

# Positionality in identity research

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# Overview

**Research interests:** identity (applied linguistics) and Polish migration.

Underpinned by own family background of migration from Eastern Europe.

From a literature background, where 'I' does not exist. Therefore, difficult to reflect on researcher positionality/ use the first person in academic papers.

But: ethical responsibility to **acknowledge own positionality**, especially in PAR.

# Research Project

Identity construction amongst bilingual Polish-born teenagers in the UK (Young, 2018).

Small post-2004 Polish community in SE England; pre-Referendum (2016).

## Research Questions:

1. How do the teenagers construct their identities?
2. In the light of contemporary anti-immigrant discourses in the UK, how do these adolescents position themselves; how are they positioned by others?

**Methodology:** narrative, semi-structured interviews.

# Positioning theory

**Identity:** seen as fluid; **negotiated** through the way a subject positions themselves, and how they are positioned by others (e.g. work by De Fina & Georgakopolou).

Depperman (2015: 373): 'Harré and van Langenhove (1991) distinguish between **self- and other-positioning**. [...] People do not only position themselves actively, but **they are also positioned by others' acts of other-positioning.**' (my emphasis)

# Reflexivity

Academic expectation for **reflexivity** regarding the research process:

Holmes (2020: 2): 'Positionality requires that both acknowledgment and allowance are made by the researcher to locate their views, values, and beliefs about the research design, conduct, and output(s).'

Epistemological positioning; also relation to the participants. Conceptualised not as insider/ outsider, but through **positioning theory**.

# Positioning the researcher

## Positionality:

References ‘the identity of the researcher in relation to the study context and or participants’ (Medzani 2021: 387; cf. Rowe 2014)

‘Identities come into play via our perceptions, not only of others, but of the ways in which we **expect** others will perceive us.’ (Bourke 2014:1, my emphasis)

# Transparency

But: Is the researcher **ethically obligated** to declare their positionality to the participant?

This is especially pertinent in PAR, when participant interaction and involvement are a key element of the research. Can a researcher expect a participant to expose their vulnerabilities when the researcher does not declare her own?

Bourke (2014: 7): 'I have to be forthright in communicating my positionality with participants.'

## Eastern European identities

Blurred identities within Eastern Europe acknowledged by scholars (cf. Applebaum; Kamusella, etc.)

A person can live in the same town their whole life, and have moved three countries.

E.g. **Minsk**: originally in Lithuania, then Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, then Russia, now Belarus (cf. researcher's own family).



# Identity as researcher

**Power dynamics:** adult university researcher working with secondary school students (aged 11-16).

1. Extra curricular classes in mainstream school setting: an established power dynamic within the institutional setting. But, as an out-of-school Polish-only class, slightly less formal, enhanced by the students' relationship with the Polish teacher.
2. Polish Saturday school classes: first names and jeans.

# Self-positioning

Not looked at through insider/ outsider perspective, but through **positioning theory**.

**Self-positioning as non-Polish:** some Polish heritage, but not born in Poland; limited language proficiency, sketchy family history (more Lithuanian/Russian than Polish).

**Also:** not recent migrant, or teenager in referendum Britain. Ethically, did I have the right to claim an identity with which I was not comfortable?

**However:** experience of migrant history and related elements (e.g. hostility; different home/school identities).

## Other- positioning

Learning my background during the project, participants positioned me as Polish.

This made certain assumptions, e.g. linguistic; cultural practices, including religion.

Valuable for **identity research** – the contradictory positioning forced me to examine:

- i) how I was constructing Polish identity
- ii) my own positionality

## Impact on research

Contradictory positioning raised questions of what 'Polish' identity was: predicted on place of birth, language proficiency, religion etc.

**Participants'** understanding of Polish identity sat with a wider conceptualisation, whereby: "Identity' [...] is essentially a compact with one's ancestors' (Krastev & Holmes 2019: 72).

# Ethical considerations

Which was more ethical:

1. Initial stance as non-Polish? To resist being positioned as Polish/ migrant family?
2. But: was it more convenient for me to accept being positioned as Polish, as the participants were more likely to talk? (Which raises other ethical questions.)

Not just a question of academic transparency, but **identity research** with participants – which raised the very questions at the heart of the research.

## Concluding questions

Ultimately, the reflections benefited the research; but **ethical questions** raised:

What are the ethical questions around declaring researcher positionality?

Should a researcher be obliged to declare their full positionality?

How far is that possible, given the subjective and shifting nature of positionality?

Does it remain an ethical obligation to acknowledge researcher positionality: what is the researcher ethically obliged to reveal, and why should they?

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