# Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process

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## Abstract

Through this article, the author provides a reflection on the role of positionality in research, following the completion of a qualitative research project. Through the research project, the White researcher sought to explore the ways in which students of color experience a predominantly White university. Drawing on literature and findings from the research project, the author highlights potential challenges and opportunities of being cognizant of one's positionality. These reflections illustrate the significance of positionality and serve as a reminder of its potential effects on the research process, as well as on participants and the researcher. The manuscript concludes with recommendations for researchers to carefully consider the potential influence of their positionality in any research setting.

## Keywords

Positionality, Research Process, Qualitative, Insider/Outsider

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*Through this article, the author provides a reflection on the role of positionality in research, following the completion of a qualitative research project. Through the research project, the White researcher sought to explore the ways in which students of color experience a predominantly White university. Drawing on literature and findings from the research project, the author highlights potential challenges and opportunities of being cognizant of one's positionality. These reflections illustrate the significance of positionality and serve as a reminder of its potential effects on the research process, as well as on participants and the researcher. The manuscript concludes with recommendations for researchers to carefully consider the potential influence of their positionality in any research setting. Keywords: Positionality, Research Process, Qualitative, Insider/Outsider*

## Introduction

"Research is a *process*, not just a product" (England, 1994, p. 82). If England's statement is true, then an accompanying argument might be made that research is an ongoing process, and does not stop once we complete disseminate the findings. For research to be valuable from the perspective of process over product, the value must lie beyond a sense of completion. Research continues as we reflect: on the development of an idea; on data collection; on findings, and; on implications. Our reflections may take shape in other ways. My reflections on one of my own research projects have led me to consider the interaction between myself and the participants who were kind enough to share their time and thoughts with me.

Research represents a shared space, shaped by both researcher and participants (England, 1994). As such, the identities of both researcher and participants have the potential to impact the research process. Identities come into play via our perceptions, not only of others, but of the ways in which we expect others will perceive us. Our own biases shape the research process, serving as checkpoints along the way. Through recognition of our biases, we presume to gain insights into how we might approach a research setting, members of particular groups, and how we might seek to engage with participants. "Within positionality theory, it is acknowledged that people have multiple overlapping identities. Thus, people make meaning from various aspects of their identity . . ." (Kezar, 2002, p. 96).

I wrote this paper in an effort to present issues of positionality that I encountered during the completion of a qualitative research project. The topic of the research had as its focus the engagement of students of color in the campus culture of a predominantly White institution (PWI) of higher education. Throughout my preparations to conduct this research, from the formulation of the initial research questions to the drafting of the focus group protocol, my positionality as a White man studying issues of race remained at the forefront of my mind. Through the rest of this paper, I discuss these issues, the assumptions I made throughout the process, and the lessons that I continue to learn and apply regarding my positionality.

This act of examining the research process in the context of my positionality can be described, at least in part, as reflexivity. Reflexivity involves a self-scrutiny on the part of the

researcher; a self-conscious awareness of the relationship between the researcher and an "other" (Chiseri-Stater, 1996; Pillow, 2003). But can the methodological approaches that I undertook in collecting and analyzing data be described as reflexivity? Yes, if we accept that reflexivity is "a continuing mode of self-analysis" (Callaway, 1992, p. 33), and that efforts such as this paper are part of the same research process in which the initial results were produced.

I am a White, heterosexual, cisgender male, and I have lived in the southern United States for most of my life. Prior to conducting the research study upon which this reflective work is based, I worked in undergraduate student housing for several years, all in the southern United States. My experiences working with diverse undergraduate students in their living environments ultimately led to my interest in conducting qualitative research to learn more about the experiences of students of color. Through conversations with students of color in the residence halls and other facets of campus life, I heard stories in which students shared struggles with racism and prejudice, and wanted their stories heard. I entered into the original research project in hope of developing an understanding the ways in which students of color experience and negotiate the campus culture of a predominantly White institution of higher learning.

Following the initial completion of the research project, I began to reflect more deeply on the experience beyond the written page. Specifically, I asked myself questions about the experience:

1. What role did my positionality as a White man studying issues of race in higher education play?
2. How did I use my positionality in different spaces?
3. Did my positionality influence the interactions that I had with student participants?

Answers to each of these questions are explored throughout this paper, but not in a lock-step fashion, as the answers to each are intertwined with each other. But before delving into my reflections on my experience with the research process, a review of positionality is warranted.

The nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument. It is reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process. Just as the participants' experiences are framed in social-cultural contexts, so too are those of the researcher. As a member of the dominant culture in multiple categories, it becomes increasingly important to establish trust with participants as noted above. In conducting research, it is critical to be mindful of the fact that conducting a study that highlights issues of difference may contribute to the further marginalization of the participants of the study (hooks, 1990). Not only may my own biases influence the participants, their responses, and my own observations and interpretations, but so too may the very nature of this study.

The concept of self as research instrument reflects the likelihood that the researcher's own subjectivity will come to bear on the research project and any subsequent reporting of findings. Interpretation consists of two related concepts: the ways in which the researcher accounts for the experiences of the subjects and of her or himself, and the ways in which study participants make meaning of their experiences. Related to subjectivity is the expression of voice that results in the reporting of research findings. Through this voice, the researcher leaves her or his own signature on the project, resulting from using the self as the research instrument and her or his subjectivity. Qualitative research seeks to provide an understanding of a problem through the experiences of individuals, and the particular details

of their lived experiences. Particulars provide a means to avoid losing experiences in abstraction (Eisner, 1998), and serve as a means to illicit themes from data. Finally, "qualitative research becomes believable because of its coherence, insight, and instrument utility" (Eisner, 1998, p. 39). The cogency of the research process rises from the relationship between the research instrument (the researcher) and the participants.

"There's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all" (Hall, 1990, p. 18). Positionality represents a space in which objectivism and subjectivism meet. As Freire suggests, the two exist is a "dialectic relationship" (Freire, 2000, p. 50). To achieve a pure objectivism is a naïve quest, and we can never truly divorce ourselves of subjectivity. We can strive to remain objective, but must be ever mindful of our subjectivities. Such is positionality. We have to acknowledge who we are as individuals, and as members of groups, and as resting in and moving within social positions.

As a White man, what does it mean to critically examine issues of race? Heading Freire (2000), I have to be careful that I do not attempt to speak for research participants who are people of color, that I do not attempt to work on their behalf to help them rise up. According to Freire, such efforts on my part would in fact be counter-libratory, as my position situates me as an oppressor. In order to be an ally and advocate, my work has to reflect the voices of those who participate in research.

As evidenced by the wealth of data that was borne out of focus groups and interviews with students of color, it was apparent that these participants had no shortage of experiences to draw upon in our conversations. White students, on the other hand, do not experience race in an everyday capacity. Because Whiteness is the norm in U.S. society, and by extension to this and all PWIs, their race bears no significance in their lives. These students were the norm of Big State University. Unlike the students of color with whom I spoke, the White participants struggled to engage in conversations about race.

## Methods

For the purposes of the original study, focus groups were used as the primary means of data collection. Individual interviews supplemented focus group data, and observational data was collected by the researcher to further supplement the focus group and interview data. Each of these data collection tools provided opportunities to gain insights about the experiences of the participants on campus.

Focus groups were chosen as the primary means of data collection because the data that comes from group interactions might not otherwise be collected (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). Despite the potential of not garnering the depth of individual interviews, focus groups offer multiple benefits. Through interactions between participants, a researcher can gain insight into the ways in which meaning is made within the context of the group (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Focus groups can serve to help participants feel empowered in research process by allowing them greater opportunity to steer the discussion in different directions based on the conversation flow (Morgan, 1997).

Focus groups and individual interviews were digitally recorded and followed a semi-structure protocol. Open-ended questions were asked to provide participants with the most opportunities to tell their stories and to encourage their own voices to come through in the data. Through the course of each focus group and individual interview, follow-up questions were asked based upon statements made by participants.

Five focus groups were used in data collection; four with Black students, and one with White students. Of the four focus groups with Black students, one was made up entirely of Black women who participate in a Black sorority. The other three focus groups with Black

students were made up of both women and men, and represented a cross section of participation in different aspects of the campus, from resident assistants to a member of the football team. The focus group that was made up of White students was dominated by students who participate in one of Big State University's undergraduate honors programs.

Individual interviews were used for one of three reasons. One, if a student who expressed interest in participating but was unable to attend a focus group; two, if a student expressed interest in participating but was the only participant to identify with a particular racial/ethnic group; or, three, if a student participated in a focus group and expressed interest in talking one-on-one to expand on the focus group experience.

As I moved about the campus of Big State University during the completion of this study, I was always cognizant to be observant of the variety of social structures present at the institution that could contribute to the campus culture, climate, and the discourse. These observations provide a data source for interpretation, and further providing for thick rich description.

In addition to these data sources, a number of documents were used in the data analysis and interpretation. From Big State University's student newspaper, The Bugler, to institutional websites, a great deal is communicated about Big State University's culture and discourse through documents. Additional document data was collected from brochures, broadcasts of the campus radio station and television commercials used to aid in student recruitment.

## Analysis

I analyzed data from each of the sources described above by coding transcripts, documents, and notes from observations. This process of coding and analyzing was done throughout data collection; each instance of analysis informed subsequent data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this way, not only did the participants' voices come through in the final reporting of the themes that emerged, but they also emerged through data collection. However, it would be naïve on my part to suggest that codes and themes emerged from the sources of data absent of any other influences. Just as with any aspect of the research process, my voice and my positionality are intermingled and intertwined into the project, both in part and parcel.

### The Research Process through my Positionality

As I prepared to conduct focus groups with undergraduate students in which I would seek to engage them in frank discussions about their experiences with and perceptions of race at Big State University, I expected that my position as a White man would aid me in connecting especially well with White students, while requiring me to make special efforts to connect with students of color. Such expectations would seem reasonable, and at least in some part grounded in logic, based on works that suggest that people tend to gravitate toward those with whom they share some level of commonality (Cabrera & Nora, 1994; Chang, 2002; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). But what occurred was quite the opposite. Students of color were much more open to discussing issues of race with me, while White students were what can best be described at reticent.

My own preconceived notions about the importance of my positionality were reversed through the collecting of data. The lessons to be gleaned about positionality that arise out of this research do not lie in the disconnect between preconceived notions and lived experience. In being cognizant of my positionality as a White man attempting to engage students in

discussions about race, I aided in creating spaces in which voices that are often silenced were sought and heard.

Conversely, I might have taken my positionality for granted in attempting to engage White students in discussions of race. What can be an explanation for their reticence and refusal to speak about issues of race? One potential answer is that White students might have perceived me as challenging their White privilege. If this were the case, this perception might have eliminated any trust that would have been based on our shared sameness.

As I completed the research, and analyzed the data, a negative picture emerged of the site of study. This less-than-flattering perspective of the nature of engagement of students of color in the campus discourse is framed in large part by my own positionality. As a White man, each aspect of this research has been mediated by who I am, and the lens through which I view the world. I am critical of Big State University, and PWIs in general through White eyes. The ways in which I interacted with participants was based in my own lived experiences as a White man, and the ways in which I perceive issues of race. As I analyzed the data and looked and listened for emergent themes, I did so with White eyes and ears.

Not only was the product of this research mediated through my positionality, but the participation of the students was also mediated through my positionality. As became apparent in focus groups and individual interviews with students of color, my positionality may have served to create spaces in which students of color had a voice, and spaces in which they were not silenced. Through the dominance of whiteness at Big State University, students of color responded to my sincere interest in their lives as an opportunity to engage in a discourse of inclusion. Conversely, the reticence of White students to participate may also be linked to my positionality, in that they might have viewed my research as attempting to debunk their White privilege.

## Insider/Outsider

"Positionality is thus determined by where one stands in relation to 'the other'" (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Lee, Ntseane, & Muhamad, 2001, p. 411). Who am I in the context of researching issues of difference? Reflecting upon my experiences, I am reminded that the old adage that "when you assume, you make an ass of 'u' and 'me'" rings true.

There were assumptions I made as a researcher regarding access and my positionality that relate to a concept of insider/outsider. As the research was conducted in the auspices of my dissertation, I was an insider with all of the participants. Although I was a graduate student while they were undergraduates, we shared a common bond; one of struggling against the rigors of academic requirements. I may have also achieved a greater sense of solidarity with students of color as most with whom I spoke were juniors and seniors, with the end goal of graduation in sight, if not close at hand. Conversely, the White students who participated were all first year students, and the prospect of graduation seems to be as far away as the moon during those early stages of collegiate life.

### Compensating for being an outsider

In reflecting on the research experience, I noticed something regarding my position as an insider as a fellow student. In conversations with students of color, as I introduced myself and moved each discussion forward, I drew on my insider status more so than when I interacted with White students. It might have been that I was seeking to compensate for my outsider status of being a White man collecting data from people of color, many of whom were women.

Issues of positionality remained active throughout the data collection process. While engaging in a discussion with a group of Black women, all of whom were members of the same sorority, my positionality was checked by participants. Tammy, a Black 3$^{rd}$ year student, turned to me at one point during a conversation about stereotypes, and asked me what I thought of them (the group of Black women) as I spent time with them. This question posed by Tammy brought a statement by Amber, a Black 3$^{rd}$ year student, that I was there to ask them questions, not the other way around. These statements made by Tammy and Amber highlights issues to address in considering my positionality.

Tammy, through her question about what stereotypes I held of her and her fellow participants, called my positionality out into the open. Not only was I a White man studying the experiences of people of color, but in this instance, I was also the only man in the room. My initial perception of this interaction was that Tammy chose to capitalize on the shift in the power dynamics in the room: I was significantly outnumbered. Perhaps Tammy was taking advantage of the fact that she and her sorority sisters having the upper hand in terms of out-numbering me. Being respectful of the give and take that was developing in the focus group, and wanting to continually build trust with the participants throughout the duration of the focus group, I asked Tammy a clarifying question. But before the conversation could go too far down a path of discussing stereotypes based on my position as a White man, Amber spoke up and suggested that my role was to ask questions of the group, and not the other way around.

Amber's statement about our roles, that I was there to ask questions and the students were there to answer them, also indicates something about my position. Could it be that Amber was showing deference to me as a White man, as she is a Black woman? After all, Whiteness permeates the fabric of campus life at the institution. But I believe there to be a different explanation for Amber's call to the group to remind them of why I was spending time with them. The most likely explanation that I believe to be true lies in mutual respect. The respect that the students of color and I shared for each other, not just in this one focus group, but through all of my interactions with students of color throughout this study, remind me that my initial assumptions about my positionality were misconstrued.

**Was I really an insider?**

"Everyone's basically on the same field" was a comment shared by Sean, a White 1$^{st}$ year student, that highlights the perspective held by White students that race is not a significant issue at State. There is a bit of a contradiction to this sentiment, as White students appeared to be much less comfortable in the focus group settings than students of color. Further illustrating White students' refusal to participate upon learning more about the nature of the research project, one White first year male got up and left indicating that he could not contribute to the research. As each of the focus groups were held in residence halls, I asked White students if their roommates were available. The majority of the White participants responded that their roommates did not feel comfortable talking about racial issues.

Other factors might have also affected the distinct differences in interactions that I experienced with groups of students of color compared to those with groups of White students. Race is an everyday lived experience among people of color. Essed (1991) described an "everyday racism," that represents the "systematic, recurrent and familiar practices that are derived from socialized attitudes and behaviors" (Tamale, 1996, p. 472).

## Concluding Thoughts

As I have reflected back on the research experience I had throughout my dissertation, my mind has become flooded with valuable information. While I hope that the scholarship that emerges from the dissertation makes a contribution to my field, the greater lessons that have emerged thus far pertain to the research experience itself.

The White students spoke about race in rather generic terms, and looked to other participants and to myself in an effort to ensure that they were saying the "right" things. I was also asked if the right things were being said during a focus group with Black students, but Stephanie's query followed a part of the focus group in which the participants began posing questions to each other, and I simply posed follow-up questions.

I am both insider and outsider. As someone concerned with the exclusion of students of color in PWIs, I became an insider with students of color, as my research interest is their lived experience. But on the flip side, the White students with whom I interacted had little to no personal experience with the topic and were unable to relate to it, and by extension, were unable to relate to me.

As with any research project, as I moved through the research process, I continually thought about issues pertaining to limitations of the study. At one point during the process, I began writing about limitations in the context of my positionality as a White man studying issues of race and in collecting data from students of color. But now reflecting on the research process in the context of positionality, I realize that my positionality is not a limitation. My positionality meets the positionality of participants, and they do not rest in juxtaposition to each other. The research in which I engage is shaped by who I am, and as long as I remain reflective throughout the process, I will be shaped by it, and by those with whom I interact.

Now that I have taken the time to reflect upon my experiences with my own positionality in qualitative research, I am more mindful of some important things to consider. First, I need to address my positionality with all participants of qualitative studies. I cannot assume participant positionality based on physical attributes any more than a participant can assume my positionality based on physical attributes. As I noted previously, I engaged differently with White students than with students of color participating in the original study. Second, as I enter the field to collect data, I need to be clear (with myself and participants) about my motivations for collecting the data. Are there motives (true or assumed) that relate to my positionality? Addressing questions of motivation with participants has the potential to foster greater openness between participants and myself.

As someone engaged in participatory research with students of color in higher education in the United States, my positionality is an important element of the research process. Not only do I have to be mindful about the influence my positionality has on the process, but I have to be forthright in communicating my positionality with participants. Transparency of positionality and my intents as a researcher are now central to my research efforts.

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