

Mathematical Biography

Assignment overview. Have a conversation with someone about their experiences about how some aspect of their identity has shaped experiences they've had with mathematics. Then write about your conversation.

Conversation. Choose someone to talk to who you're comfortable having a potentially intimate conversation with: a friend, a family member, a classmate, or whoever. If possible, try to choose someone whose background is a little different from your own. Many different dimensions of identity might impact someone's relationship with math. There is data out there suggesting that gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity all might play a role in shaping someone's experiences with math. Other dimensions of identity may be important as well. It's not necessary for the person you talk to to have had *negative* mathematical experiences involving their identity — understanding the role that identity might play in shaping *positive* experiences can be valuable too.

It might be a good idea to plan out some questions you want to ask in advance. You might ask them some of the same questions you asked yourself when you were writing your mathematical autobiography. I also encourage you to *listen respectfully* to what the person you talk to has to say. Acknowledge the significance of their lived experiences and the validity of their thoughts and opinions. Ask questions as neutrally as you can. Do your best to keep your own opinions out of the conversation, unless you really think that sharing something might help them open up.

Write. After you've had your conversation, write roughly 500 words about it. Feel free also to use pseudonyms if that makes things feel more comfortable. Describe what you learned about this person and what your reaction to the conversation is. You might decide to compare and contrast your experiences with theirs. Feel free to structure this however makes most sense to you. You might also decide to look up some data and/or journal articles that help situate the story of the person you talked to in a broader social context.