

Positionality and Ethics in Doing Research

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the importance of Positionality in maintaining ethics in research. Integrating this concept in various research practices foregrounds the idea that the social identity of a researcher plays a crucial role in the research process. This idea is predicated on the assumption that researchers are active epistemic agents situated within concrete social contexts and circumstances that influence the selection of research questions, environment, participants, methodologies, and framework, as well as the interpretation of data and resolution of potential conflicts. Doing research from a positional lens therefore problematizes the criteria of objectivity and neutrality, which undergird most research following the positivist paradigm. My claim is that an ethical approach to research necessitates self-reflexivity toward one's assumptions and biases and how they affect the entire research process. This approach entails more than simply adhering to predefined ethical guidelines, as if ticking boxes in a manual, since it involves inquiry into societal structures that implicitly inform the development of research. Recognizing his/her involvement in pre-existing power relations within the research environment, a researcher should ask: Whose voices are privileged and whose voices are silenced? Whose interests are being served and whose interests are not? I argue that researchers should resist the tendency to 'view things from nowhere' by utilizing *reflexive thinking* and *conscious partiality*.

Keywords: Positionality, Standpoint Epistemology, Ethics, Research, Philosophy

Ethics in Doing Research

Ethics is concerned with normative principles that govern specific behavior and practices in various fields. It refers to certain codes of conduct enacted by an external body, such as the institution with which one is affiliated, profession, or workplace. While this view of ethics is not incorrect, it is rather simplistic. In the context of ethics in research, there is a tendency to hold such a simplistic view. For some, an ethical practice in doing research entails ticking all the boxes in an ethics manual or following established protocols. Underlying this practice is the assumption that ethics in research is merely a set of codified procedures that must be adhered to by researchers.

A research output that is done ethically assumes that the researcher and her work have ethical integrity. What does this imply? There are two basic assumptions here: One is *honesty* and the other is *objectivity*. A research output that does not fabricate, misrepresent, or worse, falsify data, methods and results is a work imbued with ethical integrity. In other words, the integrity of a research output rests on the honesty of the researcher towards the research process, the subjects of research, her references, and even her personal motivations for conducting her research. Honesty also implies respect for other people's contribution to knowledge or their intellectual property. Thus, a researcher gives proper credit to them when their works are utilized. A researcher who practices openness and transparency should not intend to deceive or withhold critical information.

Moreover, a researcher that has integrity avoids producing a 'Hollywood-type' research that reports only the 'good things' and omits its unexpected outcomes. In my field, for example, a paper presenter at an international conference was 'grilled' by an expert because he noticed that the presenter only chose the 'good news' about her study, carefully omitting the negative or 'but' parts. Put simply, an honest researcher does not sugarcoat her study. Also, an ethical approach to research ensures that no harm is done before,

during and after the process. It safeguards the welfare of the researcher and the researched, carefully avoiding the possibility of placing them in harm's way. In particular, the ethical integrity of research is maintained by obtaining informed consent from study participants and informing them of critical information such as the study's purpose, methods, and, if applicable, the risks involved.

What I have described so far is an understanding of ethics in research that focuses on the procedures. It typically entails obtaining approval from an ethics committee, particularly if human subjects are involved, assuring committee members that the researchers involved are competent and trustworthy. Though this process is essential in carrying out one's research, it however does not provide the necessary 'tools' for dealing with real-world ethical issues in the field. For Guillemin & Guillam, "the checklist is not much help once the researcher is out in the field and dealing with the realities of research practice" (2004, 269). Later in the paper, I will highlight *reflexive thinking* and *conscious partiality* as tools that are essential in maintaining ethical research practice.

Another generally accepted principle that determines the ethical integrity of a researcher and her work is *objectivity*. It has to be emphasized that the concept of objectivity in relation to doing research is not straightforward. Let us first consider the 'simplistic view' of the principle of objectivity. Its conventional understanding in research is based on the idea that the knower (or researcher) is distinct from the known (or researched). In other words, the subject is separate from the object. Following this assumption, ethical integrity in research means that the researcher has to maintain impartiality towards the process, methods, frameworks, subjects, results and the other important components of the study. This understanding of objectivity implies that the researcher has to suspend her biases to avoid 'contaminating' her study. This also means that the lesser the subjectivity of the researcher is involved in the process, the better the results, that is, the more objective (thus 'ethical') her research output is. But as I will elaborate later, the idea

of objectivity is a contested area in research, both in the field of natural and social sciences as well as humanities.

These simplistic views toward ethics in research is predicated on the assumption that ethics consists of a set of criteria or codes of conduct that tell researchers what to do and what not to do in the process of doing research. It foregrounds the idea of objectivity as a crucial criterion in maintaining a value-free research output. Ethics in research, therefore, denotes the correctness of certain actions and practices, which are based on two principles: honesty and objectivity. If we think about it, these principles are plain common sense. In the next section, I take a closer look at the concept of objectivity and its problems.

Objectivity in Doing Research

Positivism is a theory about knowledge, which predominantly pervades most scientific research. Many of our assumptions about the research processes are deeply informed by this theory. Positivism is a paradigm that maintains that the world of experience is an objective world. In this view, the ‘objective world’ is governed by underlying principles, patterns that are generalizable, fixed laws and universal values (Code 1993). What we call ‘facts’ stem from this objective world. And what we call ‘good’ and ‘right’ are based on certain fixed values. We may use photography as an analogy of this theory. Just like taking pictures that show us realistic photos, doing research that is informed by positivistic assumptions is the same as ‘capturing’ a phenomenon as objectively as possible. In other words, to achieve validity and reliability, the researcher maintains a critical distance from her methods and analyses. Like a photographer, she obtains an ‘accurate’, thereby a truthful image of reality.

Applying this in the context of research, the researcher ought to keep neutrality towards her research. She does not let her autobiographical facticity intrude into her study. The level of

objectivity maintained in such research is supposed to make its results universalizable. What this implies is that, following Positivism, researchers do not only ‘discover’ certain patterns about the world but also make generalizations based on their purportedly objective findings. Moreover, Positivism assumes that the knower (subject) is separate from the known (object). The knower is understood to have the capacity to grasp the objective nature of what is being known. Hence, the researcher is an active agent in the process of knowing, capable of understanding phenomena. The object of knowledge or the known is usually understood as inert, passive, and capable of being grasped and scrutinized. Additionally, Positivism assumes that the process of knowing involves the rational and methodological discovery of a yet unknown truth.

From a positivistic lens, what we call objective truth proceeds from the elimination of the subjective interpretations and other biases the researcher holds. Subjective elements, such as the conditions surrounding one’s Positionality, are understood as obstacles to understanding objective reality. They obstruct the interpretation of evidence because they can be sources of error. Thus, maintaining objective measurement “allows for the application of statistical analysis, and makes data collection and interpretation open to replication and testing by others” (Sprague & Koborynowicz 2006, 26). If we look at how Positivism developed in the history of thought, we cannot deny its obvious contribution to humanity. Through its methodological rigor and use of logic, Positivism allowed for the development of the sciences and the rejection of speculation. Positivism made possible the attainment of knowledge through empirical research and rational analyses. Furthermore, it has largely contributed to the development of scientific methods for interpreting nature, society, and humans, such as empirical observation, statistical analysis, experimentation, and other comparative methods. Much of its contribution can be felt not only in the pursuit of scientific truth but also in many other fields, like business and commerce, law, technology, medicine, and even the crafting of public policies. However, Positivism is not without problems.

I will mention some criticisms against Positivism that would help us rethink the notion of objectivity in relation to doing research. According to Longino, the logic of Positivism is flawed because “data do not say what hypothesis they are evidence for...The same data can be used to support contradictory hypotheses and which connection gets made depends on the background assumptions being made” (Longino 1989 cited in Sprague & Kobryniewicz 2006, 26). A researcher always uses a network of conceptual assumptions, explicit or implicit, that support her claim, which is impossible to eliminate. The important question, then, is not whether a study is objectively conducted but rather which assumptions are made and which are not. Following Alcoff (1988), these background assumptions are based on values; therefore, research cannot be neutral. Despite the claims of objectivity and neutrality, the search for truth via research is anything but neutral. Like other forms of human consciousness, scholarly paradigms like Positivism are expressions of specific world views (Sprague & Kobryniewicz 2006, 26). For Code, the objectivity which Positivism upholds is nothing less of a normalized construct of a “privileged group of educated, usually prosperous, white men” (1993, 19). For this reason, scholars begin “rejecting positivism’s pretensions of creating a view from nowhere in favor of the notion that each knower is specific, located in a particular time and place” (Sprague & Kobryniewicz 2006, 27). This notion refers to the theory of knowledge called Standpoint Epistemology. Its basic assumption is that a knower, in this case, a researcher, has a unique perspective on the object, which consequently affects her view of the entire study from start to finish. The concept of Positionality is an offshoot of Standpoint Epistemology, which we now turn to.

Positionality and the Construction of a Researcher’s Epistemic Position

Positionality refers to one’s “social location in relation to an existing economic, political, cultural and social network” (Alcoff 2008 cited in Reed-Sandoval & Sykes 2017, 219). In its broadest

sense, it points to the conditions that cause, maintain and change a person's social position. These conditions consist of, but not limited to, the different geo-political and socio-cultural factors that inform how one sees the world, and also how one is seen by others. It is premised on the notion that a person's perception of and claims about the world are intimately connected to her position, not least because "knowledge does not arrive unmediated from the world; rather, knowledge gets constructed by the interaction between the questioner and the world" (Takacs 2003, 31). In other words, positionality shapes a person's worldview, which fundamentally stems from her unique, embodied and situated standpoint. A passage by Alcoff concerning the Positionality of women is helpful in understanding this concept. She notes that

When the concept "woman" is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The external situation determines the person's relative position, just as the position of a pawn on a chessboard is safe or dangerous, powerful or weak, according to its relation to the other chess pieces (Alcoff 2006, 148).

A person's Positionality defines her epistemic position and interactions with other knowers. Her embodied and concrete situatedness shape how she is positioned within "multiple, relational social processes of difference," such as, "gender, class, race, ethnicity, age and sexuality" which in turn determines how she is "differently positioned in hierarchies of power and privilege" (Qin 2016, 1). In this regard, Positionality has crucial implications concerning knowledge acquisition, production and justification – all of which are central in doing research. A person's position with the existing knowledge economy (viz., academic institutions, educational policies, dominant educational ideologies, modes of assessing knowledge, information technology, etc.) impacts how she acquires, produces and justifies knowledge. Such position

determines her capacity to discriminate ideas, competence to put forward arguments, facility with the dominant language and the capacity to maintain or challenge an existing thought.

Inasmuch as one's epistemic position affects her interactions with other knowers, it likewise determines her authority to be listened to and to be taken seriously. In other words, Positionality is intimately associated with power. For instance, in the context of research, a researcher's epistemic position will have an effect on her power to construct (or deconstruct) knowledge. This is derived from her relationship with her immediate knowledge community (i.e., peers, teachers, colleagues, etc.) and her access to existing bodies of knowledge.

Taking Positionality Seriously in Doing Research

Integrating the concept of Positionality in research maintains the idea that the social identity of the researcher plays a significant role in the process (Mosselson 2010, Bourke 2014). Underlying this is the positional claim that researchers are embodied subjects situated within concrete contexts and circumstances that shape the process of choosing the research agenda, environment, research participants, methodologies, conceptual framework, as well as the interpretation of data, including the dilemmas and conflicts that arise in the field (Alcalde 2007). Being entangled in the various layers of social relations in the field necessitates reflexivity toward one's assumptions, biases, and actions and how these affect the research process from the beginning up to the end. In this regard, research entails doing a critical self-introspection along with the process of carrying out the research agenda. Thus, each time a researcher engages in research, he or she is (re)searching himself or herself all over again, in addition to studying something or someone else (Milner 2007).

Paying attention to the impact of one's Positionality in the research process presupposes some assumptions concerning the

nature of knowledge and how it is produced. One is the notion that *knowledge is situated*, thereby it carries the fingerprints of a socially, culturally and historically situated person or group. As Rose asserts, “the sort of knowledge made depends on who its makers are” (Rose 1997, 306-307). This assumption underlines the crucial fact that as researchers, “we are differently situated by our social, intellectual, and spatial locations, by our intellectual history, and our lived experience, all of which shape our understandings of the world and the knowledge we produce” (Qin 2016, 1). Knowledge therefore is essentially linked with the identities, values, interests and even the political agenda of the individuals involved in its production.

Another epistemological assumption is the notion that *objectivity does not imply neutrality*. In the positivist-empiricist tradition, what normally counts as objective knowledge is presupposed by the impartiality of the researcher and independence from the concrete specificities of the research process. This Baconian research paradigm focuses on *what* the object of study is and gives less account on *who* conducts the study. In contrast, objective knowledge has something to do with the “limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object” (Haraway 1988, 583). Objectivity, in this sense, is possible only through the complex connections and the overlaps among equally legitimate, non-homogenous, partial perspectives. In other words, one cannot possibly speak of knowledge in absolute terms but only of partial and situated knowledges (Elicor 2020).

Reflexive Thinking

Reflexive thinking “refers to the idea that, as *thinkers*, we play an important part in determining the substantive thought – and the truths or knowledge – we arrive at” (Tarrant & D’Olimpio 2017, 2). Every stage of research necessitates critical reflection on one’s own thoughts and the process of one’s own thinking. This metacognitive move involves the constant examination of our own personal assumptions, preconceptions and biases that we inevitably

bring into our research experience. This is crucial in research insofar as it does not compartmentalize the thinker from the thought, the researcher from the researched. It assumes that reflexivity helps us avoid the tendency to separate our role as a researcher from our identity, which is constituted and shaped by different forces around us. Thus, it is impossible to be a dispassionate and objective observer of the world not least because we always bring our Positionality in our research, shaping its outcome. Our personal values, political views, culture, ethnolinguistic background, age, gender, education and profession not only influence and inform the way we view the world but also how we are viewed by others. Indeed, cultivating reflexive thinking highlights our own agencies, thus nurturing our capacity to adopt a greater sensitivity to how our Positionality gets entangled in our research work.

It must be noted, however, that emphasizing reflexivity does not mean tolerating self-indulgence in research but rather aims to “shed light on the research process” and “should not be seen as ‘navel gazing’” (Rose 1997, 309). What is crucial here is the level of awareness a researcher has about her entanglement in the web of power relations already in place within the chosen research environment. As Sultana argues, “reflexivity in research involves reflection on self, process, and representation, and critically examining power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation” (2007, 376). In this kind of approach, the researcher refuses to view phenomena from the role of an impartial observer, which is nothing but a “view from nowhere” (Code 1993, 16). It is for this reason that one’s perspective of research has to evolve from the idea of ‘researching about’ (implies distance) to ‘researching with’ (implies active participation), thus maintaining the implicit relationality between the researcher and the researched.

A researcher’s decision to take on a particular area among all the other possible fields already manifests his/her partiality. In my case, for example, I have chosen to specialize in Philosophy for/with Children rather than, say, Metaphysics or other branches of

Philosophy. Why did I choose this research area and not the others? My answer to this question has something to do with the conditions shaping my Positionality, including my preconceptions about the nature and purpose of Philosophy, my experiences, past and present, and all the other ideas and activities I have been exposed to. Knowing that my Positionality as a researcher always leaks into my study, I ask: does this make my research less valid and less reliable? The notions of validity and reliability, in this sense, no longer follow the positivistic assumptions of objectivity and neutrality. Highlighting my Positionality in my research practice actually makes it more valid and reliable as it implies ‘laying down all my cards on the table’, so to speak. This transparency adds another dimension to the ethical integrity we are talking about. However, I always acknowledge that my research output is contingent on the concrete circumstances where the research was done. Thus, a reflexive researcher always assumes partiality and situatedness of knowledge. Whatever result a study may generate, it is but a provisional view of a phenomenon, not an absolute interpretation of it.

Researchers’ social and political locations affect their research (Harding 1986, 1992). Researchers make choices and these choices are not value-free decisions. They have certain reasons for choosing the crucial elements of their research: from the main topic, questions, hypothesis, research design and methodology, conceptual framework up until our interpretation of data, analyses and findings. They also have certain reasons for rejecting other possible topics, questions, frameworks, etc. These supposedly reasoned choices are always subject to ethical inquiry. These choices include, for instance, the very purpose of the research itself. Is my aim to contribute to the existing body of knowledge or to advance my career? Does my choice to work with a particular group of people put their interests first or mine? Who actually benefits from my work? These ethical questions foreground the welfare of the subjects of research, their autonomy and dignity. In other words, it is through one’s actual interactions with them that one’s ethical commitments can be tested and carried out.

This is where being reflexive in research practice becomes crucially relevant. Being reflexive allows a researcher to step back and take a critical look at her role in the research process. A researcher does not merely report the facts of her study but also actively constructs interpretations while at the same time questioning how those interpretations came about. What this means is that the epistemological aspect of research is itself ethical. The more grounded one is in her Positionality, the more adept she is at navigating the research process while adhering to ethical standards.

Conscious Partiality

The purpose of being conscious of how one's Positionality plays out in the research process is not necessary to reduce the role of one's subjectivity and stop it from influencing the results of our research. I have already emphasized that this is not absolutely possible. However, this also does not mean that 'anything goes' in one's research practice. Of course, there are subjective elements that are necessary to suspend, especially if these could cause harm to both the subject and object. This is where the notion of 'conscious partiality' becomes important.

Conscious partiality is a notion advanced by Mies and Shiva (2014) as a methodology for research in women's studies. This is "achieved through partial identification with the research objects" (ibid.). As a research approach, it opposes the positivistic assumption of neutrality of researchers and of value-free research. Partial identification means that the researcher recognizes the shared experiences with the participants of the study thereby maintaining a certain level of relationality with them. This partial identification "leads to empathy and connection, and therefore greater validity of research data" (Humphries & Martin 2000, 79). Conscious partiality as a methodological complement in research is opposite to the "so-called 'Spectator-Knowledge' (Maslow, 1966: 50), which is

achieved by showing an indifferent, disinterested, alienated attitude towards the ‘research objects’” (Mies & Shiva 2014, 38).

This notion, which we ought to add to our research ‘toolkit’ addresses two tendencies in research practice: The first is when the researcher’s Positionality is totally alien from the Positionality of the researched, thereby making identification difficult. The second is when the researcher’s Positionality is too steeped into the situatedness of the research participants, rendering critical assessment challenging. When the experiences of the researcher and participants are totally incongruous, conscious partiality means finding common threads that would allow the researcher to identify with them. In my case, for instance, I may say that my experiences as an adult are no longer relevant to those children I engage with. In fact, there are many instances when I felt alienated from their ‘world’ and points of view. However, through conscious partiality, I make an effort to find common experiences with them, such as my childhood experiences in the past, or my experiences with my own child and other child relatives. On the other hand, when the researcher is deeply immersed in the reality of the participants, thereby claiming some universalistic assumptions of common experiences, there is a possibility that the researcher’s identification with the participants might flatten some crucial differences and divergences of opinions and assertions. Identification, therefore, should take account of differences. Mies and Shiva explain,

Conscious partiality is different from mere subjectivism or simple empathy. On the basis of a limited identification it creates a critical distance between the researcher and his Objects. It enables the correction of distortions of perception on both sides and widens the consciousness of both: the researcher and the ‘researched’ (Ibid.).

Thus, conscious partiality takes a radical look at the nature of the participants of the study (or research ‘objects’). Mies and Shiva further argue that conscious partiality “not only conceives of the

research objects as parts of a bigger social whole but also of the research subjects, that is, the researchers themselves” (ibid.). In this sense, unlike the positivistic separation of knower and known, there is no dichotomy between researcher and researched. Rather, the latter is always entangled with the researchers since both belong to a social whole. This implies that what the researcher produces always affects the researched, and vice versa. The implication of this notion cannot be understated; that is, the researcher bears a huge ethical and moral responsibility toward all the participants in the study.

Concluding Remarks

The acknowledgment that all knowledge is partial and situated is at the heart of any research that claims to be ethically conducted. It resists the positivistic tendency to claim validity and reliability through impartiality and objectivity not least because all research outputs are limited and incomplete. Researchers are in the business of constructing knowledge; thus, their works contribute to the ever-expanding body of knowledge that affects society and people's lives in one way or another. Additionally, researchers make choices and decisions which can be subjected to ethical inquiry. It is therefore important to ask: by working on a specific research project, whose voices are being privileged? Which conceptual or ideological frameworks are preferred? Whose interests are served? On the other hand, whose voices are silenced? What paradigms are ignored? Whose interests are not served? Conscious partiality is crucial in research as it challenges us to view reality *from below*. This “view from below” – in contrast to the “view from above” - means that research “must be brought to serve the interests of those who are dominated, exploited and oppressed” (ibid.). One may say that her work is non-political because it is unbiased and objective. Others may treat their research works as purely ‘academic’ endeavours with no direct impact on the concrete realities of life. This, however, is far from the truth. Knowledge generation through research is inextricably linked to the socio-political forces that surround the

researcher. It would be quite naïve to claim total ‘objective distance’ from one’s work and its outcomes. Hence, researchers’ ethical responsibility does not end with the paperwork submitted to an ethics committee. Such responsibility continues even after the research is completed.

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