

DBA ADVANCING TO THE DOCTORAL RESEARCH STAGE POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

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POSITIONALITY &
REFLEXIVITY IN RESEARCH



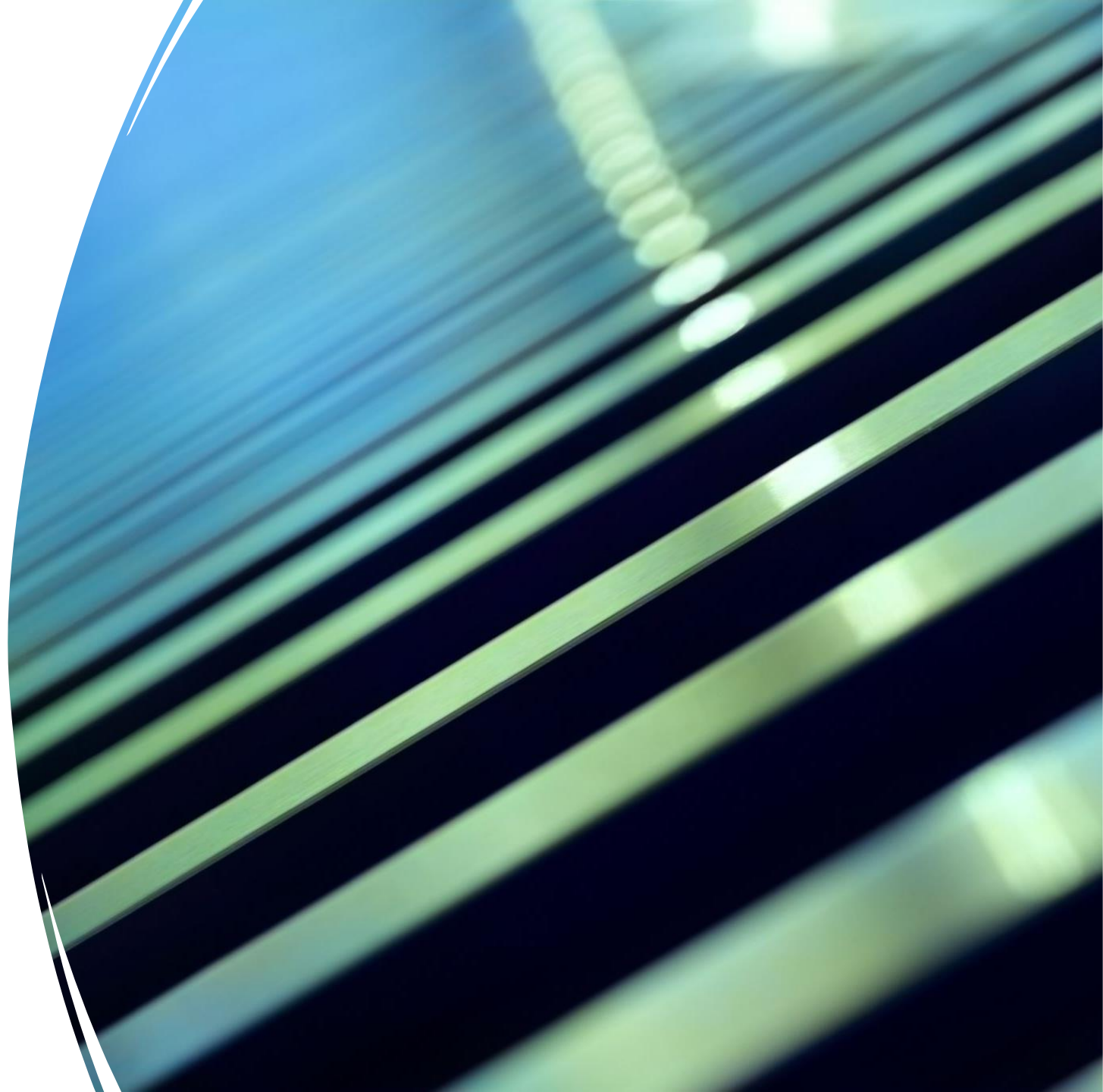
Please note

- This presentation will introduce you to some aspects of research methods – but it is NOT intended to replace key reading, such as Bryman, Denscombe, Creswell, Maxwell, Guba and Lincoln and Cohen **etc.**
- You must read key texts and beyond at doctoral level that cover the method and for this you may have to go beyond your modules reading list.
- Again some slides will not be focused on and you are expected at this doctoral level to be motivated, engaged and understand the areas you need to explore.



Agenda

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- POSITIONALITY
 - REFLECTION
 - REFLEXIVITY
 - ACITIVITY
 - NEXT SESSION
 - Q&A



Concept	Definition	Research Application
Positionality	The researcher's social position, identities, experiences, and worldview that form their standpoint	Forms the foundation for understanding researcher influence
Reflection	Thoughtful consideration of research actions, processes, and experiences	Supports iterative improvement of research practice
Reflexivity	Critical analysis of how the researcher's positionality impacts all aspects of the research process	Ensures methodological integrity and ethical rigour

Term	Simple Definition	What It Means for Your Research	Example
Positionality	Who you are as a researcher	How your background and identity affect your research	
Reflection	Thinking about what you did	Looking back at your research actions and decisions	
Reflexivity	Understanding how who you are affects your research	Seeing the connection between your background and your findings	

Conceptual Metaphors

- Positionality: A map with "You Are Here" marker—situating yourself in relation to the research
- Reflection: Looking back over your shoulder—examining what occurred in your research journey
- Reflexivity: A camera photographing the photographer—analysing how you shape what you observe



Positionality

- A map with "You Are Here" marker:
- Illustrating how positionality situates the researcher within the research context.



Reflection

- A person looking back over their shoulder:
- Representing the act of looking back on past experiences or actions.



Reflexivity

- A camera turning to photograph the photographer:
- Representing the researcher examining their own role in the research process.



The main differences are

- Positionality is the researcher's background and standpoint.
- Reflection and reflexivity are actions or processes researchers engage in.
 - Reflection is a thoughtful consideration of the research experience.
 - Reflexivity critically analyses the researcher's positionality and influence.
- Positionality refers to the researcher's identity and worldview.
- Reflection focuses on the research process and experience.
- Reflexivity connects the researcher's positionality to its impact on the research.

In summary

- Positionality is who researchers are.
- Reflection is thinking about what researchers do.
- Reflexivity is critiquing how researchers' positionality affects research.
- Reflexivity builds on positionality and reflection to directly examine the researcher's subjectivity and influence in the research process.

Example of Reflexivity

- *Without Reflexivity (A Hypothetical, Less Nuanced Approach):*

The sociologist might design surveys and interviews, gather data, and then present their findings as objective truths about teenagers and social media.

They might overlook how their own age, gender, use of social media, or even their preconceived notions about beauty standards (as a researcher from a specific cultural background) might have subtly influenced the questions they asked, the way they interpreted responses, or even how they presented themselves during interviews, potentially shaping the teenagers' answers. They simply act as if they are a neutral observer, simply collecting facts.

Example of Reflexivity

- *With Reflexivity (A More Sociologically Informed Approach):*
- A reflexive sociologist would be acutely aware of their own positionality. Before, during, and after the study, they would engage in critical self-reflection:

Example of Reflexivity

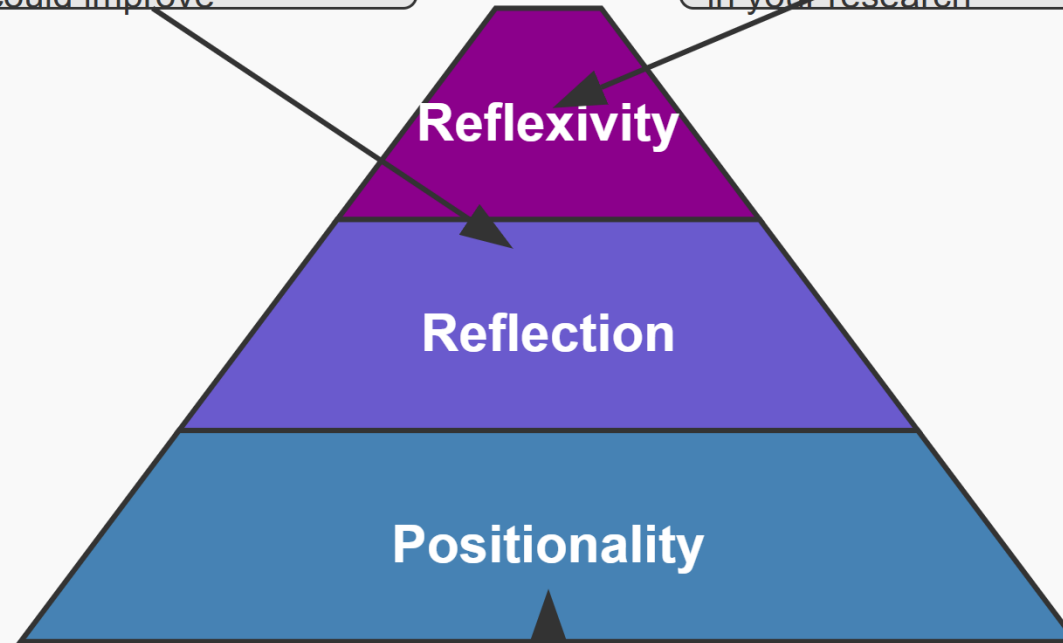
- **Before the study:** They might ask: “What are my own biases regarding social media and body image? How might my personal experiences (e.g., being a Gen X’er researching Gen Z, or coming from a culture with specific beauty ideals) affect my interpretation? Am I projecting any of my own anxieties onto the participants?”
- **During the study:** They might observe how their presence as an “adult researcher” changes the dynamics of an interview with a teenager. They might note if their questions, despite being carefully worded, seem to lead participants to certain types of answers. They might even acknowledge this in their field notes or research diary.
- **After the study:** They would openly discuss these potential influences in their methodology section, explaining how their own position might have shaped the data or analysis. They wouldn’t claim complete objectivity but rather acknowledge their role as an active participant in the research process.

Do you have your own examples ?

The Reflexivity Progression Model

Middle Level: Looking back at what you did in your research and how you could improve

Advanced Level: Analyzing how who you are shapes what you find in your research



Reflexivity

Reflection

Positionality

Foundation: Who you are as a researcher (background, experiences, viewpoints)
Example: "As an HR professional in South Wales manufacturing, I bring industry knowledge and connections, but also preconceptions about turnover causes."

The colour scheme progresses from lighter blue (positionality) to deeper purple (reflexivity), visually representing the deepening level of analysis as you move up the pyramid.

1. Bottom Layer (Foundation) - Positionality:

1. The widest part of the pyramid represents your starting point as a researcher
2. Shows that your background, experiences, and viewpoints form the foundation
3. Includes a specific example related to an HR professional researching turnover in South Wales manufacturing

2. Middle Layer - Reflection:

1. Builds upon your positionality
2. Represents looking back at what you did in your research
3. Shows how reflection is a step above basic awareness of who you are

3. Top Layer - Reflexivity:

1. The highest level of the pyramid
2. Represents the most advanced understanding
3. Shows how reflexivity builds upon both positionality and reflection
4. Focuses on analysing how who you are shapes your findings.



WHAT IS YOUR POSITIONALITY ?

- Reflecting on, fleshing out, interrogating, and conveying your positionality relative to a research orientation is **critical to ensuring the validity of your research stance**.
- After all, no one can be 100% objective.
- The researcher's beliefs, values systems, and moral stances are as fundamentally present and inseparable from the research process.

EVERYTHING
COVERED
BUT HER EYES,
WHAT A CRUEL
MALE-
DOMINATED
CULTURE!



POSITIONALITY

NOTHING
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ELANS



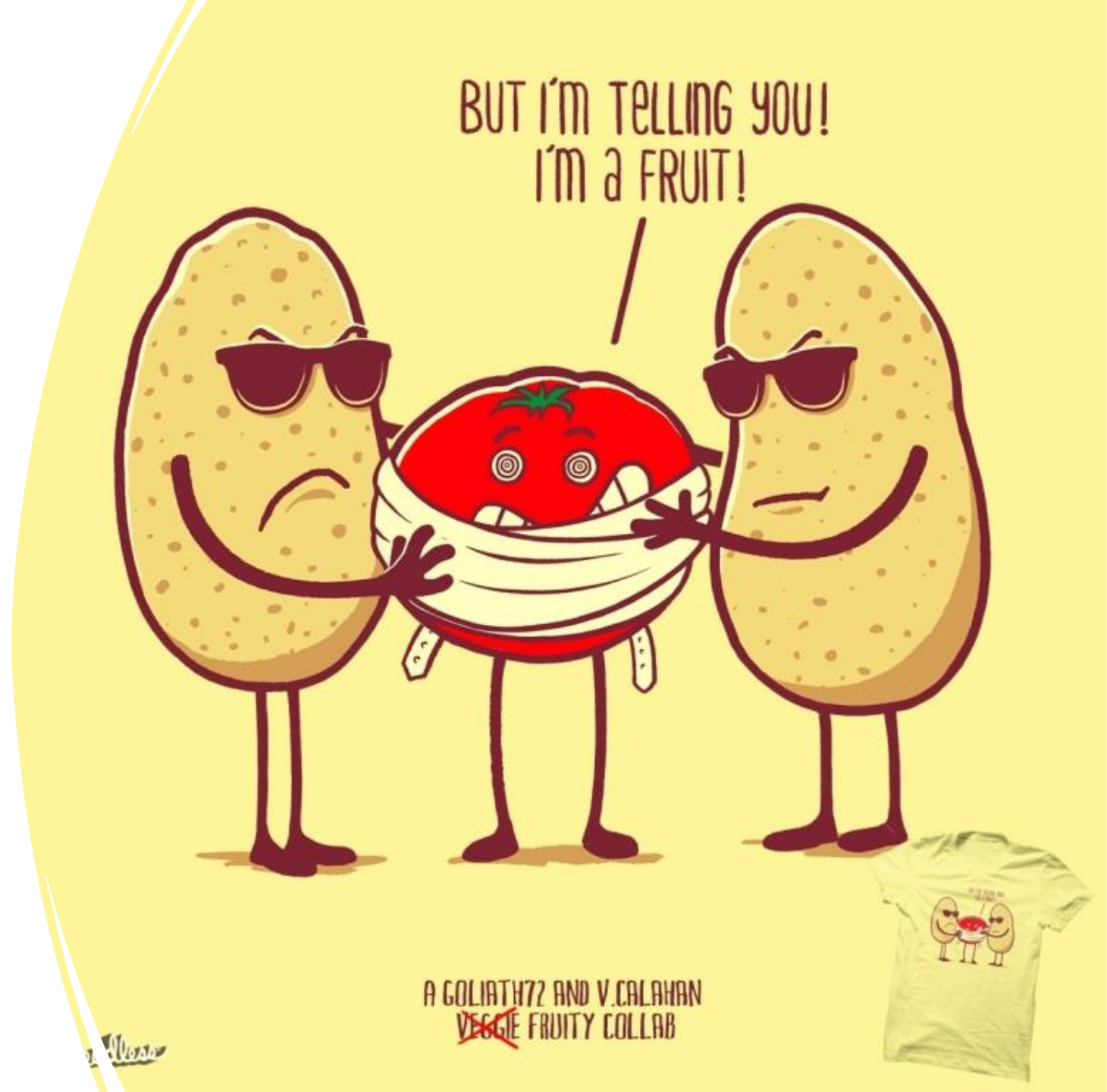
Identities are created through naming ourselves in relation to historical/cultural narratives - both how society positions us and we position ourselves.

- “...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past.”(Hall, 1994, p. 394)



ON IDENTITY

- “Every individual is a meeting ground for many different allegiances, and sometimes these loyalties conflict with one another and confront the person who harbors them with difficult choices.”
- (Maalouf, 2000, p. 5)





IDENTITY ? REFLECTION? POSITIVITY? REFLEXIVITY?

IDENTITY ?
REFLECTION?
POSITIVITY?
REFLEXIVITY?



Your examples ?



Jack Ma – Founder of Alibaba



Meet India's Top 10 YouTubers, Who Transformed Online Stardom into Wealth

📍 Pune Pulse Desk 🕒 February 20, 2024



Top 10 on Douyin 2024

ALL RESEARCH HAS POSITIONALITY

Even the most passive methods of data collection and quantitative analysis have some interactional aspects, and it is impossible to absolutely control for and ensure the unobtrusiveness of research applications and interventions.

Power dynamics flow through every vein of the research process; therefore, it is our ethical duty to intentionally and mindfully attend to our role(s) in the contextual power interplay of the research process.

Understanding your positionality

Category	Description
Dimensions of Positionality	Positionality encompasses multiple interconnected dimensions:
Social Identities	Gender, ethnicity, class, age, ability, nationality, etc.
Professional Background	Prior roles, disciplinary training, institutional affiliations
Theoretical Orientations	Paradigmatic assumptions, conceptual frameworks
Personal Experiences	Life history, values, beliefs, motivations for research
Positionality in Context	Positionality is:
Dynamic	Shifts across space-time and research contexts
Relational	Depends on interactions with participants and communities
Scaled	Operates at personal, institutional, and societal levels
Intersectional	Reflects overlapping aspects of identity and power
Quote	"...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past." (Hall, 1994, p. 394)

Your positionality

- Positionality is very much a question of understanding the following:
 - The **perspective that you possess**, which is often not explicitly acknowledged on a day-to-day basis. This includes the many and intersecting socio-cultural identities that accompany it and experiences that contributed to its formation. It is perspective that formulates many of our preferences and biases, plus it influences everything that we create, interpret and understand.
 - The **privilege that you possess**, which accrues as a result of your socio-cultural identities and the way they position you in any given context or location. Privilege is often fairly invisible since it is part of a normative and hegemonic system of relationships and forms of domination.
 - The **power you possess as a consequence of your privilege and its operation through the system of relationships**; plus the role that you play in perpetuating that power by maintaining its knowledge and discourses; be that actively or as a consequence of ignorance.

Your positionality

- As a researcher/ scholar-in-the making:
 - How does your identity affect your perspective on the topic you are interested in studying?
 - What power and privileges do you bring to your study?
 - What considerations do you make, if any, about your access to **research knowledge** and the **research context**, plus **interactions with respondents** due to your “insider” or “outsider” status.

Examples of positionality statements

Weak Example:

As an HR professional with over 20 years of experience in South Wales manufacturing, I believe I can conduct this research on staff turnover objectively.

Strong Example

- As a senior HR professional with over 20 years of experience in the South Wales manufacturing sector, I bring valuable insider knowledge of recruitment processes, exit interview protocols, and industry-specific retention challenges. However, this extensive experience may lead me to normalise certain turnover patterns I've repeatedly observed, potentially overlooking newer factors affecting today's workforce. My position as an HR leader may create power dynamics during interviews, with shop floor workers potentially reluctant to share critical views of management practices, while line managers might emphasize external factors rather than leadership shortcomings. My long-standing professional relationships with multiple manufacturing facilities in the region provide exceptional access to participants and data, but may also create confirmation bias as I might unconsciously seek evidence supporting solutions I've previously implemented. My initial training in traditional HR metrics focused on quantitative turnover rates, but my theoretical framework has evolved to acknowledge how organisational culture, worker identity, and regional economic factors interconnect to create complex turnover narratives that cannot be understood through statistics alone.

Activity 1

- Write your own positionality statement
(Around 100 words)

Please put it on Teams once completed

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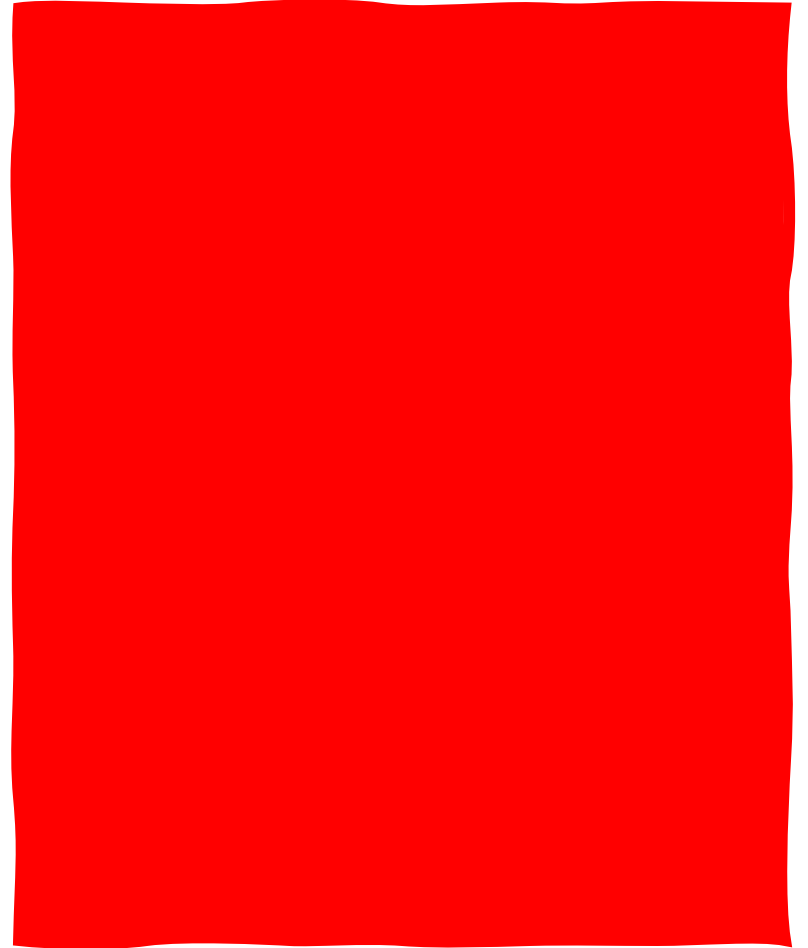
Reflection	Reflexivity
"What happened in the interview?"	"How did my presence shape what was said?"
"What themes emerged from the data?"	"How did my analytical lens determine what I recognised as a theme?"
"How did participants respond to my questions?"	"How did the questions I chose to ask reflect my assumptions?"
"What challenges occurred in data collection?"	"How did my positionality create specific challenges and opportunities?"

Why Reflexivity Matters

Reflexivity enhances research by:

- Increasing transparency about knowledge construction
- Identifying how researcher influence shapes findings
- Making explicit the values embedded in research
- Strengthening methodological integrity
- Supporting ethical practice, particularly with marginalised communities

Activities for doctoral
researchers to
understand their
positionality, reflection,
and reflexivity in relation
to their own research



Multi- Perspective Research Journal (Positionality) Task:

Maintain a research journal with three distinct voices: a) Your personal voice b) The voice of a key stakeholder in your research c) The voice of a critic or skeptic of your research approach

Over 3 months, make entries from each perspective weekly. Analyse how these different viewpoints interact, conflict, or complement each other. Reflect on how your own position influences your interpretation of these voices.

Activity 2

Reflection Task

- Create a visual timeline of your academic and personal journey:
- a) Mark key events, theories, or people that have shaped your research interests
- b) For each marker, write a brief reflection on its impact
- c) Draw connections between these influences and your current research questions
- d) Project this timeline into the future, anticipating how your research might evolve
- e) Analyse patterns in this map to understand the trajectory of your thinking and potential biases.

Reflection and Reflexivity Task

- Develop a series of potential ethical dilemmas in your research:
- a) Create 5-7 scenarios that could realistically occur during your study
- b) For each scenario, write your immediate reaction and planned response
- c) Consult ethical guidelines and revise your responses if necessary
- d) Ensure (during your journey) you revisit these scenarios and note any changes in your perspective
- e) Reflect on how your personal values and experiences shape your ethical decision-making in research contexts.

Positionality and Reflexivity Task

- a) Identify 3-4 disciplines outside your own that could find your research relevant
- b) Rewrite your research abstract for each of these disciplines
- c) Reflect on the challenges and insights gained from this translation process
- d) Analyse how this exercise reveals the assumptions and jargon specific to your discipline, and how your academic positioning influences your communication of research.

Common Misconceptions

Misconception 1: "Reflexivity means acknowledging bias to eliminate it"

Clarification: Reflexivity recognises that researcher influence cannot be eliminated—only understood and accounted for in analysis. The goal is not researcher neutrality but transparency about how the researcher shapes the research.

Misconception 2: "Once I've written my positionality statement, I've addressed reflexivity"

Clarification: Reflexivity is an ongoing process that continues throughout all research stages, not a one-time declaration. Your understanding of your positionality will evolve as the research progresses.

Sharing time

Common Misconceptions

Misconception 3: "Reflexivity is only relevant to qualitative research"

Clarification: While more explicitly discussed in qualitative traditions, researcher positionality shapes all research—including what quantitative variables are selected, how they're measured, and how findings are interpreted.

Misconception 4: "Being reflexive means my research isn't rigorous"

- **Clarification:** Reflexivity enhances rigour by making transparent the processes of knowledge construction and strengthening methodological integrity through critical self-examination.

Key Questions for Your Doctoral Journey

Research Design Stage:

- How does my positionality inform my research questions and theoretical framework?
- What assumptions am I bringing to research design based on my background?
- How might my positionality influence access to participants and sites?

Data Collection Stage:

- How do participants perceive me, and how does this shape their responses?
- What power dynamics are present in research interactions?
- What am I primed to notice or overlook based on my experience?

Applications

Analysis Stage:

- How do my interpretations reflect my theoretical commitments?
- What alternative readings of the data might others with different positionalities offer?
- How am I representing participant voices in relation to my own?

Writing Stage:

- How transparent am I being about my role in knowledge construction?
- Have I accounted for how my positionality shaped the entire research process?
- Am I making appropriate claims given the situated nature of the knowledge produced?

Applications

Evaluating Reflexivity in Your Research

Superficial Reflexivity:

- Briefly mentions researcher background without analysing its impact
- Treats reflexivity as a "tick-box" exercise
- Confined to a methods section without integration throughout

Deep Reflexivity:

- Critically analyses researcher influence at all research stages
- Documents evolution of thinking throughout the research process
- Considers how different positionalities might yield different interpretations
- Integrates reflexive insights into methodological and analytical decisions

References

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Additional reading

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Q&A