



REFLECTING ON YOUR IDENTITIES TO ADVANCE EQUITY IN URBAN FORESTRY

AN ARBOR DAY FOUNDATION ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE TRAINING RESOURCE

HONORING SUBJECTIVITY

Objectivity is defined as “lack of favoritism toward one side or another” or “freedom from bias.”¹ A common approach to try to achieve objectivity is to rely on quantitative or large-scale data about environments and systems that seemingly cannot emerge from individual perspectives—like how urban forest canopy coverage has disproportionately declined over the last several decades in predominantly communities of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and lower income communities.

However, we all have a unique combination of backgrounds, experiences, and vantage points that are shaped by the cultures we are a part of, as well as the cultures we are *not* immersed in. This reality creates blind spots when certain perspectives are excluded from the generation of knowledge and decisions. In the U.S., much of the published research and guidance on urban and community forestry emphasizes knowledge generated by those in positions of power, which disproportionately excludes people of color and those with lower median incomes.

Advancing equity in urban and community forestry requires understanding and honoring the subjective experiences of historically marginalized people and communities. This allows for meaningful approaches to urban and community forestry that integrate appropriate responses and repair harm inflicted on communities of color and lower-income residents.

PRACTICING SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND

Examining the ways that each of our unique cultural lenses mediate our understanding of urban and community forestry allows us to make room for recognizing the experiences of those we hope to serve. There are **two practices** in particular that can help to advance equitable, inclusive, and culturally-informed dialogue:

- Reflecting thoughtfully on your own unique viewpoint and how dominant cultures mediate it.
- Listening carefully and without judgment to the viewpoints of the people you hope to serve in equity-seeking communities.

These practices can lead to what philosopher Sandra Harding refers to as “strong objectivity.”² Strong objectivity allows us to identify ways in which dominant cultures guide our approaches to urban and community forestry, and to broaden our knowledge to include the experiences of marginalized people and communities. That way we can build programs that are responsive to experiences of marginalization and eradicate the root causes of inequities in urban and community forestry.

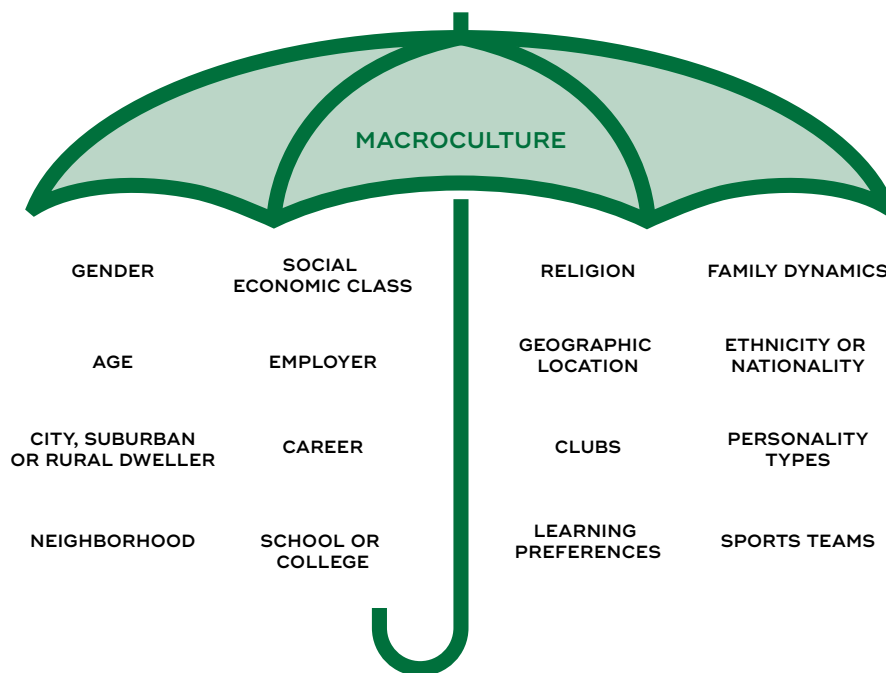
1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/objectivity>
2. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF01064504>

**STEP 1:
IDENTIFY THE 6-8 “MACROCULTURES” THAT ARE MOST MEANINGFUL OR
INFLUENTIAL TO YOU**

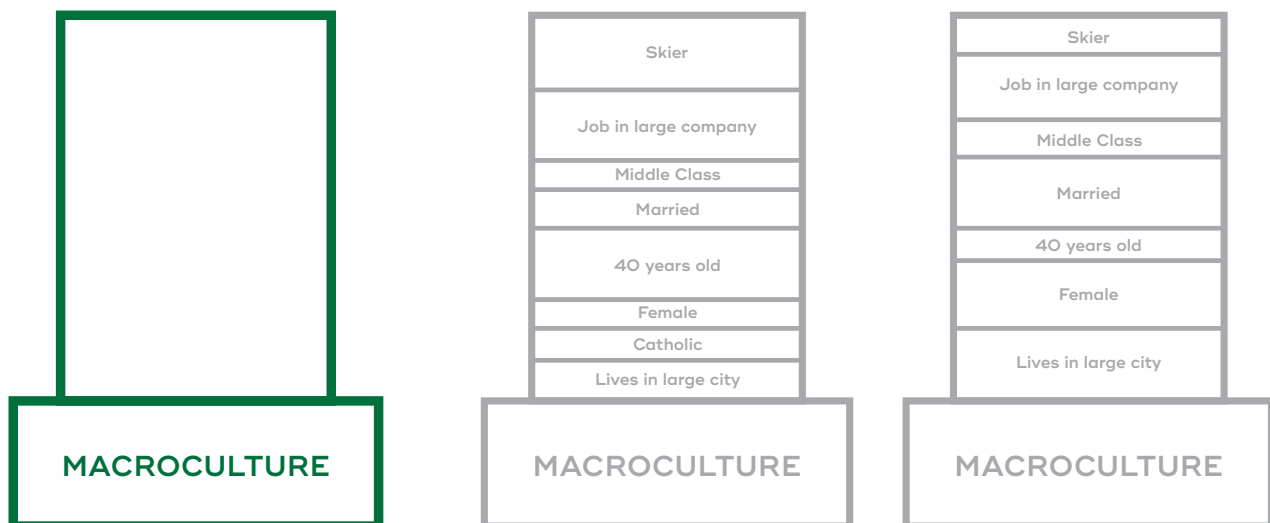
All of us have several cultural identities (or “macrocultures”) that vary in terms of how they influence each of us and our awareness level of that influence.

- Review the smaller umbrellas of cultural identity in the diagram below.
- Select the 6-8 macrocultures that you feel are most meaningful or influential to you personally. In other words, which identities below do you feel influence how you live your life and the decisions you make or *can* make?
- Write your 6-8 macro-cultures in the blank diagram below. Draw the boxes for each one proportionately: Wider boxes indicate the macro-cultural structures that are more important to you and narrower boxes indicating the macro-cultural structures that are less important to you (see examples provided). Feel free to print this page, or draw your diagram on a separate piece of paper.

NOTE: This list is not exhaustive of all important macrocultures (e.g. race, sexual orientation). Please add cultural identities as needed.



EXAMPLES



Inspired by the cultural identity umbrella model from Jurin, R. R., Roush, D., & Danter, D. (2010). Communicating across cultures, pp.189-203. In R. R. Jurin, D. Roush, & D. Danter. (Eds.) Environmental communication: Skills and principles for natural resource managers, scientists, and engineers. London: Springer Science + Business Media

STEP 2:**REFLECT ON HOW YOUR MACRO-CULTURES INTERSECT WITH YOUR APPROACHES TO URBAN AND COMMUNITY FORESTRY PROGRAMS.**

- A. Consider your **most influential** macrocultures in your identity diagram on the previous page.
- B. Write an example for how one or more of those very influential identities influences your approach to the following issues:
 1. The evidence you rely upon to determine goals for your work within urban and community forestry.
 2. Who you talk with most in order to make decisions about urban and community forestry programs.
 3. What you spend most of your time doing in your work within urban and community forestry.
 4. What you discuss with funders or other influential decision-makers in regard to urban and community forestry.
 5. How you measure success for your organization's environmental justice goals.

STEP 3:**UNDERSTAND THE EXPERIENCES OF LOW CANOPY RESIDENTS IN RESPECTFUL WAYS**

At this point, you hopefully have a greater sense of awareness for which macro-cultural structures influence you and your approach to urban and community forestry. This is a crucial step to being able to hear other viewpoints—especially from people who have been marginalized and oppressed in dominant societal systems of power—with humility, openness, and respect.

It is important to ask questions that will help you understand the viewpoints of those you hope to serve, **and** to avoid the urge to offer your viewpoint until you fully understand theirs. It is also important to create reciprocal relationships with people whose time and perspectives you seek.

One way to accomplish this is by sharing this [list of questions](#) created for residents with a community leader or someone who works for a community-based organization. This will help to determine: (1) If the questions are worded appropriately, (2) if any questions should be added or removed, and (3) how best to gain resident feedback to these questions in an equitable way (e.g. offering compensation or reciprocal services like a free tree consultation, or help with community-based programs).

If you are not ready to share this list of questions with a community leader, share them with your colleagues first. They may be able to identify which community-based leaders to reach out to and how these questions might fit in with your existing community engagement efforts.



THE ARBOR DAY FOUNDATION AND FAIR FORESTS CONSULTING

At the Arbor Day Foundation, we believe everyone should have access to the powerful benefits of trees. To help strengthen our focus on communities that need trees most, we partner with experts like Dr. Christine Carmichael from Fair Forests Consulting. This resource, crafted by Dr. Carmichael, is part of our ongoing commitment to empowering our partners to grow their environmental justice work in urban forestry.

Alliance for Community Tree members have access to our full environmental justice training series in the ACT Member Resource Center. Learn about this network and how to join at arborday.org/ACT.