



## Reflections on a Systematic Literature Review: Questioning the (In)visibility of Researcher Positionality

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## **Reflections on a systematic literature review: Questioning the (in)visibility of researcher positionality.**

### **Abstract**

This critical commentary is developed from the author's experience of conducting a systematic review and thematic synthesis of literature investigating social worker's perceptions of bureaucracy in frontline practice. Reading widely contributes to the development of knowledge, evidence-based practice and research skills, yet the majority of literature consulted failed to address the influence of researcher positionality in research design, data collection, analysis or presentation. Questions of quality reporting in published literature are raised, identifying a stark contrast between research reporting practices and social work values. As social work practitioners, educators and students, we need to question why is positionality widely invisible in the publication of qualitative social work research, what is being prioritised in literature and does this align with the core values of the social work profession?

**Keywords:** Qualitative methods, Qualitative analysis, Quality assurance, Social work, Research, Reflexivity.

Having conducted a systematic review and thematic synthesis of literature investigating social worker's perceptions of bureaucracy in frontline practice (Pascoe, Waterhouse-Bradley & McGinn, 2021), this critical commentary examines the reporting of researcher positionality across the 39 articles included in the study. Through an analysis of this sample, it was apparent that the majority of publications failed to address or acknowledge the influence of researcher positionality, their worldview, motivation and values on research design, data collection, analysis or presentation. The findings question the broader culture of social work research and publication, what standards are being reinforced and whether this mirrors professional social work values.

### **The influence of positionality on research and social work practice**

Qualitative research seeks to gain insights and greater understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of participants (Campbell, Taylor & McGlade, 2017). While methods and methodology should be well detailed to ensure someone else can conduct a similar study and understand the processes followed, it is important to acknowledge the inability to replicate qualitative data (Pitney & Parker, 2009). For example, the interaction in interviews, focus groups and ethnographic observations are shaped through dynamic verbal and non-verbal cues, the research context, and both participant and researcher health, wellbeing and attitudes at the time. These precise circumstances and interactions cannot be duplicated as they vary from one moment to the next, and qualitative research it is not conducted in a controlled environment (Pitney & Parker, 2009; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

While measures such as inter-coder reliability, data saturation and participant checking have been developed as strategies to improve rigor, such approaches remain controversial across

qualitative research, and there is no agreement that objectivity is desirable or achievable (See Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2020, Chammas, 2020; Smith & McGannon, 2018). The presence of subjectivity should not be hidden or overlooked, nor should subjectivity discredit the findings of a study. All research has strengths and limitations, and no researcher is ever neutral in their approach to the subject matter. Challenging the notion of objectivity opens opportunities to examine the role of researcher positionality.

The influence of self on research has been gaining attention across the social sciences and qualitative research. As researchers, factors such as gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, race, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic background influence our relationships with others and how we are perceived by potential participants, shaping engagement and what data is collected (Chacko, 2004; Crawford et al., 2017). For example, I identify as a woman, yet gender roles and constructs of gender can differ significantly across cultures, groups, societies and individuals. The gender norms of the research context can privilege certain voices over others, shape who can and cannot participate, what they can and cannot discuss and under what circumstances. In research it is important to be critically aware of the impact your gender and other personal characteristics can have on what knowledge is shared and how it is presented.

Beyond personal characteristics, other influences include your institutional base, funding sources, personal values, professional values and epistemological underpinnings, all of which set out the boundaries of research, can re-direct focus or place emphasis on particular elements of a project (Peshkin, 2000). Whether you are previously known to the participants, have lived or worked in the community of interest, or have similar shared experiences also impacts your relationships with participants, how you perceive the research context and your

interpretation of findings. Described as an insider-researcher position, the strengths, limitations and complex ethical challenges that may arise are beyond the scope of this commentary but are detailed in social work research by Chammas (2020). Identifying the myriad of influences that impact research design, data collection, analysis and presentation highlights how no study can be considered neutral, and that researcher positionality is a key determinant in the construction of knowledge (Crawford et al., 2017; Escobar, 1991).

Recognising that no research can be considered value free, and acknowledging the subjective nature of qualitative research, integrating reflexivity in an open and honest manner enhances transparency, accountability, credibility, trustworthiness and sincerity in qualitative research (Gringeri, Barusch & Cambron, 2013; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017; Peskin, 2000; Probst, 2015; Tracy, 2010). Although open reporting of positionality and reflexivity does not guarantee accurate representation of participant experiences or voices (Finlay, 2002), time and space are needed to reflect on the process of interpretation and how the researcher's identity and positionality influences their understanding of data and the broader subject under investigation (Peshkin, 2000). Not only is this important in the interpretive process but reporting positionality and identity in publications aids in developing awareness and a reflexive research culture (Peshkin, 2000).

In my own social work training and practice, ensuring the time and space for reflection to question my values and belief system was vital to unpack their influence on my engagement with service users and to challenge any potential biases to prevent oppressive practice. Debriefing with colleagues, regularly accessing supervision, and maintaining a practice journal were some of the strategies that provided a safe environment for this reflexive process, strategies I have carried forth into my PhD (See Nowell et al. 2017 for an account of

reflexive journaling in qualitative research). Having practice experience before entering academia, positionality has remained at the forefront of my mind, however, I found scant evidence of this through the systematic literature review.

### **The sample**

As part of a larger study, thirty-nine articles were retrieved through a systematic literature search across nine different databases. Limited to empirical research with social workers, each study employed qualitative methods. For full details of the systematic search methods, see Pascoe, Waterhouse-Bradley & McGinn (2021). The final sample spanned across 24 journals and were published between 1998 and 2019, with more than two thirds published since 2011. Studies ranged from rural social work in Australia, specialist palliative social work in Canada, hospital-based social work in Saudi Arabia, child protection services in England and disability social work services in Sweden.

Of this sample, only two articles declared researcher positionality, both of which included limited detail. One stated they had previously studied with their research participants but did not discuss the impact of this pre-existing relationship on data collection or analysis. The other highlighted limitations to confidentiality due to ongoing professional and personal contact between the participants and researcher, discussing steps to enhance confidentiality. While this is the more detailed of the two, they also did not address how positionality influenced the data collection or analysis process.

The wide range of journals, publication dates, fields of practice and research contexts highlights that the absence of positionality in social work research is not restricted to a particular set of circumstances but is evident across the body of knowledge. While

declarations of funding and host institutes were detailed alongside authorship as standard procedure, these factors were not integrated into the body of the manuscript, with no discussion on the extent to which the funders and/or host institution norms, expectations, culture or accountability requirements affected the research design, data collection, analysis or presentation. As a profession that emphasises the central role of critical reflection to evaluate and enhance practice and to develop an awareness of the impact of self on others (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2019; British Association of Social Workers, 2014; Coulshed & Orme, 2006; Parker & Bradley, 2011) the absence of positionality and lack of discussion on factors shaping the research is incongruent with social work values and practice.

## **Discussion**

This invisibility is not a new phenomenon. In their study of 100 qualitative social work articles published between 2003-2008, Barusch, Gringeri & George (2011), found only 14% of their sample included information on reflexivity and the use of self. In a similar study investigating social work literature between 2008-2010, Gringeri et al., (2013) also found minimal reporting of reflexivity, present in only 16% of their sample. Despite calling for greater attention to positionality and reflexivity in research publication and graduate training (Barusch et al., 2011; Gringeri et al., 2013), with the majority of articles published since 2011 (27 of the 39), the current study highlights that change is yet to occur.

Although a lack of reporting in publications is not definitive evidence that consideration of positionality is absent in the broader research process (Probst, 2015), a continued exclusion from publication risks cultivating a research culture that overlooks such central consideration. Using prior publications to inform research design or guide decisions on what information to

include and exclude in research reporting is not uncommon; therefore, it is important to question why has the recognition of positionality been overlooked in social work publications, what norms are being promoted by this omission and what is prioritised when the use of self is over-looked?

With a lack of consensus throughout academia, and diverse epistemologies, methods, and methodologies adhering to different standards, there is no single set of guidelines or criteria to determine quality in qualitative research. Multiple evaluative tools, however, have been established to guide the analysis of qualitative research, with five of these frameworks introduced as examples in table one. As summarised in columns two and three, each tool poses key analytical questions, highlighting the importance of evidencing reflexivity and positionality in publication to enhance transparency, rigor, and quality. Although developed to inform the critical appraisal of existing research, this overview offers guidance to researchers by indicating the depth of reflexivity and attention to positionality needed to promote best practice and increase trustworthiness in qualitative research. Ultimately, a sole statement of the researcher(s) personal characteristics is only the first step.

### **Insert table one**

Beyond the guidance summarised in table one, further practical recommendations include reporting practices which foster critical awareness of one's positionality to highlight how reflexivity has been adopted as an ongoing process, rather than an isolated activity at a single point in time (Benson & O'Reilly, 2020; Gringerie et al, 2013). Strategies may include professional supervision, debriefing sessions with colleagues, and journaling, all of which help the researcher identify bias, assumptions, initial reactions, and feelings throughout the research process (Al-Natour, 2011; Gringeri et al., 2013). Disclosing such strategies and examining the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches builds transparency and



promotes a greater understanding of the influence of the researcher on the researched and visa-versa. Lastly, it is recommended that articles clearly state the epistemological underpinnings, as this impacts decision making in research.

For these recommendations to be adopted, there needs to be greater attention directed towards reflexivity and positionality from journals and peer review processes. Questions, such as those posed in table one, could be incorporated into both author and peer-review guidelines to provide clear direction during the write up and publication process. Despite focusing exclusively on qualitative research, questions of positionality should also be considered in the context of quantitative and mixed methods research.

## **Conclusion**

Invariably, the attention given to reflexivity and positionality in research will shift, depending on epistemology (Probst, 2015), intended audiences, objectives of publication and word count available. However, instead of ignoring worldviews and subjectivity, being cognisant of positionality and transferring reflexivity from frontline social work to research can improve best practice. Such transparency adds value to knowledge development and critical thinking, yet the consistent exclusion from the sample perpetuates assumptions of neutrality and fails to recognise the role of the researcher in knowledge construction. Now is the time to extend the dialogue on what we wish to prioritise in continued professional development, knowledge production, and research culture, and how these practices reflect the values of the social work profession.

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