

A practical guide to positionality and position statements

This resource aims to support individual researchers, or research teams and centres, in considering their positionality. It begins with an overview of what positionality is, and why it is important in our research work, and this is followed by an invitation to explore positionality through a mapping exercise. This aims to support the translation from conceptual understanding into a tangible conceptualisation which can be revisited and reviewed as appropriate.

This guide originates from a workshop held as part of the Decolonising DMU: Tips, Tricks and Takeaways celebration, held in May 2022. The workshop explored another resource created by the project, [a self-auditing guide for Research Centres and Institutes](#), in which colleagues are encouraged to consider the benefit of developing a position statement. Specific focus within the workshop was then given to how we might *begin* to go about exploring our own positionality, resulting in this resource.

What is positionality?

Positionality is the recognition of how a person's characteristics, past experiences and views of the world may influence the way they design, conduct, and interpret a research study. It acknowledges that researchers play a role in the construction of knowledge, and in so doing, we have an impact upon the findings we generate. Establishing our position requires consideration of how we wish to introduce ourselves as researchers.

Positionality is our opportunity to situate ourselves within the research work that we conduct. We may live, work or study within the field we are exploring, we may have a personal history with the research topic, or we may share key characteristics with our research participants. This is known as an insider perspective. Or we may not have a personal link to the circumstances studied, but instead possess a desire to investigate in search of explanatory factors, or we may have expertise around an aspect of the setting we wish to explore. This is known as an outsider perspective.

Our position can also change, over time or depending on the study we are conducting. In reality, as researchers we often 'simultaneously reside in several positions' along a continuum, rather than maintaining one position (Mercer 2007, p.7). This fluidity highlights the importance of exploring where we situate ourselves in relation to our work, to enable clarity for those we work with and transparency for those with whom we share our work.

Reflexivity is essential to the process of understanding our positionality. The practice of reflexivity requires us to be sensitive to our social, political, and cultural context and allows us to be upfront about our existing thoughts and feelings on a research topic.

'A reflexive approach suggests that, rather than trying to eliminate their effect, researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their work, aiming to understand their influence on and in the research process' (Holmes 2020, p.3)

Reflexivity can help us to understand the power relations imbued in our research (Jacobson and Mustafa 2019), offering an

opportunity to consider how to address these in a responsible and respectful way. This kind of reflexivity requires the researcher to be critically conscious and honest about themselves and their position in relation to their work, however uncomfortable.

The reflexive process of expressing our positionality is not a simple check box exercise and takes time and consideration. Making our position transparent does not mean we are able to transcend our own subjectivity (Pillow 2003), but rather it highlights our biases so we can consider their potential influence and work to mitigate them.

Why does positionality matter?

By its very nature, positionality implies a belief that a researcher cannot be separate from the phenomena they study. Parker (1999) describes this effect as ‘the interpretative gap’. By this, he means that there is always a difference between objects/events in the world and the way that we describe them. Language itself is a human construct and can be used with varied meaning by different individuals. It is not always intentional, but as human beings we will always bring a certain perspective with us, and this will inevitably influence our research practice.

It is important to note that this subjectivity is not a weakness of research, but rather an opportunity to be aware of our role and its effect on the studies we conduct. By being explicit about our positionality we can help others to understand how our findings have emerged and to distinguish between different world views and philosophical standpoints.

Positionality statements are useful in highlighting our positionality and privilege, not only in relation to our individual characteristics but also as researchers and academics. They also help fellow researchers and academics to understand the starting point of our research, when reading our findings. This kind of methodological

transparency and rich description can also help to increase the transferability of our work as researchers, aiding others in judging the suitability of a study for their own context.

The development of a positionality statement is also a valuable reflexive exercise for a researcher. Considering our position at the beginning of each new study we work on can help to unearth a deeper understanding of ourselves and our motivations within our research work. Positionality is fluid and we may find that different elements of our social identity become salient within different research studies. Understanding when characteristics are most influential is key to understanding our positionality.

How do I determine my position?

When we begin to consider our positionality, we ask ourselves a few questions:

- The ontological question - what is the nature of reality?
- The epistemological question - how do we know something?
- The methodological question - how do we go about discovering knowledge?

(Guba 1990)

The answers to these questions form the foundation of our positionality. It is then crucial to consider how our identity has influenced, and potentially biased, our answers to these questions, alongside our understanding of and outlook on the world. We can add further layers to this by considering the broader social and political contexts that create our identity and impact our experience of the world.

Once our personal position has begun to form, Savin-Baden and Major (2013) note the importance of then locating ourselves in relation to our specific research study. They advise that we consider how to situate ourselves in relation: first, to the subject that we are investigating; second, to the



communities of people whom we recruit as participants; and third, to the broader research process and context. We repeat this process for each new research study, acknowledging the fluidity of our positionality in different contexts.

Memo writing can be a particularly valuable tool in supporting this reflexive process, as it provides a space to reflect on the research process from conception to dissemination. By engaging with memo writing regularly throughout the research process, it also allows us to capture those changes in the salience of our social identity and to consider the influence that may have upon our work.

It is important to highlight that engaging reflectively in this way takes time and is an iterative process. It is a research skill that requires practice, like any other.

How do I communicate my position with others?

Once we have considered our positionality, we can then consider how to communicate it with others. Below are some examples of ways in which you might communicate your positionality.

1. As an appendix to be used alongside ethics applications, participant information sheets, research reports and peer-reviewed journals.
2. As excerpts or memos used within an article, thesis, or dissertation, to show how your thought processes were situated throughout the research journey.
3. As a researcher bio on your website, your employer's website, your LinkedIn or your Orcid ID page.

Depending upon the space in which you are sharing your positionality, the length may vary. For example, a LinkedIn bio is likely to be 1-2 paragraphs, whilst a thesis positionality statement could span 1-5 pages.

Savin-Baden and Major (2013) highlight several areas that should be covered within a positionality statement:

- description of the researcher's lenses;
- their beliefs (where relevant);
- potential influences of relevance to the study such as demographic characteristics;
- their chosen position in relation to participants and the research context; and
- any concerns that may arise regarding their influence on the research process.

Getting started

Mapping can be a valuable tool in exploring and considering how we present ourselves as researchers (Jacobson and Mustafa 2019, Noel and Paiva 2021). The mapping process allows us to explore how our identities and beliefs interact and overlap with another.

A mapping exercise might begin by exploring the different facets of our identity, in this way we can start with familiar terrain before confronting more complex angles, such as the following prompts.

- What do I believe to be the nature of reality?
- How do we know something?
- How do we go about discovering knowledge?
- How does my identity influence my views?
- What are my views on the subject I am investigating?
- What are my views on my participants?
- What are my views on the research process and context?
- How has my positionality changed over time?

Please see the example map and statement overleaf.

Example Map



Example Statements

I arrive at my current research study as a research fellow with expertise in qualitative methodology, particularly grounded theory and methodologies that amplify participant voice. I live in the city in which the university is located, and I'm also an alumnus of the institution. I consider myself to have a social constructivist view of the world, in that I believe that we each learn through interaction with others and internalise that learning in relation to our prior understanding and experience. In this way, I view reality as subjective and relative to the individual, perhaps this is why I favour qualitative methods.

My social identity, that of a white, heterosexual, able bodied woman affords me significant privilege within the physical space of the institution. I find myself able to feel comfortable in the majority of spaces on campus and saw my myself and my experiences represented throughout my own education. My alumni status adds to this overall sense of belonging.

I consider campus my home and have since very early in my studies. I was drawn to working on this project when I learned that not everyone has the experience of university that I did. I acknowledge my own naivety when I came to this work, and lack of awareness of the realities of university experience for many others. It fuelled a desire to develop a deeper understanding of racial disparity in higher education, and to highlight the diversity of experiences within higher education.

I reside somewhere along the continuum, an insider of the university community, whilst also an outsider in relation to the specific experiences of Black, Asian, and Ethnically Minoritised staff and students. This position raises the question of how I can ensure a safe space for my participants, for them to feel confident that their experiences and views will be handled with respect. This is a space in which I am continually working and growing.



Our own experiences shape our view of the world. Bernard (2017) writes about her positionality as a Black woman inhabiting multiple intersecting identities within the academy and being confronted with challenges such as alienation, isolation and marginalisation. This resonates with my own experiences both inside and outside of the academy as I hope to cope with navigating my way through the world amongst the white gaze. I identify as an able-bodied minoritised multilingual woman from a working-class background. I can speak three languages but for the most part of my life I felt this wasn't an important part of my identity as the languages I speak in addition to English are not considered to be the norm and are not Eurocentric. My background is in English Language Teaching but my subject role does not match my body. I was born in this country but I am regularly "othered" in many forms including my body and speech. For example, although I am a native English speaker it is the norm for people to assume I do not use English as a first language or comment on my linguistic capabilities or police my language use. Linguistic microaggressions are just one dimension to other stereotypes that I regularly endure.

It is not just the way in which I speak; it is the way speech and language is framed towards me. As an example, in my workplace I frequently get mistaken as a student or a person that is 'lost' by staff across the institution (also a common experience for other academics of colour, e.g., Bernard 2017; Johnson and Salisbury 2018). While the outwards appearance of looking young may be appealing to some, the frequent instances of mistaken identity uncover hidden and implicit messages of racial microaggressions that reinforce internal signals of double consciousness and self-condemnation as I question the spaces I can and cannot inhabit. They question my place in the academy and the wider world, also highlighted by the experiences of Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury (2018) in their article "Are you supposed to be in here?" as an example of regular microaggressions directed towards them as they navigate their way through academia. These habitual instances of not being able to belong make me feel like a "space invader" a term coined by Puwar (2004) to show how racialised bodies are often othered and unable to be accepted.

My PhD research is largely infused with a Critical Race Theory lens merged with Postcolonial Theory. This gives me the tools and language to understand and explain my experiences alongside my participants. I draw on Yosso's *Community Cultural Wealth* model (2005) particularly her work on linguistic capital as an example, within my fieldwork to serve as a reminder that non-majoritarian language habits and skills are a source of strength, and mark and protect cultural identities. I use Storytelling, a key concept in CRT, to share counter-narratives of my participants that are rooted in dignity to reframe dominant discourses and uncover hidden structural barriers and practices.

My own lived experience is an important component in developing and defining my research as I share insider insights and intersectional identity markers with my participants. This enables safe spaces between me and my participants. However, I am aware of my own biases and the power dynamics that reside between myself and my participants. I take great care to ensure that my own journey does not solely define the experiences of my participants; I do not want to essentialise their experiences as we are not a homogenous group.



Gender - I was born female and atheistically pass as what society sees as female, I identify as female in terms of my physical body. Recently in the last year I have acknowledged that spiritually I believe we all have feminine and masculine energy. At the same time, I do not identify as being gender fluid but acknowledge that I can operate with both energies.

Sexuality - I acknowledge that being heterosexual and in a cis-passing relationship allows me to not be judged.

Ethnicity and nationality - My relationship with my ethnic identity is complex. I was born in the UK as are both of my parents, however none of my grandparents were born in the UK. In some spaces I am white passing this means I do/have benefit/ed from white privilege and at the same time can be classed as racially ambiguous. I have an olive skin tone and often get asked “where are you from?” “what are you mixed with?” meaning I also experienced some othering. I have also experienced the exotification of this. Being born in the UK and having a UK passport allows me the freedom to travel with a certain level of protection.

Age – Currently at 30 years old I feel as if I am taken seriously enough by my older and younger peers. I am not socially seen as too old or too young and this is likely to come with benefits.

Religion – whilst christened into the Catholic faith at birth, I do not practice any religion and hold my own spiritual beliefs, not wearing any religious clothing also allows me to not face any prejudice.

Disability – I have no physical disabilities, I was diagnosed with a learning difficulty (Dyslexia) at college which means I find some things difficult to read, I have trouble with some pronunciations and spelling.

Health - I am physically healthy and have no long-term health issues. I have postnatal anxiety but apart from this suffer from no mental health conditions.

Language - I speak English as my first language and have always lived in an English-speaking country, I have no accent. Whenever I travel I always come across people who speak English and unless I am in very remote places I do not tend to have a problem communicating.

Education - I have studied in the UK education system in public schools in English since birth. I was fortunate enough to have a fully funded scholarship to study my PhD and acknowledge that having the title Doctor allows me a certain privilege in some spaces.

Employment and economic status – Currently, I am in full time employment but on maternity leave, this will have an impact on my career and earning potential. I live in a dual income household.

Motherhood – I conceived my daughter naturally and had no complications during my pregnancy or birth. I am stating this as some of the work I do centres around families, and I appreciate that complications in conceiving, pregnancy, and birth can all have a major impact on our positions.

Resources

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Produced by

Lucy Ansley lucy.ansley@dmu.ac.uk

Paris Connolly paris.connolly4@dmu.ac.uk

Sumeya Loonat sloonat@dmu.ac.uk

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