Chapter 2
Researcher Positionality:
Individual and Social Consciousness
Amid Heuristic Introspection

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents researcher positionality within the context of two systematic methods of inquiry for the examination of self-as-subject: autoethnography and heuristic inquiry for doctoral-level research. These ways of knowing and understanding the lived experience of the self are meant to further inform not only the individual experience, but the collective or cultural experience at large. The articulation of researcher positionality is an essential precursor to doctoral inquiry, the supervision of which often requires doctoral research supervisor agency to oversee the heuristic introspection. While the doctoral scholar may not initially choose the approach as creative research, outcomes of the research may result in enhanced creative thinking and arts-based research products as representations of findings.

INTRODUCTION

The very cave you are afraid to enter turns out to be the source of what you are looking for. – Joseph Campbell (1995)

Before a doctoral researcher embarks on any study of self-as-subject either through heuristic research or autoethnography, it is important to take stock—
to first examine and assess one’s own researcher positionality. Researcher positionality involves the critical self-reflection and determination of self-awareness within the social constructs, biases, contexts, layers, power structures, identities, transparency, objectivity and subjectivities for the viewpoint assumed within doctoral research (Throne, 2012; Throne & Bourke, 2019; Throne & Oddi, 2019). For almost half a century, social science researchers, especially those from qualitative paradigmatic viewpoints and specifically anthropology and human geography, have called for an understanding of the nature of and appreciation for the subjectivity of the principal investigator as vital and needed processes for self-reflection and a determination of self within social or experiential constructs under investigation (Behar, 1994; Kirsch, 1984; Kirschner, 1987; Rose, 1997). The term positionality emerged from the chorological work of the geographical sciences (England, 1994; McDowell, 1992; Rose, 1997; Sack, 1974), economics, and environmental planning among others, and specifically in discussions of the politics and reflexivity within research-based knowledge construction. Also, Smith noted positionality in the context of learning via research was often considered in tandem with situated knowledge, which substantiates the need for doctoral scholars to narratively place researcher objectivity and subjectivity whereby the researcher situates the many aspects of perspective and positionality among the doctoral community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the subsequent evolution to the larger scholarly community of academic research.

Mertkan and Bayrakli (2018) have noted that while doctoral researchers have great access to many tools for research skill development, less resources are available for researcher methodological and academic identity development throughout doctoral education. Doctoral researchers move and take part within various and overlapping contexts, structures, and communities, not necessarily acquiring or acquiescing to them, but evolving their own unique researcher identity and positionality as a result (not because) of the work (Bourke, 2014; Lehner, 2007; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Smith, 1999; Throne, 2012). Thus, the narration of researcher positionality within the context of doctoral education serves to inform and mantle the investigator’s research study rather than to invalidate it as partial, biased, or contaminated by personal perspectives, agendas, or cultural or sociopolitical viewpoints (Throne & Bourke, 2019) and may also enhance clarity of researcher methodological and academic identity (Mertkan & Bayrakli, 2018).
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