

Exercise 8: Considering Context and Consequences

Discussion Prompts

Use the prompts below to guide your group's conversation.

You can focus on a real research project or make one up for this exercise.

- If you are an oversight committee member, consider how you might use or adapt these questions in your review process—for example, by including them in application materials for researchers.
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Identities and Communities

When we think about 'communities,' we often imagine groups that already exist. But research can also create or expose new vulnerabilities that bring people together in unexpected ways.

For example, as described in today's reading, "Challenging Our Ideas of 'Community' – A Case Study," an algorithm wrongly flagged pet owners who were prescribed opioids for both themselves and their pets, grouping them together based on their shared characteristics.

Similarly, research on BRCA1/2 variation and cancer risk led individuals to organize and define themselves as the 'BRCA previvor' community.

1. **Are there any aspects of your work that you can imagine creating an identity or encouraging new communities to form?** Does your research reinforce existing communities or groups?

Write a brief statement capturing your thoughts.

Putting Your Research in Context

Social and Cultural Context

2. What **social or cultural context** may be relevant to your results?

- a. My research could lead people to relate to each other in new ways
- b. Social stigma or taboo may shape how my results are received
- c. There may be a strong social appetite for this kind of research, raising the risk of overinterpretation (taking the findings further than supported by the research)
- d. My results could appear to conflict with cultural beliefs or practices
- e. My results could appear to reinforce cultural beliefs or practices

Historical Context

3. What **historical context may be relevant to your results?**

- a. Could your findings unintentionally echo harmful narratives used in the past to oppress or marginalize groups?
- b. Does a group's history (e.g., genetic bottlenecks, past research harms) affect the kind of data available to you?
- c. Does the dataset itself have historical context that is important to acknowledge/account for in your results?

Political Context

4. What **political context may be relevant to your results?**

- a. Does your research touch on politically charged issues right now?
- b. How could your results be weaponized against one or more groups/communities?

Environmental Context

5. What **environmental context—such as the built environment including access to transportation and housing quality, as well as exposures to things like air pollution, toxins, or climate change— may be relevant to your results?**

- a. Could your findings affect how environmental factors are understood or addressed in ways that might harm certain communities?

- b. Could your findings help highlight environmental factors that impact health, and in turn support policies or actions that benefit certain communities?

Open Questions About Context

6. What questions do you still have about relevant context to your results?
 - a. I don't know what I don't know: there may be context I'm unaware of
 - b. I *do* know what I don't know: I suspect a finding (such as an outlier/discrepancy) may be due to context, but I don't know what that context is
 - c. I don't have access to the people or materials that would provide needed context
 - d. Materials that would give me more context are in a language I don't understand
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Considering Your Own Context

7. In what ways is *your* personal context (identity, beliefs, positionality) reflected in your results and conclusions?

Write a brief response to this question using “Guide: Writing a Positionality Statement for Biorepository Research” for inspiration. This is for your own personal reflection, though you may adapt it later for grants, publications, or review materials.

→ **If you wrote a positionality statement earlier in your project** (as discussed in *Exercise 6: Grounding Your Communication*), consider taking a few minutes to revisit it and update it if needed.

Has your perspective changed as a result of doing this research? Do you see ways that your identity or beliefs have influenced how you interpreted your findings?

TIP: to explore this concept further, we recommend these two exercises:

- *Exercise 3: Exploring Soft Conflicts of Interest*
- *Exercise 6: Grounding Your Communication*