



Exploring Researcher Positionality: Insights into Studying Doctoral Students' Educational Experiences in South Africa

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Abstract

This research note presents an examination of my positionality as a doctoral student conducting a study on the work-life integration of emerging researchers in doctoral studies. Grounded in qualitative inquiry, the research delves into the impact of my individual identity as the researcher and my subjective standpoint in the process of research and comprehension of the social phenomena under scrutiny. Positionality, which encompasses personal expertise, cultural principles, power dynamics, and preconceived notions regarding research, assumes a central role in shaping the perspectives of researchers. By sharing personal reflections and insights, this paper aims to illuminate the complexities and fluidity of positionality in qualitative research. Drawing on a collection of research memoirs, I explore my positionality in studying doctoral experiences in South Africa. The paper highlights the dynamic nature of positionality, revealing shifts in the researcher's identity throughout the study and challenging the notion of a fixed researcher identity.

Keywords: *Qualitative Study; Positionality; Reflexivity; Doctoral Education; Fluidity*

Introduction

This paper presents a reflexive analysis of my positionality within a study entitled "*Exploring the Work-Life Integration of Emerging Researchers in Doctoral Studies: A Phenomenological Inquiry*." The study collected data through key informant interviews with individuals concurrently engaged in research positions within a scientific organization and pursuing their doctoral degrees at South African universities, the original study reflected on was granted ethics approval Protocol No REC 2/29/03/23.

Positionality, a crucial aspect in qualitative research which encompasses the researcher's subjective position and its potential influence on the interpretation of the investigated social phenomena (Jamieson, Govaart & Pownall, 2022). It encompasses various elements such as personal knowledge,

cultural values, power dynamics, and preconceived notions about research (Shih, 2019), which permeate every stage of the research process. Reflexivity, an essential component of qualitative inquiry (Medzani, 2021), enables researchers to acknowledge their positionality and critically examine its impact on both them and the participants involved (Mason-Bish, 2019). By offering personal reflections and insights through this researcher's note, the present paper seeks to illuminate the intricate nature of positionality and its ramifications throughout the research endeavor.

Drawing from a collection of research memoirs and utilizing a qualitative approach, I present the conceptualization of personal positionality in relation to factors such as personal values, work experience, age, and gender. By reflecting on my identity shifts throughout the study, I uncover the fluid and dynamic nature of positionality in qualitative research, challenging the notion of a static researcher identity.

The recognition and acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality bear significance within the realm of qualitative studies, given their direct implications for the research process and the subsequent interpretation of findings. While there are numerous resources available on practical field techniques in qualitative research, there is a scarcity of thoughtful discussions on research ethics that go beyond procedural guidelines and delve into "ethics in practice" (Lincoln and Canella 2009). "The wider public has had limited exposure to research practices that prioritize ethics and concern for others" (p282). To address these gaps, it is imperative for researchers to centralize their ethical struggles and actively engage in dialogue to foster understanding (Bettez, 2014). The intricate nature of ethical considerations is compounded by the complexities inherent in qualitative research. The field is characterized by constant evolution, encompassing a wide range of perspectives, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks (St. Pierre & Roulston, 2006, p. 677). As a result, tensions and conflicts arise not only within our individual research endeavors but also within the broader landscape of qualitative research.

By exploring the potential challenges and opportunities associated with positionality, this study offers valuable insights into the multifaceted effects of positionality on both participants and researchers. It contributes to the ongoing discourse on research ethics and underscores the need to prioritize ethical practices that prioritize the well-being and perspectives of others. Through this researcher's note, the aim is to stimulate further discussions on the complexities of positionality in qualitative research and to emphasize the significance of self-reflection and awareness in research practice.

Conceptualizing Positionality and Reflexivity

Reflexivity in research refers to the practice of engaging in self-reflection as researchers. It involves examining our own subjectivities, biases, and how they shape the research process, as well as the reciprocal influence between our research and our worldview (Jamieson, Govaart & Pownall, 2022). While positionality relates to our knowledge and beliefs, reflexivity focuses on how we actively employ this knowledge. A key aspect of reflexivity is critical thinking, which prompts us to question and analyze the rationale and methods behind our research. It involves a critical examination of the usefulness, ethical considerations, and value of what we study, who we study, and how we conduct our research (Willig, 2013). As highlighted by Lazard and McAvoy (2020, p. 177), reflexivity revolves around understanding the research process and recognizing our own influence within it.

This process of questioning and self-reflection is ongoing, as researchers continually reassess and reconstruct their understanding (Barrett et al., 2020). It requires disciplined introspection and prompts researchers to constantly evaluate their perspectives, assumptions, and actions throughout the research journey (Wilkinson, 1988). By embracing reflexivity, researchers can gain deeper insights, challenge biases, and enhance the rigor and quality of their research.

Exploring Identity Shifts

Doctoral candidates who comprised the study participants all work for the same research organization and from South Africa. We all, work together, experienced the effects of lack of support from our universities and some share same gender and race and characterized by the historically racialized higher education. As a researcher, I share a similar socialization background with the participants, considering that these experiences are somewhat common across the country. This situation prompts important inquiries regarding the extent to which our shared circumstances create familiarity. It leads me to question the boundaries I need to navigate considering our shared socio-economic conditions and experiences. Are there any implicit barriers that need to be addressed when negotiating these boundaries? Additionally, how do factors such as my demographic characteristics influence the research process and the findings of the study? These questions drive my exploration as I reflect on my interactions with the study participants and consider the various 'positions' involved, and identities I embodied (Barret et al 2020).

Recognizing Positionality and Reflexivity: Embracing the Role of the Knower

Within scholarly literature, researchers who conduct studies in settings with which they are already familiar or possess prior knowledge about their participants are often referred to as "insiders" or "researchers at home" (Anderson, 2021; Wiederhold, 2015, p. 606). However there has been efforts in literature to dismantle the dichotomy of insider and outsider researcher given that researcher positionality has become quite complex. According to Subreenduth and Rhee (2010), the simplistic dichotomy of categorizing researchers as either "insiders" or "outsiders" fails to encompass the intricate nature of a researcher's positionality in qualitative work, they further state:

“The major limitation of insider–outsider location or Self-Other construct is that the term “hyphen” immediately restricts the imagination for the complexity we attempt to explain, tease out, and analyze. For us, the use of the term “hyphen” continues to signify a dichotomy between insider and outsider or Self and Other. The hyphen is also limiting because it remains a linear occurrence – exactly what we intend to disrupt as we speak of/about for example the field–home, personal–professional, and identity politics”. (pp. 340–341)

This quote highlights that positionality cannot be simplified as a binary categorization of being an insider or an outsider. As Bettez (2015) proposes, the unique composition of each individual and the interactions that unfold within it present distinct challenges concerning reflexivity and other research practices. These challenges encompass various aspects, such as gaining access to participants, wherein a researcher's own composition can simultaneously foster points of connection and disconnection. Additionally, the employed research methods may require a considerable level of trust influenced by one's own composition. Furthermore, considerations regarding disclosure emerge, determining which elements of our composition should be shared and to what extent. The analysis process also necessitates acknowledging blind spots that may shift as our compositions evolve. It can be argued that we are continually navigating and negotiating the intricacies of our positionality, persistently "working the hyphen." As described by Lincoln (2009), the concept of "working the hyphen" pertains to the exploration of the interconnectedness between us as researchers (subject and object) and the individuals or groups for whom we conduct our work (also subject and object). This delicate and occasionally contentious junction involves studying the conjunction of the Self and the Other.

In the subsequent sections I will explore certain traits that created interconnectedness between me and participants, these traits include , my identity as a black South African woman, along with my affiliation with a research organization, formal education from a South African university, and belonging to a specific age group, which have granted me unique access to knowledge that may not be readily available to individuals who do not share these characteristics. I would like to expand more discussing these “insider- research” points to show how these worked together to make me a perceived knower.

Affiliation with Research Organization and Doctoral Candidacy

My affiliation with a research organization and my ongoing pursuit of a doctoral degree offered me unique opportunities and advantages when it came to conducting my study. Being a part of the research organization provided me with established networks and connections within the field, giving me an advantageous position in terms of participant recruitment. According to Anderson (2021) The familiarity researchers have with the social context being studied in social research is often linked to the concept of assuming an insider view of participants' lives.

Through my doctoral candidacy, I was able to establish a shared identity with potential participants. As fellow doctoral candidates, we shared similar experiences, challenges, and aspirations in our academic pursuits. This shared identity created a sense of camaraderie and trust, which played a significant role in establishing rapport and facilitating the recruitment process.

Moreover, my affiliation with the research organization meant that I had direct access to individuals who were not only suitable participants for my study but also had a vested interest in the research being conducted. This access was instrumental in forming the foundation of my participant pool. The existing relationships and professional connections within the organization served as a valuable resource for identifying and approaching potential participants who met the criteria for my study. Furthermore, the shared identity of being part of the same organization allowed for a deeper level of understanding and empathy between myself and the participants. We shared a common context, navigating the challenges and dynamics within the organization, which provided a basis for meaningful engagement and insightful discussions. This shared identity facilitated open and honest exchanges, contributing to the richness of the data collected and enhancing the overall quality of my research.

Gender and Age as Shared Identity

In literature it has been argued that gendered perspective in research is essential for challenging biases, uncovering inequalities, understanding intersectionality, promoting diversity and inclusion, informing policies, and empowering marginalized voices (Watson-Singleton, Lewis & Dworkin, 2021). It is a critical lens through which researchers can contribute to a more equitable and just world. Through a critical analysis of the existing literature, the author addresses the ways in which intersectionality scholarship has often failed to adequately capture the unique experiences and challenges faced by women of color (Cole, 2020). Gender plays a significant role in researcher positionality, particularly when the researcher shares certain life experiences specific to a particular gender. In this study, both female and male participants were included, and as a female researcher, my gender had an impact on the participants' comfort level in sharing their experiences. They felt that I would understand them better and be less critical or judgmental due to our shared gender. The perceived social proximity between us also made it easier for participants to express themselves.

Specific challenges related to gender emerged in discussions about balancing childcare responsibilities while pursuing studies. Women participants found these challenges relatable and felt more comfortable discussing them with me, considering the caregiving responsibilities they faced, such as breastfeeding and related activities.

The age discrepancy between the researcher and the participants significantly impacts the research process, as noted by Manohar et al. (2019). The level of trust and respect established by participants, which directly influences the extent of information shared, is closely intertwined with the age of the researcher. In my case, being around the same age as most participants had a positive impact on our interactions. They perceived our conversations as peer-to-peer rather than an interrogation or a mere research exercise. It is important to acknowledge that these dynamics of gender and age influence the research process, creating both opportunities and challenges. Understanding and reflecting on these factors is crucial for maintaining ethical research practices and establishing rapport with participants.

Socio-Economic Context

In conducting research, the shared socio-economic context between a myself and participants had a significant impact on my positionality and reflexivity. According to Schiffer (2020) when the researcher and participants share a similar socio-economic context, it can contribute positively to both positionality and reflexivity in several ways. I noted that I had shared experiences due to a shared socio-economic context, most of the participants come from humble backgrounds and where it was never a luxury to pursue a doctoral degree but a prerequisite to enhance academic career. When one of my participants reflected on hardship between studying, working, and supporting a family this fostered a sense of empathy, because I understood that is the typical life of an African in South Africa. I began to draw upon my own lived experiences to relate to the participants' perspectives and interpret their responses more accurately. This shared understanding enhanced my positionality by enabling me to navigate the research process with greater sensitivity and authenticity.

It is important to note that while a shared socio-economic context can positively impact positionality and reflexivity, researchers must remain vigilant about potential pitfalls. It is crucial to continuously reflect on and challenge their assumptions, biases, and privileges to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or inadvertently marginalizing certain voices within the research.

Effects of Positionality on Participants and Research Process

As I embarked on conducting interviews with my participants, I held the belief that my role within the research organization and being a black woman would facilitate a sense of connection between me and the participants. However, I also recognized the need to make intentional efforts to establish rapport with each participant individually. These expectations seemed reasonable, as previous research suggests that individuals tend to feel more comfortable and inclined to engage with those who share some commonalities (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). That what occurred during my interviews. Here's an analysis of how positionality influences each stage of these three stages: (Data Collection: Data Analysis and Interpretation)

Data Collection

My Positionality aided the selection of research questions and recruiting the participants themselves. Recruiting participants for research is generally difficult, given even the use of internet services emails, social media platforms generally people are reluctant to respond if there is no established rapport (Kalman, 2019). Given that my participants are my peers, colleagues and we all are pursuing a doctoral degree and understand the difficulty of the process it became easier to recruit participants. I recruited my participants by email as it is easier to track, I wrote a short appealing invite summarizing the purpose of the study and gave glimpse of the research interview questions to expect. Given that the study required that they reflect about their doctoral process it did not require much preparation and allowed participants to immediately avail themselves as some felt interview questions helped them even reflect about their doctoral journey even further. Given that already participants are inundated with work I did not want their participation in the study to feel like extra work. I hereby underline three observations I made during interviews:

- 1. *Trust and Rapport*:** The shared insider qualities context facilitated the establishment of trust and rapport between me and participants. When participants perceive the researcher as someone who can genuinely comprehend their circumstances and challenges, they are more likely to open and share their experiences openly and honestly. This trust and rapport can lead to more in-depth and meaningful data collection, enriching the researcher's understanding and enhancing reflexivity.
- 2. *Enhanced Validity*:** Since I share certain qualities with the participants, it contributed to the validity of the research. According to Schiffer (2020) the researcher's understanding of the participants'

experiences is likely to be more accurate and comprehensive, as they can draw on their own knowledge and familiarity with the context. This alignment enhanced the credibility and transferability of my research findings, as I effectively communicated the participants' experiences to a wider audience.

3. Ethical Considerations: The shared context influenced ethical considerations in the research process. My familiarity with the participants' social circumstances allowed for a more informed and ethical approach to data collection and analysis. I was able to recognize and mitigate potential power imbalances, respecting the participants' autonomy and ensuring their voices are heard and represented accurately.

Data Analysis

My positionality played a crucial role in data analysis where it shaped the coding of data that was analyzed on Atlas ti. Personal experiences, cultural background, and social positioning can influence the identification of themes, patterns, or meanings in the data. Researchers with different positionality might interpret the same data differently, leading to variations in analysis and findings. Awareness of one's positionality is crucial during this stage to minimize biases and ensure a more nuanced analysis. During the analysis of interview transcripts, I found myself to be more attuned to themes and patterns related to social inequalities, discrimination, and the experiences of marginalized individuals. Whilst I was coding the responses to the question about support structures for doctoral students, I paid particular attention to instances where participants from marginalized backgrounds mention barriers they face due to their socio-economic status or lack of institutional support. Which helped me to create codes such as "*Socio-economic barriers*," "*Marginalized experiences*," or "*Lack of institutional support*" to capture these themes.

Interpretation

Interpretation of research findings is heavily influenced by positionality this can manifest in the language used, the emphasis given to certain findings, or the broader implications drawn from the research. For example, when I was analyzing the impact of personal environment on the doctoral journey, I prioritized codes related to *access to resources* and *internet affordability*, given my awareness of the challenges faced by individuals from marginalized communities in accessing such resources. Also being a doctoral student myself the language used during the interview process was easy to follow and importantly to contextualize.

Given that my positionality can influence the interpretation of data, I developed mitigating strategies and reflected in the study. I was transparent about my positionality, by disclosing my background and potential biases. This allowed readers to consider the potential impact of positionality of the findings and interpretations. I also incorporated multiple sources of data, such as interviews, and document analysis, which provided a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Diverse data sources can help mitigate the influence of individual positionality on the overall findings.

Fluidity and Dynamic Nature of Positionality

Recognizing the fluidity and dynamic nature of positionality is essential in qualitative research. Navigating various positionalities becomes an integral part of the researcher's journey, encompassing fieldwork, interpretations, writing, and more. This aspect holds deep personal significance, but articulating positionality proves to be a complex endeavor. Ultimately, we exist as a complex assemblage, a unique amalgamation of multiplicities that surpasses our individual social identities and past experiences (Bettez, 2015). Our assemblage evolves as we navigate through life, grow, and engage with different environments. Approaching our work as complete individuals rather than fragmented aspects of

ourselves is paramount. The understanding of positionality further deepens with the insights provided by DiAngelo and Sensoy (2009):

“The call for positionality is an assertion that knowledge is dependent upon a complex web of cultural values, beliefs, experiences, and ascribed social positions ... Thus, who you are (as knower), is intimately connected to your socialization into a matrix of group locations (including gender, race, class, and sexuality). (p. 446)”.

Therefore, positionality plays a crucial role in the production and comprehension of knowledge.

However, it is problematic to perceive positionality as fixed. Anthias (2002) highlights this issue through the concept of "translocational positionality," making it important to emphasize that we cannot be defined solely by our identities, as they are constantly evolving and subject to change Puar (2007, p.211) offers a critique of the related concept of "intersectionality," arguing that it limits understanding by presuming separable components such as “race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and religion”. Puar (2007) proposes a transformative shift from the concept of intersectionality to that of assemblage, reimagining assemblages as "collections of multiplicities" (p. 211). Extending this notion, Hames-Garcia (2011) advocates for a theory of multiplicity that acknowledges identities as inherently intertwined rather than discrete and separable (p. xi). Assemblages, as outlined by Puar (2007), represent interconnected networks that are dispersed yet interlinked (p. 211), providing a framework to comprehend the dynamics of movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures within events, spatiality, and corporealities (p. 215). By embracing the notion of assemblage, we expand our understanding of the intricate nature of human beings and their interconnectedness, transcending existing frameworks and enabling us to exist beyond conventional boundaries (p. 216).

Challenging the Notion of a Fixed Researcher Identity

Embracing the fluid and ever-shifting nature of positionality in qualitative research necessitates challenging the notion of a fixed researcher identity. As someone who consistently questions rigid categories, rather than adhering to a specific inquiry paradigm, I adopt an inclusive stance, intertwining diverse approaches and perspectives derived from a compilation of research paradigms. This assertion underscores my belief that my role involves interpretation, construction, and the recognition that meaning is negotiated. However, in the section on "positionality" within the work I did on doctoral education, I identified myself as a "development sociologist," and a "critical theorist," among other designations, to emphasize my attention to structural issues and power dynamics.

For instance, the intersection of my racial background, formal education in development studies, and passion for social justice has shaped my lens and focus on inequalities, prompting me to explore the construction of collective knowledge. However, I recognize that these positionalities only offer a partial and evolving understanding of who I am. As a researcher, self-perception directly influences my research approach.

Presently, I am actively involved in a participatory research project that resonates with my personal values and ethics, introducing new dimensions to my scholarly endeavors. This undertaking presents a multitude of opportunities and challenges as I navigate the intricate landscape of qualitative research. Within this context, my theoretical and conceptual orientations form part of a larger assemblage that encompasses my evolving identity and ongoing transformation.

Throughout my journey as a researcher, I am committed to recognizing, comprehending, and navigating these intricacies while refusing to be confined within rigid identity boundaries. I firmly believe that through reflexive acknowledgment of our multifaceted and fluid nature as qualitative researchers—serving as interviewers, analyzers, and (re)presenters—we can transcend initial reactions, gain broader perspectives, unveil hidden insights, and cultivate a sense of collective belonging. Embracing the act of

self-naming and embracing our complex identities empowers us to engage in meaningful research and contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the social fabric that surrounds us.

The Fluid and Ever-shifting Nature of Positionality in Qualitative Research.

The work of Silvia Cristina Bettez on “*Navigating the complexity of qualitative research*” has helped me explore and reflect on the fluid and ever-shifting nature of positionality in qualitative research which stems from the understanding that researchers' identities are multifaceted.

Positionality is not fixed; it evolves as researchers engage with their participants, reflect on their own biases, and navigate the complexities of the research context. Several key factors contribute to the fluidity of positionality. Researchers' identities are influenced by factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and sexual orientation, among others. These aspects of identity intersect and interact, shaping researchers' experiences, beliefs, and values. As individuals' identities and social locations are complex and can change over time, researchers' positions and perspectives are also subject to transformation.

In qualitative research, researchers interact closely with participants, building relationships and co-constructing knowledge. These interactions can influence researchers' perspectives and positionality. As researchers engage in dialogue and actively listen to participants, their understanding of the research topic may evolve, leading to shifts in their positions and interpretations. The broader sociopolitical and cultural context within which research takes place also affects positionality. The social, historical, and institutional dynamics of the research setting influence researchers' positions and shape their understanding of the topic. Changes in societal norms, power dynamics, or cultural shifts can impact how researchers perceive their roles and negotiate their positionality.

By centering our attention on the intricate relationships between participants/coresearchers, readers, and ourselves, we can navigate qualitative research in a more meaningful manner. In the context of postmodern understandings of ever-shifting subjectivities, the pursuit of understanding others and us may appear daunting. However, it is precisely through grappling with this challenge that we uncover profound significance. It is essential to embrace reflexivity that embraces multiplicity without reducing it to a singular perspective and recognizes the unknowable without making it overly familiar. Without engaging in critical reflection that prioritizes connection, we run the risk of causing harm to participants, producing self-centered findings, and misrepresenting phenomena. We must strike a balance where the human element takes precedence over mere tasks, ensuring that we foster genuine communion throughout our research endeavors.

Acknowledging the fluid and ever-shifting nature of positionality is essential in qualitative research as it promotes transparency, reflexivity, and critical awareness. Researchers must continually reflect on their own biases, engage in open dialogue with participants, and consider how their positions influence the research process and findings. By embracing the complexities of positionality, qualitative researchers can navigate the inherent subjectivity of research and enhance the validity and trustworthiness of their work.

Conclusion

This reflexive researcher's note challenges the notion of fixed identity within qualitative research. The exploration of fluid identity demonstrates how it can serve as a facilitator in gaining access to participants and creating a safe space for open expression. By acknowledging and embracing my evolving identity, I was able to establish rapport and trust with participants, allowing them to feel more comfortable and freely share their experiences. This challenges the traditional assumption that researchers must maintain a static, objective identity. Instead, it highlights the value of embracing one's fluid identity and

leveraging it as a resource for richer data collection and analysis. Researchers who acknowledge their evolving positionality can approach the research process with increased flexibility, adaptability, and openness, leading to a deeper understanding of the studied phenomena.

This recognition of the fluid nature of identity in research has implications for future studies. Researchers should consider how their own evolving identities can be leveraged as strengths to facilitate participant engagement, trust, and collaboration. By acknowledging and embracing fluidity, researchers can create research environments that are more inclusive, authentic, and empowering for participants.

Furthermore, this reflexive inquiry has implications for future research on studying educational experiences. Researchers examining similar topics, should consider their own positionality and its potential impact on the research process. They should engage in self-reflection, actively seek diverse perspectives, and foster ongoing dialogue with participants and peers. This approach promotes a more comprehensive understanding of educational experiences and ensures that the research findings are grounded in the lived realities of the participants.

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Notes on Contributor

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