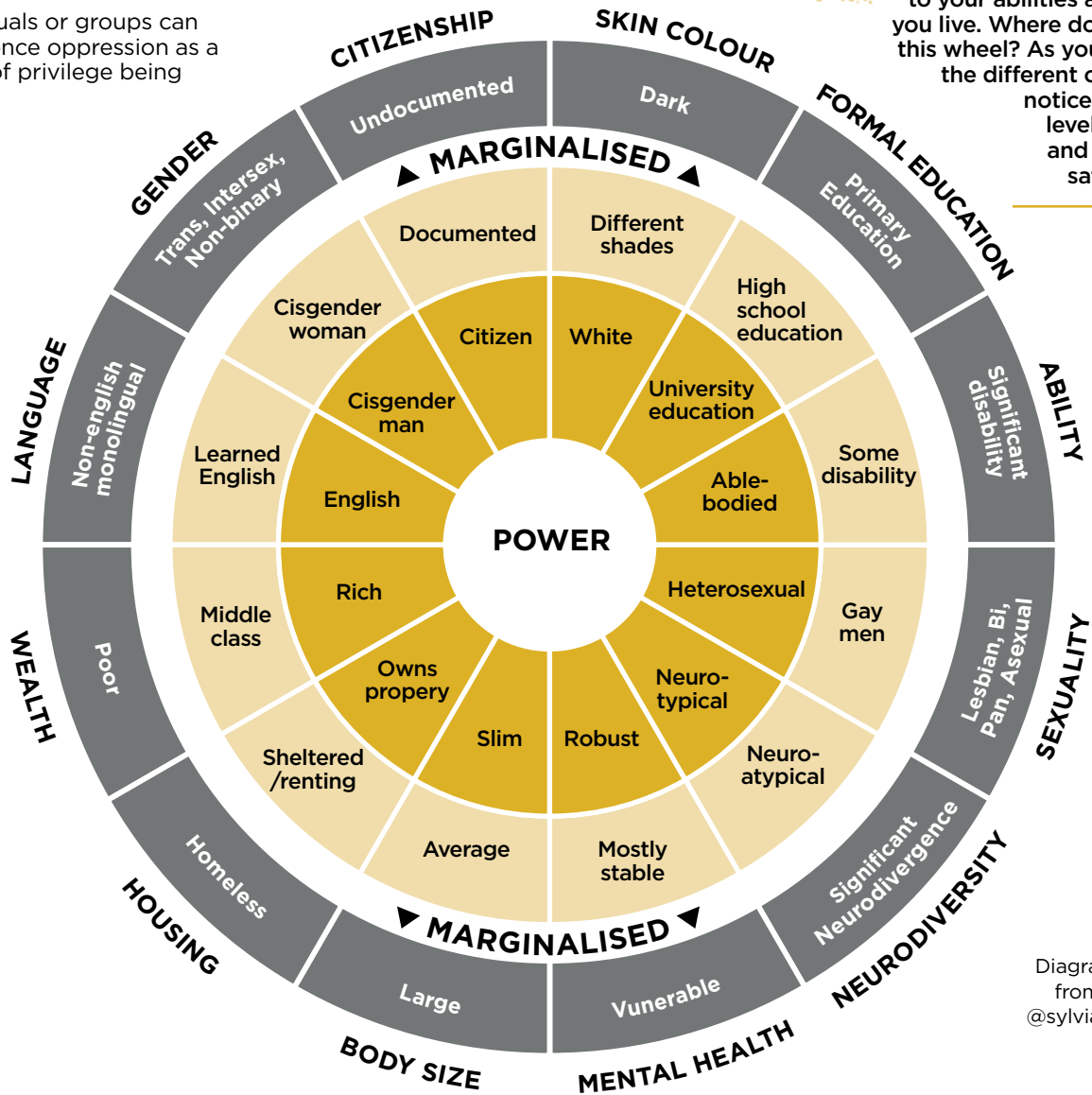


Diagram adapted from cerweb.ca @sylviaduckworth

## Key points

Power and privilege are interconnected

Power is not static

Power and privilege influence someone's ability to access resources, like money and jobs

Privilege is understood through social power systems, e.g. class, gender and race

<sup>3</sup> Lexico, n.d, Privilege. In [Lexico.com dictionary](#), accessed 20 May 2022

<sup>4</sup> University of Colorado Denver (2022), *Diversity, Enquiry & Inclusion 101*, Office of Equity, accessed on 13 May 2022

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

# Intersectionality

Intersectionality refers to the interconnected identities that someone experiences. It involves layers of meaning that are influenced by status, personal experience, context and how, when and where these identities are within society.

The intersections within an individual's identity create unique experiences within their everyday lives. Members of historically oppressed groups, such as those living with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, refugees, and LGBTQIA+ people, experience the impact of intersectionality.

When marginalised identities intersect, the likelihood of oppression and discrimination increases, which magnifies social

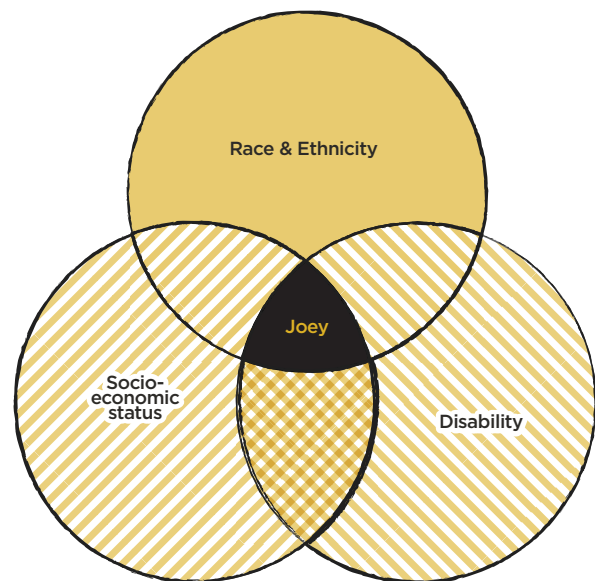
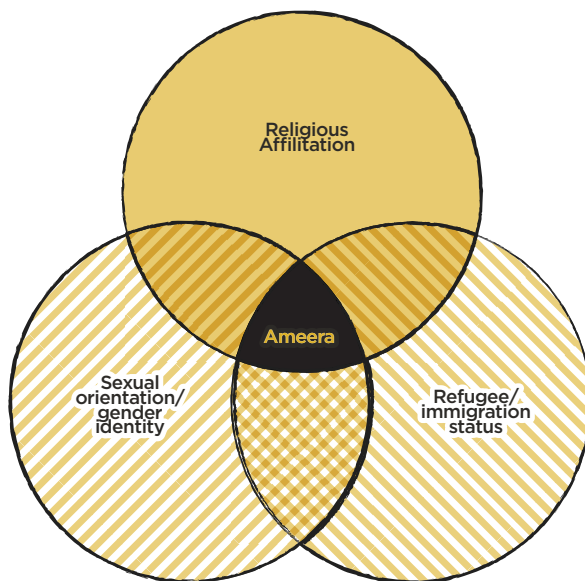
and economic disadvantage for these groups and individuals.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to be aware of intersectionalities because it reveals people's nuanced experiences, which are often overlooked and sometimes not overtly visible. Intersectionality can produce compounding forms of disadvantage, as well as unique knowledge and strength from which people and groups can challenge inequality and injustice.

## What does intersectionality look like?

Ameera (she/her) is a Muslim young person of refugee status who identifies as gay. Her religious background, sexual orientation, gender identity and immigration status shape her experiences, like where she lives and her access to support, now and into the future.

Joey (he/him) is a young white person with a learning disability. His ethnicity, ability and socio-economic status intersect to make up his identity which creates his lived experiences, like what services he can access and the relationships he has with others.



Diagrams: National Association of School Psychologists (2017)



See [this video](#) by the [Intersectional Souls Project](#) for different examples and situations where intersectionality exists.

**There are many different aspects of a person's identity to consider when thinking about intersectionality:<sup>7</sup>**

Race	Criminal History	Religion	Age	Language	Mental health
Ethnicity	Indigenous	Sexual Orientation	Class	Seniority	Migration or visa status
Nationality	Class	Education	Ability	Housing Status	Medical history
Gender	Language	Colour	Socio-economic status	Geographical location	Work experience

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<sup>7</sup> Government of Victoria (2021) *Understanding Intersectionality*, accessed on 20 May, 2022; Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d, *Anti-oppression*, accessed 20 May, 2022.

# Ethical issues of Power and Privilege in Research

Australian researchers have obligations under the **National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)** to conduct respectful, beneficial, and fair research. This requires researchers to be aware of power dynamics and recognise how intersectionality may influence research participants' lived experiences, and how this may impact their participation.<sup>8</sup>

Positions of privilege, authority, or influence may impact participants' ability to freely make informed decisions. This is particularly important when working with children and young people and marginalised groups. For example, participants may feel pressured to take part in the research or feel that they cannot withdraw from the study due to the researcher having a level of authority, or power, over them.

When planning and conducting research, **the National Statement (2007)** provides some important considerations to reflect on how power may cause ethical issues:

→ Does the research method ensure that the participants can meaningfully

participate without any harm or prejudice?

- Does the participant have the capacity to understand what the research involves?
- Has the participant given informed consent to participate in the research?
- Is there a possibility that the participant will be coerced (pressured) by others (e.g. researchers, parents, friends or other adults)?
- Are there conflicting interests and values between children and their parents during the research?

Researchers from UNICEF Innocenti have recommended the following principles when it comes to the ethical considerations required to address intersectionality, power and privilege:<sup>9</sup>

Harms and benefits	Informed Consent	Privacy and Confidentiality	Financial Reimbursement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Explain why research is conducted with specific cohorts and why certain groups are included or excluded from the research.</li> <li>→ Consider all potential harms and benefits - no matter how big or small.</li> <li>→ Have strategies and protocols in place to minimise distress and safeguard research participants from harm.</li> <li>→ Have support available for research participants throughout the research process.</li> <li>→ Identify clear pathways for responding to research participants concerns.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Ensure all participants are fully informed about the research and what is required of them during the research process.</li> <li>→ Explain that participants can negotiate what they consent to do in the research.</li> <li>→ Respect participants' decisions within the research - even if they want to withdraw from the research.</li> <li>→ Consider whether the consent processes are appropriate and accessible for all research participants.</li> <li>→ Recognise the advantages and disadvantages of parental consent.</li> <li>→ Consider the cultural appropriateness of consent within multiple contexts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Respect the research participant's right to privacy and that all information is confidential.</li> <li>→ Store, deposit and protect all data in accordance with your organisation's data management policies. Let the research participants know where it is stored, who has access to the data and how long will the data be stored for.</li> <li>→ Know what to do when there are safety concerns about the research participants' data.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Make sure that all reimbursements are not used to influence the research participants to take part in the research.</li> <li>→ Manage the expectations of the research participants.</li> <li>→ Consult the cultural appropriateness of your proposed reimbursement and the ways that participants receive payments during the research process.</li> </ul>

8 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research: Innocenti.

9 Ibid

# Strategies to navigate ethical issues of power and privilege in research

There are many moments in a research project when power dynamics should be considered. Below are some examples of these and how they could be addressed. Consider the following strategies to address some of the ethical issues relating to power imbalances in unequal or dependent relationships.

Power dynamic	Stage of research process	Potential ethical issues related to power imbalances	Strategies to navigate power imbalance issues
Researchers and children and young people	Research design and planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Research is not beneficial to young people as it is set by adult agendas.</li> <li>→ Research is not just as it excludes young people from being engaged as collaborative researchers, as they are perceived to lack skill/experience.</li> <li>→ Research is not just as terminology is inaccessible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Adopt a co-research approach, where young people are embedded into the research team and share decision-making, and input into formulating research questions and research design.</li> <li>→ Seek input from youth advisory groups in initial stages of planning.</li> <li>→ Present proposed research questions and research design in layman terms - keep it simple!</li> <li>→ Reinforce that young people are the experts of their lived experiences.</li> </ul>
	Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Research does not allow participants to make freely informed decisions, and they are pressured to take part.</li> <li>→ Participants are uninformed as consent forms are inaccessible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Reiterate that decisions to participate or not will not affect their relationship with the researchers, or any other partners involved.</li> <li>→ Provide a youth-friendly, plain language version of the consent form.</li> </ul>
	Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Research is not just as it does not value young people's time involved in the research.</li> <li>→ Participants feel pressured to respond to senior interviewers in a particular way.</li> <li>→ Participants feel pressured by observation of adults.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Encourage participants to start and lead the conversation during the study. Ask additional open-ended questions to guide the participants.</li> <li>→ Encourage participants to ask questions throughout the study.</li> <li>→ Spend time building rapport with participants so that they feel comfortable to be honest.</li> <li>→ Consider the setting/location of the study - youth spaces are less intimidating than corporate offices.</li> <li>→ Consider your body language, what you wear and how you talk and act with participants.</li> <li>→ Ensure that there are not more adults than young people in the room.</li> <li>→ Provide appropriate remuneration to thank participants for their time.</li> </ul>



Power dynamic	Stage of research process	Potential ethical issues related to power imbalances	Strategies to navigate power imbalance issues
Researchers and marginalised groups	Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Research does not allow participants to make freely informed decisions to take part.</li> <li>→ Research is not inclusive as methods are inaccessible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Translate consent form into the participant's first language.</li> <li>→ Use interpreters during the research process.</li> <li>→ Avoid technical jargon.</li> <li>→ Ensure that consent forms are accessible to all research participants (i.e. by utilising the National Relay Service).</li> <li>→ Consult research participants and ask: What is their preferred method of communication? How would they like to be involved in the research?</li> <li>→ Consider how your chosen methods of data collection are accessible for all people, and plan for accessibility requirements (e.g. Auslan interpreters).</li> </ul>
Children and parents	Recruitment and Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Research is not respectful as parents may coerce children to take part.</li> <li>→ Children feel pressured to respond in certain ways in the presence of parents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Ensure that as well as parental consent, informed consent is received from the child.</li> <li>→ Reiterate that participation is voluntary.</li> <li>→ Consider separating children and parents when collecting data from both groups.</li> </ul>

# Exploring your positionality

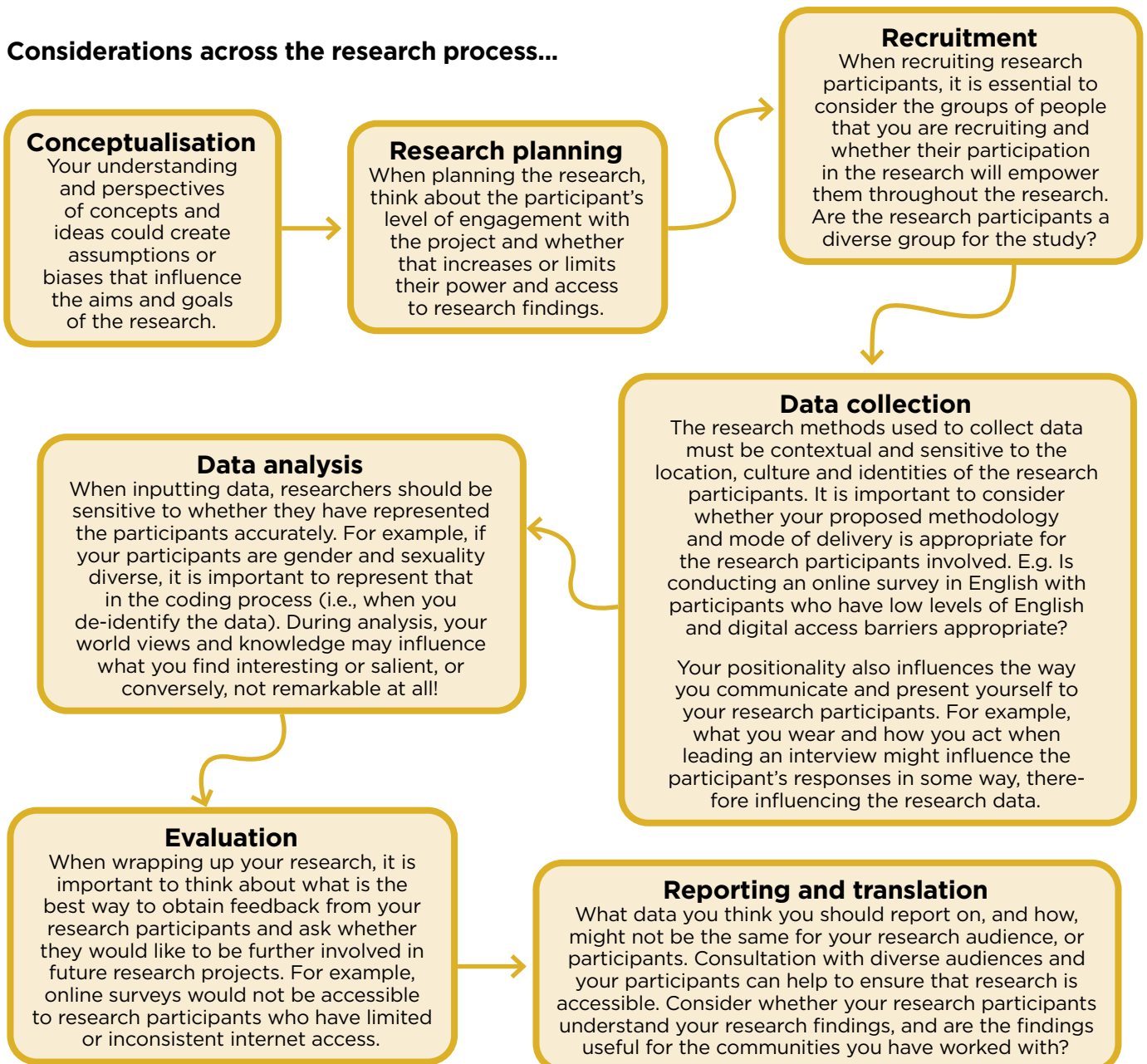
Positionality refers to the positions and perspectives that a researcher has and draws upon when conducting research.<sup>10</sup> Exploring your own positionality will help you to develop your reflexivity, a crucial skill to have as a researcher.

Being reflexive is going one-step further than being reflective, and is about examining your own world views, judgments, assumptions and identity - and considering how these might shape the research. Awareness of these is crucial in research so that you can identify any personal beliefs, interactions or relationships with others, or ideas you have about the world, that might affect the research. For example, your pre-existing

political beliefs may influence how you conduct an interview with someone about the election, and it may influence the patterns that you find in data, and even how you report on these findings.

Whilst reflexivity can help you to become aware of your own biases and be accountable for these, it's important to note that these will never be eliminated completely.<sup>11</sup>

## Considerations across the research process...



<sup>10</sup> Holmes, A. (2020) Researcher Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide, *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8, 4, pp. 1-10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## Example positionality statement in cross-cultural qualitative research

My personal experiences, alongside my ethnicity, age, and gender both influence the project and explain how I am positioned within the project. I am a young Caucasian female with a tertiary education. I was born in England and migrated to Australia three years ago. I thought about water in two ways: environmentally and economically. This is due to firstly, my educational background in Environmental Science and thus my understanding of the consequences of water wasting, and secondly, my financial situation as a student living in shared houses.

**The researcher's identity and how it impacts the research**

Growing up in England, I believe my own water culture to be slightly different to that of other Australians my age. Living up to its stereotype, I remember England as being very wet. In contrast, I have learnt through personal experience whilst living in Australia that Australians take water restrictions very seriously, for example with neighbours policing each other's water usage. As I have never lived without mains (town) water, I find this concept of relying on another source very unfamiliar. The only experience I have had in this context was when I travelled south-east Asia and avoided drinking the local tap water and bought bottled water instead, or when camping and having to collect water from an outside tap.

**Commonalities and differences with research participants**

Researching the Burmese community was not something that I had planned to do. Yet, after undertaking preliminary research, I felt that the inclusion of a minority group in the household sustainability field was very important. Seeing as I know very little about Burmese culture and can speak no Burmese, I am slightly apprehensive about participant recruitment and interviewing. How will I gain access to the Burmese community in Australia when I am not Burmese, and do not know anyone who is?

**What the researcher wants to achieve and how their positionality will impact the research process**

# Recognise relationships, contexts and cultures

Each research participant comes with different lived experiences, relationships, contexts and cultures. To address unequal relationships of power and privilege within research, it is important to recognise the broader social, cultural, economic and political factors that shape the research participant and why and how they take part in the research.

Researchers should also consider the relationships that arise before, during and after the research process. These relationships include, but are not limited to, researchers, parents/guardians/carers, children and young people, other adults, partner organisations, institutions and funding bodies.<sup>12</sup> These relationships are connected with both collective cultures, for example, a young person's identity in the context of their community, and individually.<sup>13</sup>

Researchers should spend time understanding the research participants' context and identity

positions and how these might produce intersecting forms of disadvantage, discrimination - or privilege - and build relationships by respecting their lived experiences and maximising their benefits through the research. It is particularly important to consider, in the context of children and young people, whether they would be able to speak freely within their communities (e.g. if they were in gender-specific or culturally specific groups) and the role of adults within their lived experiences.

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## Recommended resources

University of Southern California (2020) **Diversity Toolkit: A guide to discussing identity, power and privilege**, USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work.

Peggy, M. (1989) "**White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack**" and **Some Notes for Facilitators**". In SEED: The National SEED Project.

Fujii, L. (2012) **Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities**, Cambridge University Press.

Johnson, S. (2015) "What exactly is intersectionality?" Published in Intersectional Souls Project resource section: **<http://intersectionalsouls.weebly.com/what-is-intersectionality.html>**

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<sup>12</sup> Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

# Activity: Writing your positionality statement

## What is your positionality as a researcher?

In 1 paragraph, consider your positionality as a researcher and how you shape the research. Think about...

- Who am I? What is my identity? What powers or privileges do I hold? What disadvantages do I face?
- How do I view myself? How do others view me?
- What are my beliefs (political, religious, environmental, social)?
- What do I value?
- What is my lived experience of the research topic?
- How do I think about the research topic? Why do I think this way?
- What is my relationship with the research participants?  
What commonalities and differences are there?
- What do I want to achieve in the research?
- What questions do I have? What am I unsure or uncertain of?

This will help you understand the connection between you and the research, and surface any power dynamics that may influence the research. Remember that finding your positionality is a complex process and involves deep thinking. It takes time and should not be rushed. It is something you should return to and consider in each phase of a research project.