

Positionality Statement

Darish K. Still · BASW Candidate, Millersville University

Living document — revised as self-awareness deepens

Positionality refers to how one's social location — the intersection of identities, experiences, and structural positions — shapes perception, interpretation, and practice. This document maps my positionality as it relates to CSWE EPAS Competency 2 (Advance Human Rights and Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice) and the NASW Code of Ethics standards on cultural humility, anti-discriminatory practice, and self-awareness.

Identity Snapshot

I occupy the following identity locations simultaneously:

- Black man in America
- Gay man — publicly out, with a history of concealing sexual orientation in professional and clinical settings due to perceived safety risks
- Person in recovery from substance use disorder — with significant lived experience across the behavioral health system
- Adult child of a family system affected by intergenerational addiction and poverty
- Person of Christian faith navigating the tension between religious community and LGBTQ+ identity
- Returning adult learner and first-generation college completer
- Behavioral health professional — currently employed as a Case Manager and Certified Recovery Specialist

No single identity on this list operates in isolation. The course's emphasis on intersectionality is not an abstraction for me — it is the architecture of my lived experience.

Positionality Within Systems of Privilege and Oppression

Competency 2 requires social workers to understand how oppression operates — and to examine their own position within those systems, including where they hold privilege. An honest positionality account requires both.

Where I Experience Marginalization

Race: As a Black man, I have navigated racist systems across healthcare, education, housing, and employment. The racial disparities in addiction treatment access and behavioral health outcomes are not statistics I encountered in a textbook — they are conditions I have lived inside.

Sexual Orientation: I have experienced homophobia as a structural force that directly shaped my care-seeking behavior. For years, I presented as straight in treatment settings because full disclosure felt unsafe. This is not merely a personal story — it is a case study in how homophobia functions as a systemic barrier to affirming, effective care.

Substance Use History: People in recovery from substance use disorder navigate ongoing stigma in employment, healthcare, and social contexts. My history includes more than a decade of engagement with behavioral health systems that delivered sequential rather than integrated treatment — a structural failure, not a personal one.

Economic Marginalization: My biography includes periods of homelessness and poverty. I have navigated public assistance, vocational rehabilitation, and underpaid human services employment. I understand economic injustice from the inside.

Where I Hold Privilege

An honest positionality account does not focus only on marginalization. I also carry privileges that shape what I assume and what I may not see:

Gender: As a man, I benefit from male privilege in professional contexts, even while navigating other forms of marginalization. Gender-based violence, the wage gap, and reproductive justice are areas where my direct experiential understanding is limited.

Citizenship and Documentation: I am a U.S.-born citizen. The experiences of undocumented immigrants, asylum seekers, and people navigating immigration enforcement are not part of my direct experience, and I must approach those populations with active humility.

Disability Status: I do not identify as having a physical disability. I may carry unconscious assumptions about ability that require ongoing examination.

English Fluency: English is my primary language. I have not navigated systems in a language other than my native tongue — a form of access that is often invisible to those who hold it.

Connection to CSWE EPAS Competency 2

Competency 2 asks social workers to advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice. My connection to each dimension is direct:

Social and Racial Justice: My experience as a Black man in American systems provides first-person evidence of how racial inequity operates at structural levels — not just in interpersonal bias, but in policy design, institutional gatekeeping, and differential outcomes.

Economic Justice: I have navigated poverty, public benefits systems, and under-resourced communities. My advocacy for economic justice is grounded in the experience of financial precarity, not observation of it.

Human Rights: Health equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and freedom from discrimination in healthcare settings are human rights issues I engage professionally through my behavioral health work — including the barriers stigma creates to prevention, treatment access, and affirming care.

Intersectionality in Practice: The populations I am most qualified to serve — Black gay men with trauma and addiction histories, LGBTQ+ people with religious backgrounds, people living with HIV — are precisely the populations whose needs are most frequently misaddressed by non-intersectional practice. Competency 2 is my vocational calling, not merely a course framework.

Cautions, Blind Spots, and Growth Edges

Cultural humility requires not only acknowledging positionality but actively managing where it may limit or distort practice:

Proximity to client experience: My lived experience is a clinical asset that requires active boundary management. The NASW Code of Ethics and EPAS standards call for self-regulation — the ability to use personal experience to inform practice without allowing it to drive unsanctioned self-disclosure or over-identification with clients.

Risk of proximity bias: My strongest empathic connection is with populations that mirror my own experience. I must actively cultivate informed empathy for populations whose oppressions operate differently from mine — including women, people with disabilities, undocumented individuals, and populations whose cultural frameworks differ significantly from my own.

The burden of representation: In academic and practice settings, I may be one of very few people present who hold my particular combination of identities. I am not obligated to serve as an educator for every diversity-related question the class raises.

Power differential as future practitioner: As a social work student training for licensure, I am preparing to hold institutional authority over clients — including clients who may share my history. The shift from service recipient to service provider carries its own ethical responsibilities.

Governing Commitments

- Engage honestly with self-reflection requirements while maintaining appropriate disclosure boundaries.
- Actively examine the dimensions of my own privilege alongside my experiences of marginalization.
- Approach populations whose experiences differ from mine with deliberate humility and a commitment to learning.
- Apply the NASW standard of critical self-awareness — recognizing when my values, assumptions, or reactions may be influencing my interpretation of course material or peer contributions.
- Use this course as preparation for culturally humble, justice-informed clinical practice — not as personal therapy.

Anchor Scripture — Romans 8:38–39

This scripture anchors my conviction that every human being — regardless of identity, history, or social location — holds inherent dignity. That conviction is the foundation of my commitment to social justice practice.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”