

# Addressing positionality in qualitative research: Significance, challenges and strategies

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Recognising and exploring one's social identities, personal histories and philosophical assumptions may, at first glance, seem out of place in a research manuscript. However, if such a manuscript is epistemologically aligned with qualitative inquiry paradigms, this introspective approach becomes imperative. Positionality, or the 'disciplined view and articulation of one's analytically situated self'<sup>1</sup> describes how 'the researcher enters into the process of knowledge production'.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, addressing positionality becomes indispensable for fostering transparency and enhancing methodological rigour in qualitative research. It is this deliberate engagement with positionality that enables researchers to enrich scholarly inquiry whilst deepening our understanding of complex phenomena.

To that end, we asked Bearman et al.,<sup>3</sup> the authors of the *Trainees as teachers: Building evaluative judgement through peer teaching* (article housed within this edition) why they felt incorporating positionality was important in their work and how they went about doing so.

## 2 | Q1: 1. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR RESEARCHERS TO ADDRESS POSITIONALITY IN THEIR WORK?

Addressing positionality is important for both researchers and their readers because of its influence on the research process and outcomes. For researchers, positionality determines what we value and are interested in, so it underlies our choices of what to study and how to study it. When we engage in research, our answers to such basic

questions such as 'what is data?', 'how is it produced?' and 'what might it mean?' reflect our social identities, personal histories and our ontologic and epistemologic assumptions. Our positionality then has a crucial role in our research, regardless of whether we address it or not. As Field et al.,<sup>4</sup> point out, examining positionality is a prerequisite for reflexivity. Leaving our positionality unexamined will likely hamper our efforts to justify our research choices and cheapen our analysis and interpretation.

For research involving direct interaction and access to a particular community or context such as in this study, our positionality will also impact our relationships with participants and the data produced. Our positionality will influence how we and participants relate to one another, the nature of the access they are willing to provide us to their thoughts or actions or environments and our possible interpretations. The issue of insider/outsider status and hence the role of familiarity and naivete in how we access and interpret a participant's world is a well-known example of this. There are more nuanced impacts as well, such as accounting for researcher privilege, negotiating power relations or respecting the vulnerability of participants in exposing their private thoughts or accounts of experience to public scrutiny.

Beyond the research process and its outcome (including downstream impact), how we see the world and what types of knowledge and methods of knowledge production we value will influence our interaction with our audience. Readers' own positionality will influence how they interpret the work and what value they attach to it. It may be that we are more likely to find an appreciative audience amongst those whose positioning bears at least some similarity to our own.

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### 3 | Q2: GIVEN THE SPACE LIMITATIONS OF MOST ACADEMIC JOURNALS, HOW DO YOU NEGOTIATE THE CHALLENGES OF INCORPORATING POSITIONALITY INTO MANUSCRIPTS?

Since we think incorporating positionality and reflexivity into our manuscripts is a necessary part of the rigour of our research, we would like to incorporate details of our positionality and how it influenced our work for readers. As Field et al.<sup>4</sup> point out, space constraints influence how we deal with positionality in manuscripts. The dilemma is that an imperfect published paper is infinitely superior to a perfect paper that remains unpublished. As researchers, we are sensitive to the explicit and implicit rules and norms of the conversation we wish to join. Hence, we start by attending to the author guidelines and the style of the papers published in the journal where we think we will reach the desired audience. However, we recognise that these rules and norms are not static but evolve as authors and reviewers/editors negotiate them in practice. We might choose to stretch the boundaries and contribute to this evolution where we have more confidence that our paper will be accepted or that we have alternative journals in mind if the editor and reviewers are not ready for evolution of practices.

### 4 | Q3: HOW DO YOU LEAD CONVERSATIONS ABOUT POSITIONALITY IN YOUR RESEARCH TEAM MEETINGS AS THE RESEARCH LEAD, AND HOW DO YOU FEEL THAT INFLUENCES TEAM DECISIONS?

These conversations are foundational to the very commencement of research design. Sometimes, when researching equity, inclusion and diversity, these conversations may lead to inviting new members on to the research team, to expand its diversity, and sometimes an advisory board may be established or enhanced. A deliberate shift to participatory methods is also a matter of positionality: The team is positioned as researching with participants, rather than about them.

In our experience, there can be considerable time invested upfront in understanding the positionality of team members in reference to the phenomenon of interest (and not taken for granted that that there is a shared representation or interest in the phenomenon). For example, in a qualitative synthesis paper exploring feedback in higher degree research<sup>3</sup> despite selecting team members that ‘may share’ similar views on feedback, we asked all research team members to articulate their positioning (homework) and came together in a face-to-face forum to understand similarities and differences, and how these may bear out on the research question and approach. The questions we asked ourselves are listed below in Table 1:

Discussions about positionality tend to be most overt when PhD candidates are embarking on their thesis. There is an expectation that PhD students will be probed with questions such as the following: Why are you interested in this question? What do you take to mean by this concept? How might your own experience influence what you

**TABLE 1** Positioning prompts on feedback in higher degree research.

Axiological: What are your beliefs regarding feedback? Regarding feedback in PhD supervision? Regarding research supervision?

Conceptual: What frameworks or models inform this?

Empirical: What data or studies inform this view on what constitutes feedback?

Reflexive: What was/is your experience of feedback in supervision (both as student and supervisor), and how does this inform the discussion?

Summary: How would you define feedback for the purposes of this study?

see in the transcripts? However, the positionality of supervisors may be less explicit although of course it is always present. It is not uncommon for research papers that are led by PhD candidates to orientate more strongly to the primary author’s positionality as part of the learning process.

### 5 | Q4: IN THE MANUSCRIPT, TRAINEES AS TEACHERS: BUILDING EVALUATIVE JUDGEMENT THROUGH PEER TEACHING, POSITIONALITY IS PRESENTED FROM A GROUP PERSPECTIVE RATHER THAN A SERIES OF INDIVIDUAL STATEMENTS. WHY DID THE AUTHORS CHOOSE TO PRESENT POSITIONALITY IN THIS WAY?

Positionality is itself a matter of positionality! As authors, we tend to view the social world as relational rather than individual—and this aligns with a mix of collective and individual representation of our position’s vis a vis the research. In Field et al.,<sup>4</sup> the authors wrote ‘Positionality is dynamic, contextual and informed by broader power relations. One’s positionality can shift over time and place, within an institution and in relation to different research projects’. Thus, we propose that (for us) individual statements elide the dynamic engagement of how we collectively and individually positioned ourselves with the work at hand. Thus, whilst we described our collective understandings, we also highlighted some individual variation in our personal histories, circumstances and research experiences. This was a conscious decision to highlight the necessary variation within the team, which will inevitably shape design, analytical processes, and the way in which the data is presented. In short, we do a little bit of both, as we think it reflects the way in which our positions influenced the research: collectively, dynamically and individually.

### 6 | CONCLUSION

In summary, the integration of positionality within research efforts, particularly those aligned with qualitative inquiry paradigms, underscores a vital dimension often overlooked in traditional scholarly discourse.<sup>5</sup> Positionality, encapsulating one’s social identities, personal



narratives and philosophical underpinnings, serves as a cornerstone for understanding the intricate interplay between researchers, their participants and the broader context of knowledge production.<sup>6</sup> Embracing positionality should not be viewed as a scholarly luxury but rather, a methodological necessity that is essential for fostering transparency and bolstering the rigour of one's qualitative research.<sup>7</sup> Negotiating the challenges associated with the inclusion of positionality requires a thoughtful understanding of disciplinary expectations as well as a willingness to push boundaries to advance scholarly dialogue. Given that the inclusion of positionality often prompts thoughtful consideration of diverse perspectives and methodologies, embracing positionality, whether through individual or collective articulations, underscores the dynamic nature of qualitative research and reaffirms the commitment to reflexivity and intellectual integrity.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Erin Kennedy:** Conceptualization; writing—original draft; methodology. **Damian J. Castanelli:** Conceptualization; writing—original draft; methodology. **Elizabeth Molloy:** Conceptualization; writing—original draft; methodology. **Margaret Bearman:** Conceptualization; writing—original draft; methodology.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

The authors have no ethical statement to declare.

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