**Complicated shadows: a discussion of positionality within educational research**

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This paper comprises of a Socratic dialogue that explores the mix of advocacy, acceptance, apathy, confusion, and criticality often presented by new educational researchers as they encounter and navigate positionality in the first stages of their research projects. The fictionalised ancient form allows a vehicle to explore common debates and discussions with new researchers as they seek to accommodate to the demands of reflexivity. Concluding with an epilogue the author suggests the importance of forging a place for new educational researchers to thoughtfully engage with positionality, in the hope of avoiding the institutional petrification of such a vital methodological and epistemological approach.

*Keywords*: positionality; reflexivity; method; methodology; alternative data-representation.

**Rationale**

The Socratic Method without Socrates is no more than a pedagogy, aping how some inspired spiritual leader clears his throat and spits, bottles his alleged method and then imagines it is dispensing the water of life. (von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, 1919, p.109)

Lynda Stone (2006), in her study of the induction of graduate researchers in the United States, highlights how the notion of what ‘what works’ dominates in educational research. Stone’s critique is founded upon the insight that ‘new generations’ of researchers learn early on what is ‘normal’ and usually adopt this in their first flurries of research thus perpetuating the cycle. Stone (2006, p. 9) argues that ‘values are woven through courses and research experiences, through papers and projects, articles and finally dissertations. All are constitutive of induction into a broad education research culture.’ Wenger (1998), similarly, points to the ‘informal’ learning involved in the integration into communities of practice as graduates are ingrained with the shared repertoire of actions, discourse and tools. Hodgson and Standish (2006) parody the creed into which educational research novices are inducted, comparing it with a religious order;

The orthodoxy with which the network of educational research operates brings to mind such an order with its evangelical qualoid and perhaps Jesuitical quantoid sects, with the affirmation of one’s Theoretical Framework its creed, with Deferential Citation its genuflection, with Reflection on Positionality its confession, with Citation Indices its devotional icons, with Cohen and Manion its bible and Denzin and Lincoln its liturgy, with the winning of Research Funds its crusade, and with AERA [American Educational Research Association] its pilgrimage. (Hodgson and Standish, 2006, p. 572)

Hodgson and Standish cast positionality as having ‘associations of purging and confession’ (2006, p. 569) in the utilisation of such a ‘methodological tool.’ It is undisputed that positionality has entered the pantheon in educational research (both quantitative and qualitative), often being introduced to the novices of the order as something that works, is necessary and an aid to the efficacy of the educational research process. Marguin et al. (2021, p. 11) state that ‘being aware of one’s own position and positioning in the social field and exercising reflexivity accordingly in order to control the potential or more likely inevitable biases stemming from one’s own subjectivity are part of the acknowledged and expected, but still important methodological discussion, in qualitative research.’

Positionality may be described as the process by which a researcher seeks to locate their ontological and epistemic assumptions within their own situatedness and establish their relation, and their research’s relation, to the social, political, economic and discursive context (Savin and Major, 2013, Marsh et al., 2017, and Grix 2019). Reflexivity in many ways can thought of as the praxis to the phronesis and the continued attention to that situatedness during the research process.

In many education departments a declaration of positionality is a requisite of EdD/PhD submissions and new researchers are tasked, during the initial stages of their project, with the daunting process of locating themselves within questions of the nature of existence and the epistemological foundations of knowledge. As this is often introduced at the start of a research programme it is not unreasonable that new research students, often approaching such questions for the first time, embrace the current assumptions and orthodoxies around them. As Moser (2008, p. 385) notes ‘ironically, when ‘getting personal’ about their work, researchers often choose to discuss themselves in terms of often impersonal externally defined categories (female, white, middle class, feminist, post-structuralist, a parent etc.).’ Many educationalists engaging in higher levels of research for the first time often have a defined and clear purpose to their research stemming from a key issue in their pedagogical career so it is understandable that a declaration positionality may be seen as just another task that needs to be completed before they embark on the real work.

The following paper is inspired by discussions with students regarding positionality as they begin their research projects. It reflects the mix of advocacy, acceptance, apathy, confusion, and criticality I have encountered. It seeks to present questions to what Hodgson and Standish regard as the absent-minded dogmatisation of positionality and, as institutional crystallisation occurs, positionality becoming something it never claimed to be.

I have chosen to draw on an ancient form of discourse, the Socratic dialogue. I have chosen this form for several reasons. Firstly, it is a form that allows an impressionistic portrait of the many discussions and conversations I have had with students regarding positionality. This is not an empirical investigation of students’ views rather it is an unfocussed fictionalised view of half-remembered conversations conglomerated into the artifice of two created characters. Some sections draw inspiration from particularly memorable exchanges e.g., a student’s strong reaction to Ellis and Bochner (2000). The approach may have resonances with Gallop’s anecdotal theory (2002) in seeking to find insight within the specific, momentary, and glancing. Secondly, the form allows uncertainty, changes of position and a plurality of views. I have formed a dialogue with two actors representing different perspectives, rather than imposing a sole authorial voice, reflecting the validity of multiple perspectives on such a key methodological issue and as a nod to the notion of the fractured identity so prevalent in post-modernist discourse. Thirdly, I hope that it will somewhat move towards what Lather (1994, p. 50) terms ‘ironic validity’ in that it recognises truth as a problem, resists the hold of the real, gestures toward the problematics of representation and circulates a form that takes the crisis of representation into account. Fourthly, it offers the chance express uncertainty regarding positionality rather than building a polemical fort, which like these two fictional characters, would be an entirely artificial construct, built on the shaky foundations of my own certainty regarding positionality. As such this is not a discourse that seeks to be ‘girdled in by now-stretched-out but not less intact, notions of neutrality, and truth’ (Fine, 1994, p. 13).

The Socratic dialogue, as typified by Plato’s *Republic* relies heavily on the ‘Socratic elenchus,’ literally a conversation with Socrates. This format relies upon a character making a statement and Socrates seeking to establish whether this statement was true, through examining the terms used, and exploring whether the specifics raised could move to general and universal statements. Plato did not seek to formulate treaties in the Aristotelian sense rather he reflected the shift in Greek culture in the fourth century B.C. away from one which relied upon oral literacy towards one which relied increasingly on written literacy, constructing his philosophy in terms of the conversation. This leads to what Kahn (1996, p. 2) termed the “imaginary and essentially fictional nature of Socratic literature” and what Momigliano (1971: 46) referred to as a literature that ‘moved to a zone between truth and fiction which is most bewildering to the professional historian.’ Though Plochmann (1973, p. 8) noted the strength of dialogue form in that it allowed “free ranging between fact and imagination, abstract thought and concrete embodiment.” It allowed Plato expression of views without essentially being tied to them except in exploration. It also allowed him to construct and give voice to views opposed to his own. The format permitted ideas to be mentioned and dropped, conversations to tail off, participants to agree they are making no progress and participants to be wrong, in many ways a more naturalistic philosophical format than the standard treaties. The form had been used by writers before Plato, such as Zeno of Elea, by his contemporaries, such as Xenophon and those after him, such as the Stoics, the Latin Apologists and medieval logicians.

The following dialogue mimics Plato’s *Crito* and is laid out in a similar fashion to Tredennick’s translation (1957). In attempt to diminish the presence of a single authorial voice there is no Socrates in the dialogue rather two equal participants. Though the form is a Socratic dialogue, it follows the tradition that emerged after Plato, where the Socrates character was not necessarily in the dialogue, despite the format still bearing his name. Unlike a Socratic dialogue, I finish with an epilogue.

**A discussion regarding positionality**

SCENE: *A room. The time is evening, and the room would be almost dark but for the light of a small oil lamp. At the head of a small table* MEL *is sitting patiently on a stool.* SANJAY *enters.*

MEL: Here already Sanjay? Surely it is still late?

SANJAY: Indeed, it is.

MEL: About what time?

SANJAY: Just at the start of evening, which means I think we should begin promptly. We have agreed to discuss positionality and its role for the educational researcher.

MEL: Yes, you know I am confused regarding the effectiveness of positionality as a research tool but let us start at why ‘positionality’ has arisen.

SANJAY: That seems to me like a good starting point, if ambitious. Well, I would agree with Borgman (1992) that withering critiques of realism, universalism and the individual have shaken the foundations of traditional models of methodology, particularly in the social sciences. Monographs such as Campbell and Stanley (1966), which were long the ideal for educational research, seem inappropriate within the current environment. As do the epistemological assumptions they rest upon.

MEL: Yes, the model put forward of educational research, through-out the post-war years, was greatly influenced by models of scientific research. Carr (2006, p.8) notes that discussions in educational research regarding technique often centred upon problems of objectivity and impartiality in research, as if the ideal for the researcher is a state of detached disinterested voyeurism. The dominant paradigm in educational research, throughout the post-war years until the 1980’s, seemed to aspire to that of the natural scientist embracing what Carr termed ‘the disinterested investigator whose only concern is with the pursuit of objective knowledge through ‘value-free’ scientific inquiry’ (p4).

SANJAY: This places the researcher in a difficult position. The scientific method has been seriously maimed, with critics such Nelson, Megill and McClostky (1987) arguing that science is nothing more than a particular socially situated narrative. Polkinghorne (1992) cast it as a social action rather than a free-floating methodology hurdling inevitably towards objective truth. The post-modernist moment has raised doubt on knowledge being able to be systemised or totalised into the singular, all-encompassing framework that science is often portrayed as being able to do. Merton (1942/1973), Knorr-Cetina (1981) and Harroway (1988) were key in identifying the situatedness of knowledge creation. Breurer (2021, p. 97) notes that knowledge cannot be separated from the ‘standpoint of cognition’ and is shaped by subject components such as place, time, preconceptions, group ties etc. Davis and Walsh (2020, p. 2) highlight the ‘multiple and overlapping’ intellectual genealogies of the trend towards ‘identity exercises’ in the production of knowledge pointing to Nancy Hartsock’s standpoint epistemology, Marxist class-consciousness, Foucault’s juxtaposition of ‘power/knowledge’ and the associated ‘Nietzschean suspicion that underwrites it.’ Gadamer was also key in recognising the unavoidability of pre-judgements in his seminal work *Truth and Method* (1975). Cumulatively, it presented a strong argument that the social sciences were mistaken in believing that adapting scientific methods to their area could achieve any claim of objectivity or an overriding theoretical and methodological framework to understand social phenomena.

MEL: Yes, this criticism of the objective claims of academic discourse ran through much of feminist thinking, as well as post-modernist and post-structuralist discourses. Wakefield (1990) argued that this ‘crisis in Western representation’ was first announced by those social groups that had been systematically denied historical representation. She states that the feminist challenge to the patriarchal order was in this sense ‘epistemological in that it questioned the structure of representations by interrogating the system of legitimation by which they are endorsed or excluded’ (Wakefield 1990, p. 21).

Feminism has shared a combined mission with post-modernism/post-structuralism in challenging those claims of objectivity in scholarship which functioned to disguise what could be termed the value-laden nature of theoretical enquiry. Many feminists see the power of post-modernist and post-structuralist discourse to challenge the homocentrism, the rationalisms and dualisms underpinning Enlightenment epistemology.

SANJAY: The widespread acceptance of epistemic anti foundationalism has created many problems regarding legitimation of knowledge in the post-positivist environment. Lyotard asked “Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?” (1984, p. xxv).

MEL: I agree, if we can no longer appeal to an objective truth, and we accept academic discourse as nothing more than subjective representations of reality tied to dominant paradigms, we are left in a situation where the legitimation of research and discourse becomes disputed. However, it would be nihilistic in the extreme to believe we can no longer conduct legitimate research due to all being but a partial representation. Lather (1994, p38) argued that the “crisis” of representation is not an end of representation rather than that of pure presence. We represent but we can no longer claim that we truly represent an objective reality.

SANJAY: Derrida (1978) argues that the inescapability of representation shifts responsibility from representing things in themselves to representing the web of structure, sign and play of social relations. And Misher (1990) reframed the validity of research and academic writing as problematic in a theoretical sense, rather than a technical problem. Maybe it is all about decentring validity from being about epistemological guarantees and as, Lather (1994, p. 38) argued reframing validity as multiple, partial and endlessly deferred. We can never escape that as a researcher we are framing the data we perceive. Positionality has played a clear part in providing a contextual marker by ‘exposing the subject position of knowledge producers’ (Fryer, 2020, p. 29).

MEL: This I think leads us on to positionality, don’t you think?

SANJAY: Yes, if we recognise that representations presented by academic discourse can no longer appeal to an objective truth then we are left with the researcher being central in producing nothing more than a text, which claims an insight upon a situation that he or she encounters. The researcher cannot be termed independent or writing from some ‘God-view’ rather he or she is a social actor producing text presenting his or her perspective on an issue. Making positionality, or it could be termed reflexivity, a central concern of all researchers. If the researcher is central, then surely, we need to understand the researcher as well as the text produced.

MEL: I would say what has arisen is a very strange phenomenon.

SANJAY: How so?

MEL: We agreed that positionality rose out the problems of validity and legitimation following feminist, post-modernist and post-structuralist discourse which shook the foundations of epistemic assumptions. It also challenged the assertions of neutrality and objectivity in traditional academic discourse.

SANJAY: I believe our conversation went in that direction.

MEL: It seems strange to me that positionality has emerged from this climate that recognises truth as multiple, varied and de-centred and yet has become a methodological tool somewhat detached from this lineage. I think it has contradicted itself by becoming a technique, a new centred single position, a new absolute. Positionality is invoked in almost every qualitative research handbook (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 2017) and is expected as integral for the submission of PhD’s in the majority of educational departments. Use of positionality, or what is termed reflexivity, is now a convention and has in practice become, for many, a tool.

SANJAY: So, you are arguing that positionality, or we can also use the term reflexivity, has become mechanical?

MEL: I agree with Pillow that ‘most researchers use reflexivity without defining how they are using it, as if is something we all commonly understand and accept as standard methodological practice for critical research’ (Pillow 2003, p. 176). What use is reflexivity, if we are not being reflective, but just going through the motions of a new orthodoxy? Academic writing has used various devices to enhance its persuasiveness. Whereas it may use rhetoric, claims of rigorous methodology or assertions of impersonal objectivity, is not positionality just replacing these to appropriately frame disciplinary narratives?

SANJAY: In response, I will first start off be saying how vital I think reflexivity is. Breurer (2021, p. 97) states that ‘through recognising one’s situatedness’ this should make the researcher ‘more aware of their motivations for their research choice, shape the process of carrying out the research and provide some reflexivity on the situated nature of research.’ McCarthy notes how traditionally the social sciences were dependent upon offering a “‘view from nowhere’ with all of its rights and privileges.” (McCarthy, 1994, p. 14. Indeed, reflexive methods grew in the 1970’s as a response to the critiques of classical and colonial ethnographic methods, which situated the researcher as non-exploitative and compassionate toward the research subjects (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Similarly, critical theory challenged the ‘privileged non-position of social scientific knowledge by analysing the modes of its production, the roles it played in society, the interests it served, and the historical processes through which is came to power.’ (McCarthy, 1994, p. 14). It is important, I think, that we situate the researcher as historically located, a social actor and working through contemporary paradigms. Bourdieu (2007) was confident that self-sociological analysis could make researchers aware of their positionality in academic and social fields, which is inherent in the production of knowledge, and explore the power relations in the research process.

MEL: Well, I think you have made the case that the researcher has got to recognise his or her place in society and that producing knowledge is in many ways a form of social action, rather than simply uncovering ‘truth’. I think any researcher must recognise that but what I am worried about is how do we address this positionality? I would ask how do we turn this into something which improves research and improves our insight? I have read academic pieces which embrace reflexivity and the centrality of the researcher position and found them indulgent.

SANJAY: Well give me an example?

MEL: I will take one of the more extreme versions I encountered in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* edited by Denzin and Lincoln (2000), a chapter entitled *Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity* by Ellis and Bochner. The piece is constituted as a short story with the couple communicating with their target, a PhD student, who they suitably rescue and get through her PhD proposal meeting by enlightening her to personal narrative. As well as this central heroic episode the audience is treated to recollections on how Ellis and Bochner wanted to bow out of an article and go to the beach (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 735), how good looking Bochner is (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 743), how Bochner makes a joke at the expense of a bemused chairman to an academic meeting’s amusement (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 749), how Ellis buys coffee for the PhD student despite the student’s insistence that she pays (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 751) and how Ellis wins over a scientist on the PhD panel (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 759). How is this helping our insight into the world? Is it not turning the privileged position of the academic into some heroic odyssey?

SANJAY: I can see you reacted strongly to the paper and possibly have focused too much on petty annoyances rather than the argument it is putting forward?

MEL: Ellis and Bochner have taken positionality to the extreme by regarding the researcher’s position so dominantly central, as Ellis notes in the narrative “I start with a personal life, I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try and understand an experience I have lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a particular life’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 737). Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 746-7) also question the assumption that research should not have therapeutic and personal value for the researcher and advocate that the researcher should express vulnerability and subjectivity in the text. What useful insight will we gain from the academic elite examining their own privileged existence?

SANJAY: It could be argued that auto-ethnography has opened up new worlds and different ways of seeing the world. Anyway, have you not taken an extreme example here?

MEL: I may have done but I believe it starkly illustrates my concerns with positionality. If it is not addressed modestly and sensibly it will not pass Patai’s test (1994, p. 69) of self-reflexivity producing good research. Rather we will have personal stories of academic’s lives accepted as publishable social science. I think it is a dangerous situation, if in embracing positionality, research becomes so personal it does not produce meaningful insight into the world, that is socially useful, and, to use an Aristotelian term, ‘for the good’. As Patai notes “Taking account of my own position does not change reality. It does not, for example, redistribute income, gain political rights for those who do not have them, alleviate misery or improve health.” (Patai, 1994, p. 67).

SANJAY: That is a strong criticism. I do accept the criticism by Patai that academics cannot accept that the world is put to rights by acknowledgement of one’s own position. However, I think we have taken an extreme form of positionality in your example and we have to examine how positionality and self-reflexivity can be useful in research. I believe it is important to be critically conscious of how the researcher’s location, across gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality etc. influences all stages of the research process from selecting the research question, to the organisation of research, the collecting of data and the subsequent interpretation. Holmes (2020, p.3) notes that a ‘reflexive approach suggests, that, rather than trying to eliminate their effect, researchers acknowledge and disclose their selves in their work, aiming to understand their influence on and in the research process.’ We do need to examine this, I believe, if our research is to be effective and ethical.

MEL: So, I see positionality is best when you reflect on your current position and pay attention to how this affects the research process?

SANJAY: Yes, Macbeth notes “by most accounts, reflexivity is a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world, and penetrating the representational exercise itself.” (Macbeth, 2001, p. 35)

MEL: I think this is a rather ambitious claim and is it fair to say that the majority of declarations of positionality achieve this? Breurer (2021) is an example of this level of sophistication, and it is a meaningful and thoughtful reflection. However, I do note this example is only possible as the author is looking back on an academic career and, with accompanying decades of perspective, can assess the historic, social and political influences on his thinking. Augustine was only able to compose his *Retractions* (2010) at the end of his life. I do accept that the researcher should be reflexive when engaged in the research process and, as you stated previously, this does require looking at your position and your commitments. Yet don’t you think many of these declarations of positionality are performative rather than displaying the authenticity demonstrated in Breuer’s account?

SANJAY: How so?

MEL: Moser highlights that positionality can present a ‘highly selective version of oneself that usually serves to keep academic authority intact’ using labels such as feminist, post-structuralist etc. while not commenting on factors such as personality and disposition that may have a larger bearing on the research process (Moser 2008, p. 386). Moser (2008, p. 387), while supportive of the importance of positionality, argues ‘categories which may not provide enough information about the researcher’s internal life, their social abilities, their ‘emotional intelligence’ and how the individual’s personality can affect the research process and outcomes.’ I think Moser is right that positionality can be a rudimentary identification with key identifiers that carry capital with the intended audience rather than a real, honest and not necessarily flattering engagement with the situated self within the research environment. Or it can verge towards the valedictory or heroic of Ellis and Boucher (2000). Atkinson (1997) argues personal narrative that advances a ‘romantic construction of the self’ is unworthy of being classified as part of social science arguing that if you are a storyteller, rather than a story analyst, your goal becomes therapeutic rather analytical (p. 335).

SANJAY: I do believe there are new approaches to positionality that seek greater honesty and critique, for example the dialogue or duoethnographical approaches explored by Norris and Swayer (2012) where conversation and intersubjectivity is used to explore oneself in relation to research topics and interrogate one’s assumptions. Brown (2015) describes this approach in practice and indeed Arthur et al. (2017) demonstrate a polyethnographical dialogue between a research team before embarking on a study of weight bias. These are examples to use reflectivity in a meaningful and critical fashion. However, I agree that positionality can become performative, even within more meaningful approaches. When presenting oneself is it not almost expected to portray oneself in a way that adds authority to the research? This may also be the case in conversational approaches. For instance, if I researched the re-training opportunities offered to redundant Merseyside ship-workers in 1980’s, would it not make sense to situate myself closer to the participants in the research? Or win the favour of the reader with a statement of heartfelt commitment to social justice, equality etc.

MEL: I am glad you are sympathetic with my concerns.

SANJAY: I am sympathetic with certain concerns you have raised. There is also a danger I believe that if personal self-knowledge is rendered as academic knowledge, it is open to scrutiny and attack, reducing academic discourse to attacks on the person. I often worry that people will be judged on their declaration of positionality before their academic work is fully appreciated. Or it becomes a rhetorical device rather than authentic to the epistemological challenge it arose from.

MEL: Well, Sanjay, you seem to be coming around to my point of view.

SANJAY: No, I would not say that because I think in many ways it would be more constructive to look at positionality as a practice which improves our research. I think that researchers should “systematically seek out their own subjectivity’ while their research is in progress. You should be ‘aware’ and observe yourself for parts of your subjectivity that may distort the research process. Ormston et al. (2014) talk of positionality helping the researcher to identify areas of bias and take account of them so they can strive towards the goal of ‘emphatic neutrality’ while recognising that it is never fully achievable.

MEL: I see you are modelling a practical form of reflexivity and positionality intended to improve the research process and remove bias?

SANJAY: Yes, the researcher should constantly question one’s method, examine the theoretical frameworks one utilises and think about how one’s position in society affects the research process.

MEL: I think we have stumbled here over yet another danger of positionality.

SANJAY: Elaborate.

MEL: Is it not dangerous that the researcher through engaging in positionality may think he or she is able to transcend bias, in some way absolve oneself, and rise above their position? Reflexivity as a post-modernist concept in many ways has taken on modernist assumptions; that the self is a singular, knowable, and fixable. We are all social agents in a particular time and place; we are actors in a scene. It is not possible to construct an objective, discursive analysis of the self, when we ourselves are immersed in the prevailing discourses of the time. As Hodkinson (2004, p. 11) notes, all academic knowledge is ‘socially constructed’ and this is not primarily an individual activity but is ‘the collective working of communities of scholars over history.’ Simandon (2019, p. 131) points to the ‘unavoidable epistemic gap’; firstly, certain knowledge and memories are unavailable to us consciously and secondly, as knowledge is constructed within spheres of power where ‘explicit political motivations’ and ‘self-presentational concerns will shape any self-declaration.’ Gadamer (1975) believed that escaping our situatedness was not possible, or even desirable, since our situatedness allows understanding. It is our pre-judgements or traditions that allow us to make sense of the world. Gadamer argued that understanding is a "fusion of horizons" of the past and present, objective and subjective (Gadamer 1975, p. 306). Understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well ‘as seeking to understand from where we are produces new understandings’ (Gadamer 1975, p. 296). Indeed, Gadamer argued against the idea that the human sciences had to work out proper methods for themselves before they could attain the status of science. Many pre-commitments are such that we are not able to see them from an independent standpoint. As Gadamer remarks, reminiscent of James Baldwin’s belief, that tradition often ‘has’ us i.e. we belong to it and cannot divorce ourselves from it at will.

SANJAY: Yes, I think it would be a bold claim to think that by engaging in reflexivity one is able to transcend one’s situation in society. I think very few would claim that. Dubois (2015) notes that we can never objectively describe reality. Rather reflexivity, in tandem with positionality, I would argue, is an approach where we examine our research questions and practices during research. By contextualising ourselves we seek to act knowingly and consciously in recognising that all that we do is situated and what we create is always subject. I think Marcus (1998) is right when he moves towards a ‘messy reflexive text’…

aware of my own narrative apparatuses, that are sensitive to how reality is socially constructed, and understanding that writing is a way of framing reality. Messy texts are many sited, intertextual, always open ended, and resistant to theoretical holism, but always open to cultural criticism. (Marcus, 1998, p. 392)

I agree with you that reflexivity and positionality should not be taken as a methodological tool that gives the researcher some sort of greater power. Or absolution. Or falls into the trap of the fixed knowable self, seeing positionality as something that is static rather than fluid. Fryer (2020, p. 27) notes that positionality and identity may be seen as fluid ‘congealing around experience, social hierarchies, and continuums of privilege and domination that may emerge despite or because of our membership across the enmeshed social categories we each occupy.’ Rather, I think reflexivity and positionality is a much more useful practice if it interrupts the practices of gathering data into the existing folds of the known. It creates practices which ‘interrogate the truthfulness of the tale and provide multiple answers’ (Minh-ha 1991, p. 12). As Holmes (2020, p.4) notes it is important to emphasis to new researchers that positionality is not a panacea that ‘eradicates the new for awareness of self-reflexivity’ nor is it a guarantee of ‘more honest, truthful or ethical research.’

MEL: I am glad you are dismissive of the greater claims made for positionality. To me, it seems strange that some see positionality as being able to mitigate bias, which is an integral part of existence as situated beings. Positionality is not a tool created to absolve modernism and create a new, stronger researcher. What we seem to have in some ways is an unusual polarity?

SANJAY: How so?

MEL: On the one hand we have dogmatic approaches embracing positionality as a methodological tool to make their research more ‘unbiased’ and more ‘objective’ and then on the other hand we have the notion of positionality used to recognise research as the opposite, something which by its very nature is biased and subjective. This has led, in many quarters of social science, to the researcher placing themselves as a prominent part of knowledge construction in the text. Since subjectivity in social research is impossible to avoid, the researcher should decide how to use it as part of the research process itself.

SANJAY: Yes, a consequence of this, I think, is a new freedom in reporting the research process outside the traditional scientific thesis with its simple logico-deductive process. For instance, there has been a growth, within social sciences, in reporting the research process as a narrative inquiry, recording the research process as a journey rather than forcing it into the neat, ‘theory-practice-conclusions’ linear model. By tracing the researcher through the research process, it is possible to show the evolving nature of the research, the changes in the researcher’s approaches and the dead-ends the researcher may encounter, rather than the sanitised, and in many ways artificial, logio-deductive model. It offers other practitioners a more personal, accessible and realistic record of research rather than an impersonal academic account.

MEL: However, I would argue that disciplines adopt appropriate codes that are effective in presenting research findings in the most useful and appropriate manner. Hyland (1999) noted texts' persuasiveness are not based on a demonstration of absolute truth or flawless logic rather texts are the ‘results of the actions of socially situated writers and are persuasive only when they employ social and linguistic conventions that colleagues find convincing’ (p. 99). It is a matter of whether the practice of overt positionality is to be adopted as a convincing and necessary attribute of the research process. Again, to return to Patai (1994), when she says “one question that the new methodological self absorption seems not to ask . . . Does all this self-reflexivity produce better research?” (p. 69). Is placing the self so central in the reporting of research providing more meaningful and useful research? I think it is worth adding that the traditional academic format is not as anonymous as critics make it out to be. A study conducted by Hyland (1999) of research journals across the disciplines found, with or without positionality, writer stance and personality is an integral part of disciplinary intercourse. His study found that writer’s expression of stance occurred “with an average of 204 occurrences in each paper, about one every 28 words.” (Hyland, 1999, p 106). These occurred as commitment to propositions, emotion, perspective, belief and degrees of intimacy with the reader. Hyland noted “Overall the results show that published academic writing is not the faceless discourse it is often assumed to be and that among the specialist terms, dense lexis, passives and nominalizations there are conventions of personality” (Hyland, 1999, p. 108). Writer stance is always present and situated in academic writing. How would simple declarations of one’s position in society, and the rudimentary and simple causation “I am a working class therefore….” improve discourse when stance is already present and used efficiently? Also let us not forget that a writer’s name is always on a paper and is therefore always accountable for the text that he or she publishes. Hyland (1999, p. 109) also noted that across disciplines there is always a large use of hedges e.g. partially, generally, approximately etc. There is often not the absolute certainty that academic papers are accused of claiming.

SANJAY: Right, well you have made two points, first of that the traditional academic paper is not the person less ogre it is made out to be and secondly that positionality and reflexivity should always question whether its overt presentation improves the research process. I would reiterate my previous point that reflexivity as a practice employed throughout the research process does improve the research produced. This does not necessarily involve everyone writing research narratives or sacrificing the traditional academic format. Should we not embrace new forms of expression that break away from the restrictions traditional practice places on conveying all that is important about education? Surely these explorations of voice, position and the relation of the researcher to the research he or she produces will create new understandings? Richard Rorty (1979) noted that science is but one genre of literature, as is the traditional model of academic writing, so is it not possible that new genres will increase the questions we can raise and address in education?

MEL: Yes, well I suppose that this returns us to where we started. The post-modernist moment, in challenging traditional forms of knowledge opens the stage for alternative forms of knowledge presentation with new modes of validity and legitimation. However, it is late and we have talked for a long time.

SANJAY: Yes, we have.

**Epilogue**

The dialogue between Mel and Sanjay represents a broad canvas of the many conversations I have had with new educational researchers regarding positionality and reflexivity over the years. Whether students critique positionality and the assumptions it rests upon or heartly embrace the epistemological approaches it springs from, such an engagement by research novices with positionality and its practical implications is to be admired. The greatest danger is silence regarding positionality. From my experience, the most common approach to positionality is instrumental. An approach that sees a statement of positionality as something that needs to be done so that the student can engage with the much more important matter of carrying out the educational research itself. This approach is understandable, educational research is often motivated by a pressing educational need and a hope to affect positive change whether at classroom, institutional or national level. This may, or may not, be reinforced by the institutional culture of education departments. It is hard to criticise students for a tick-box approach to positionality, when it is a tick-box component of a students’ progression in upgrade vivas and the equivalent. Here it is possible to see the crystallization of dogma regarding positionality of which Hodgson and Standish (2006) warn; where positionality is something which is ‘acknowledged and expected’ but forgets its continuing place in the evolving ‘methodological discussion’ (Marguin et al. 2021, p. 11).

Alongside instrumental approaches to positionality and reflexivity, there are dangers of a certain performativity, as mentioned in the dialogue. The labels or badges, that Moser (2008) refer to, are chosen as a rhetorical tool to ingratiate and enhance authority. Again, understandable considering the hierarchical nature and power of patronage within academic communities. Yet, as with instrumental approaches, this devalues the epistemological complexity and intrinsic uncertainty of seeking to someway locate and navigate one’s situatedness in the research endeavour.

This leads onto how a meaningful engagement with positionality and reflexivity may be encouraged as students begin their initiation into educational research communities. It is firstly seeking to pry positionality from institutional petrification and place it before new researchers as an ongoing methodological discussion. Both Mel and Sanjay reflect my own uncertainty when I explore my own position towards positionality. I share Mel’s worry that indulgent positionality can weaken the usefulness and effectiveness of educational research and opens qualitative research up to criticism for being inward looking and self-referential. However, I share Sanjay’s belief that restrained but rigorous reflexivity is an essential component of any research process. I also share the epistemological assumptions regarding the situated nature of knowledge that provide the intellectual foundations for positionality.

Secondly, it is to allow space for conversations with new researchers regarding the epistemological and methodological debates positionality arose from and the intellectual history of such a methodological approach. It is maybe inevitable that an idea, such as positionality, becomes distorted as it gains a free-floating state. As Quentin Skinner (2002) argues in relation to political thought, texts are essentially interventions in ongoing debates and need to be understood as such. Positionality was a radical challenge to existing conventions and the privileging of methodology that mimicked the natural sciences. To ignore the radical origins of positionality and reflexivity allows it to become a methodological tool that can be little more than instrumental.

Thirdly, if we follow the first two suggestions, and provide space for conversations regarding positionality then students must be able to respond in the fullest sense. To do this positionality must be something that students are able do differently, or even not at all, with sufficient justification for their decision. Education departments institutionally need to accommodate, as many do, methodological approaches from new researchers that respond radically to the situated nature of the researcher and the intellectual challenge to traditional academic discourse; whether this is alternative and experimental academic representations, autoethnographic approaches, narrative enquiry, arts-based approaches and the cooption of other literary and performance forms.

I hope that such approaches could create spaces for thoughtful, rather than instrumental and dogmatic, consideration of positionality and provides some small measure of reassurance for students as they navigate the complicated shadows of positionality.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was declared by the author.

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