Getting Close to Inequities:
Inequality Experts’ Proximity to the Communities They Serve

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**Introduction**

The Twin Cities (TC) is one of the whitest, most affluent urban areas in the country, with especially large racial disparities in education, housing, income, and punishment. Professionals work with marginalized communities to eradicate these barriers. Bryan Stevenson asserts that you can’t understand things from a distance; that in order to understand anything you must get close to the things you wish to know (Stevenson, 2014).

This study reveals the importance of **proximity** in addressing racial and ethnic inequities in the Twin Cities. It will also expand on how to use proximity as a concept in policy and social science to address racial and ethnic inequities in cities throughout the nation.

**Research Questions**

- How do key inequality experts view racial/ethnic inequality in the TC?
- How do inequality experts address inequities?
- How does group membership or degree of closeness influence their views on racial and ethnic inequities?

**Methods**

The data for this project was collected for the larger Grand Challenge Project on Interventions for Justice and Equity.

**Participants**

- **Sample size:** I analyzed 17 cases this summer and will complete analysis of remaining interviews in the fall.
- **Race/Ethnicity:** White (11), & Black (6)
- **Gender:** Female (13)
- **Age:** M=48
- **Employment sector:**
  - Education (6)
  - Housing (7)
  - Non-profit (3)
  - Criminal Justice (1)

**Inequality Expert Interviews**

Professionals in housing, education, health, criminal justice, and employment were asked their professional opinion on defining the problems they see in their work that perpetuate opportunity gaps, and any interventions they believe address opportunity gaps in the Twin Cities. Interviewers were prompted with questions to guide the discussion. Interviews lasted no longer than an hour and a half and could be stopped at any point the interviewee wished to do so.

**Two-pronged Definition of Proximity**

**Group Membership**

- **No membership:** having nothing in common with the community they serve.
- **Shared:** share at most one racial, socio-economic, social or cultural identity.
- **Multiple:** sharing more than one racial, socio-economic, social or cultural identity.

**Degree of Closeness**

- **First degree:** direct or immediate personal accounts of inequities.
- **Second degree:** personal observation of inequities.
- **Third degree:** third person accounts of inequities.
- **Fourth degree:** use of generalizations, typically stereotypes or stigmas.

**Findings**

**Proximity and Personal Storytelling**

“I take the bus. […] Yeah, I had a car I think for a year while I lived up here, and then it wasn’t a good idea. Once you ride the bus, it’s like all the inequities play out on the bus, not just in terms of service, but just how people are treated in transit. It’s all there. I think the hardest thing about public transit, it’s you can either use it as a tool to bring more people in, or you can use it as a tool to keep people out, and out of jobs, out of housing, out of education, just out of life. It’s also such a simple way to bring them in.”

-Megan, white female transportation advocate; shared group membership & first and second degree of closeness

**Proximity and Vicarious Storytelling**

“...”She was told her cousin who was doing well in school, was told by her teacher, ‘No, you don’t want to go into law. You can’t become a lawyer. Do something with your hands.’ This is way after slavery, this is even after Jim Crow. This person has been generationally effectively discouraged, and so she moves here and her son has no community supports.”

-Leon, black male school official; third degree of closeness

**Low Proximity**

“Oh, I think first of all I think how we … I think we don’t know our families. I think we look at them as really different, ‘They’re really different than we are. They’re black and they’re really different,’ and I think that is the first thing that we bump up against that … ‘Well, how could I possibly meet this kid’s needs?’”

-Carla, white female school official; no group membership

**Discussion**

Qualitative analysis shows that proximity is complex and multi-dimensional. This study shows how proximity provides inequality experts working with marginalized communities perspective on racial and ethnic inequities. Proximity affects how experts use personal storytelling to explain the inequities they see in their work. Measuring proximity is difficult but a promising approach for understanding beliefs about inequality.