



ISSN: 1743-727X (Print) 1743-7288 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cwse20

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To cite this article: Barry Morrissey, Fiona King, Gillian Lake, Amy Markos & Josephine Marsh (26 Feb 2026): Between, beside and beyond the binary: navigating positionality dilemmas in doctoral research, International Journal of Research & Method in Education, DOI: [10.1080/1743727X.2026.2634337](https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2026.2634337)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2026.2634337>



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Published online: 26 Feb 2026.



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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH & METHOD IN EDUCATION
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2026.2634337>

Between, beside and beyond the binary: navigating positionality dilemmas in doctoral research

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ABSTRACT

This transatlantic study investigates how doctoral students conceptualize and navigate positionality. With a significant proliferation of doctoral programmes internationally, and many enrolled students conducting research within their own personal or professional contexts, the need to explore how they address positionality is pressing. In this qualitative paper, we present findings gathered from doctoral students researching in the social justice field in Ireland and the United States of America. The students attended two Research in Progress Seminars (Session 1: $n = 20$; Session 2: $n = 18$), where they completed a number of pedagogical activities aimed at probing their experiences and their perceptions of each other's research. The findings evidence that doctoral students experience two central positionality dilemmas when conducting research as self-identified insiders. First, the proximity dilemma centres on how a researcher assimilates their personal experience with a

topic into their research, without compromising their researcher credibility. Second, the power-empowerment dilemma centres on how a researcher can leverage current systems to bring about greater equity, without reinforcing inequities by researching within them in the first place. The paper concludes by endorsing continua approaches to positionality that are fluid, momentary and scalar, to support doctoral students in mitigating dilemmas arising from perceived insiderness.

Introduction

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 October 2025 Accepted 29 January 2026

KEYWORDS

Positionality in doctoral research; reflexivity in doctoral research; insider research; social justice and equity in research

Researcher positionality is critical to understanding and making judgments on the quality and sincerity of research findings and claims (Tracy 2010). In social science research, positionality encompasses not only the impact of a researcher's social positioning and

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personal experience – including role, position, gender, social class, race and other social factors (Maynard 1994) – in shaping the research process, but also how these factors can latently influence the external ascription of that positionality (Herod 1999, Savin-Baden and Major 2013). Beyond the researcher's own perspective, the concept accounts for the power dynamics at play during the research encounter, particularly when the researcher is perceived as a member of a dominant or minority group (Forde and Torrance 2017). This is especially important in social justice research where positionality can play a key role in challenging, disrupting and decolonizing the status quo (Zembylas 2025). Although positionality has a well-established place in theoretical literature, it has recently attracted renewed scrutiny, most notably in this journal, where it has been subject to re-examination through new lenses (Southern 2021, Tanksley and Estrada 2022, Rahman 2023, Yip 2024, Musgrave 2024, Zembylas 2025). In this article, we¹ extend that scrutiny to doctoral students, as a rapidly-expanding population (Sarrico 2022, Taylor 2023), whose future research and perspectives will drive scholarly development within the education sphere.

This inquiry draws upon data derived from a broader, multi-strand research project aimed at exploring how doctoral research can enhance socio-educational equity in

the United States of America (USA) and Ireland. In that wider project, while we learned much about doctoral students' ideas on equity and social justice, the study unveiled ten

sions about their research positions and identities that we had not anticipated and they, as individuals, had not fully considered. Building on the work of others who have conceptualized positionality in dynamic and fluid terms, we have harnessed these students' insights towards structuring a spectral framework where students can capture their oscillating positionalities more methodically. This approach aims to disrupt perfunctory treatments of positionality as a front-end, procedural formality, often only fulfilled out of perceived obligation at the methods stage of a project, rather than engaging deeply with its implications (the good and the bad) from the outset. Moving beyond the perfunctory, we advocate for sustained engagement with its shifting implications, and strategic navigation of the reflexive tensions and dilemmas inherent in knowledge-production during the doctoral journey – particularly, in professional doctorates (Czerniawski 2023). The evolving, holistic, longitudinal approach we propose stands in contrast with grocery list techniques for addressing positionality (Jackson 2004), often characterized by tokenistic identity reflections that merely skim the surface of academic expectations but lack genuine critical introspection. Although all five of us are (or have been) doctoral supervisors, our exploration of positionality here is situated within the vantage point of the active researcher, rather than from a supervisory position. While unquestionably our supervisory experiences exerted a tacit influence on the inquiry, as we discuss in the methods section, these experiences remained peripheral to the lived experiences shared by doctoral participants, which served as the primary evidentiary base for this paper. In other words, and to tentatively analogize with Nakata (2015, p. 171), this research was conducted from an 'insider's outsider' perspective – while we collected data from inside our own professional contexts, our data sources were students within our respective universities, rather than ourselves. The study demonstrates the value of doctoral students adopting continua approaches to positionality and provides an emergent conceptual model to support them in engaging with reflexivity, to navigate these approaches effectively.

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Understanding positionality

Positionality has sometimes been viewed in binary terms (Huberman and Miles 2002, Zou 2023), with researchers often historically 'assumed' (Merriam *et al.* 2001, p. 405) to be either insiders or outsiders (Wilson *et al.* 2022). Insiders are ostensibly understood to be culturally 'native' or to have a direct connection with the organizational system being researched (Brannick and Coghlan 2007, p. 59) or the phenomenon under investigation (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). From an anthropological standpoint, insiders are invariably categorized as occupying an emic perspective (Beals *et al.* 2020), which is the vantage that comes from being situated within a particular culture (Pike 1954). Outsiders, frequently pitched as occupying the counter position (Bruskin 2019), are more detached from the inquiry and do not have a direct connection to the inquiry site or phenomenon under investigation (Zou 2023). Anthropologists categorize outsiders as having an etic perspective (Beals *et al.* 2020) which is the vantage that comes from being situated outside the parameters of a particular culture (Pike 1954). At the surface level, outsiders do not have to deal with the ethical complexity

of 'role duality' (Brannick and Coghlan 2007, p. 59), which is the experience of researching within a group where the researcher holds membership (Holian and Coghlan 2013). While the inside researcher has a past, a present and a future within a group, which may affect their perspective, outsiders do not have this baggage (Fleming 2018). This has led to claims that insiderness is more closely associated with subjectivity (Mohler and Rudman 2022) or even innate bias (Bilecen 2014), while outsidership has come to represent 'objectivity and value-neutrality' (Chhabra 2020, p. 315) – although this putative duality is the subject of some significant contestation (Secules *et al.* 2019, Gani and Khan 2024). These competing perspectives lead to fundamental questions as to the best position from which to conduct research. Nowhere is this question more salient than in the social justice and equity sphere.

Positionality and equity

Insiders argue they are better positioned to know what the inequities are within systems because their lived experience enables them to speak 'with moral authority and legitimacy' (Banks 1998, p. 6). This is especially true in cases where insiders are part of marginalized groups and where the culture has been embedded by those who are in more privileged positions (Kinitz 2022). For this reason, insider research has been strongly linked, historically, with the civil rights (Banks 1998) and feminist (Garung 2020) movements, where researchers sought to change systems that were deemed to be unfair or discriminatory. This type of insider research is aligned with an 'emancipatory episteme' because a central goal is to remove barriers (Sharma 2019, p. 1). Only insiders can really understand a group's culture because of their socialization within it, and this enables them to better make sense of nuances (Banks 1998). Outsiders demur on this point, arguing that insiders can be blinded by group loyalties and only the cold eye of the outsider can objectively depict what is happening in reality (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Fundamentally, both arguments are underpinned by different epistemological positions around the nature of what makes knowledge valid (Chhabra 2020). In his seminal work on the 'Sociology of Knowledge', Merton (1972, p. 36) rejects these extreme

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positions and argues that both insider and outsider positionalities are needed 'in the process of truth seeking.'

A non-binary view of positionality

A growing body of scholarship has suggested that discourses which position insiderness and outsidership as mutually exclusive are faulty (Labaree 2002), that the reality is far more 'messy' (Vicars 2008, p. 97), and that researcher positionality can change within the same project, depending on the aspect, situation or context being explored at any given time (Holmes 2020). Bukamal (2022, p. 344) outlines how researching the same idea in two different contexts can result in 'shifting' positionalities that render a researcher both an insider and an outsider within the same project, at the same time. This has led some to conceptualize insiderness in terms of degrees, with Chavez (2008, p. 475) making a distinction between the 'partial' insider and the 'total' insider. Others have taken this a step further and

argue that positionality should be plotted along a continuum (Bilecen 2014), ranging from total insider at one end to total outsider at the other. In this vein, and writing within the disability sphere, Chhabra (2020, p. 307) advocates for an 'in between' positionality which would be fluidly situated along that insider-outsider continuum and underpinned by manifold overlapping identities. Anything other than this flexible approach to positionality is 'epistemologically controversial and methodologically untenable' because of intersecting identities that are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated (Chhabra 2020, p. 315).

Building on these points, Merriam *et al.* (2001) present four case studies that illustrate why continua approaches are preferable to the binary view. In their work, they show how initial participant engagement destabilized researchers' assumed positionalities and led to an evolution in how the researchers themselves understood the interplay of factors shaping their positioning. For example, in one of the case studies, a middle-aged female professor from Botswana, originally assumed she was an insider when interviewing local businesswomen due to shared cultural background, gender and age. However, her respondents' impressions of her university affiliation and higher education status, caused her to reappraise her initial positioning in relation to her participants. While the professor was not a complete outsider, neither was she a complete insider, demonstrating the complexity and multidimensional nature of insiderness and outsidership. Herod's (1999, p. 321) example of an older researcher, who on the face of it appears to be an insider, but whose age renders them 'out of touch' by their younger research informants, is illustrative of the same point. In effect, a researcher's perception of their positionality does not always align with how their research participants perceive it; this mismatch underscores the inadequacy of the insider-outsider dichotomy for capturing such relational complexity. That surface-level insiders can often be othered, on the basis of myriad factors, has led Ademolu (2024) to wryly conclude that birds of a feather do not always flock together.

Hellawell (2006) extends the continuum theory further by proposing that instead of one continuum, there are multiple parallel continua because as Warren and Davis (2009) note, positionalities are momentary – one moment you are this and the other moment you are that. For instance, a researcher may be an insider professionally but an outsider culturally (Yip 2024) and these various positionalities may manifest differently

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in different situations or even within the same situation, depending on multiple factors (Warren and Davis 2009). Along similar lines, other studies address the language variable (Nakata 2015, Cormier 2018, p. 328) and how this impacts 'linguistic positionality'. While it may be tempting to render researchers as linguistic insiders because they share a primary language with participants, such a characterization is often reductive; it overlooks the nuanced ways in which accents and dialects often function as potent markers of social and cultural capital. Put simply, these different markers can impact on how we see, and are seen, irrespective of other commonalities that may exist. Germinaro (2025, p. 2) has also recently proposed that, conceptually, spatial relations across time are highly impactful, suggesting that different places act as 'perigees' for 'interacting with one another across time and trajectories' – it could be argued that language, as a space in its own right, has the potential to fulfil a similar function. Under this idea, spatial relations can act as disruptors or stabilizers for power dynamics.

Nakata (2015), similarly eschews the insider-outsider dualism in favour of a continuum based model, with three dimensions that shape how a researcher's positionality might be situated. These perspectives, based on research in language teacher education, are categorized as follows (Nakata 2015, p. 170):

- **outsider research** – conducted in the classroom by researchers external to the class room, focusing on data collection and analysis to contribute to broader academic knowledge

- **insider's outsider research** – conducted by teacher-researchers who collect data from their own classrooms but analyze it from an outsider's perspective
- **insider research** – conducted by teacher-researchers who collect and analyze data from their own teaching and learning contexts, in order to develop their professional practice and improve educational experiences

These categories are not rigid and the boundaries between them are loose, with the primary analytical task for the researcher being to determine the relative weighting of each category and the influence this weighting might have.

Positionality Influences

Positionality not only influences how we are perceived by or interface with research participants – although that is a key consideration. Secules *et al.* (2019, p. 19) demonstrate that it affects at least six key areas of the research process, including topic selection, epistemology, ontology, methodology, relation to participants and communication. Power dynamics, which impact positionality, also arise where an 'insider' is in a managerial position in the research site and where research participants may be working under the researcher's authority (Smyth and Holian 2008). While the status differential may curb the openness with which a participant engages during data collection, the effect can also be felt much earlier than that in terms of 'implicit coercion' to participate in the first place (Fleming 2018, p. 319). Strategies such as having someone external to the research conducting the recruitment and facilitating interviews, have been suggested as a means for creating distance to mitigate the power effects (Fleming 2018). But, the corollary of this distance, in particular in the interview space, could result in the external

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facilitator not being able to recognize new insights that could be probed further to generate new knowledge. It also validates what Lather (1986, pp. 258–259) might refer to as the 'maldistribution of power' over knowledge, that valorizes 'hyperobjectivity' as though knowledge can be gathered or produced free from social construction. This 'interplay between distance and proximity' is a pervasive feature of general discourses around positionality (Secules *et al.* 2019, p. 27) and there are times where distance is inherent and unavoidable, irrespective of whether it is desirable or not on the part of the researcher. For example, Cormier (2018) points out how translation in cross-language research can create distance and give rise to interpretation dilemmas. In these circumstances, both perceived and actual positionality(ies) – of the researcher and translator – are highly situational and socially-constructed. While very effective 'translation and interpretation

practices' exist (Cormier 2018, p. 334), these do not fully mitigate the central issues. Other ethical concerns also arise. Marginalized groups or individuals may be participating in research with a view to making change and removing perceived barriers. This can put significant emotional pressure on the researcher (Chhabra 2020), in particular where the findings do not accord with participant aspirations or where the participant has concerns that their data could be used to reflect negatively on their group (Couture **et al.** 2012). Managing the expectations of participants is a key aspect of qualitative research and has even greater pertinence where the so-called **insider researcher** occupies another institutional role that blurs boundaries by bringing them into contact with research participants, as part of their professional duties (Tshuma 2021). Even this very labelling of individuals or groups as marginalized has long been viewed as ethically problematic because labels such as these have been perpetuated by longstanding and prevailing socio-political hierarchies (Mayall **et al.** 1999) and risk cementing the status of individuals or groups within the discourse (Tshuma 2021). This reinforces rather than dismantles the colonial structures through which research has historically been undertaken (Zembylas 2025).

Positionality statements

As part of the research writing process, within some quarters of the academic community, there is an expectation that a researcher will compose positionality statements to frame their research projects and their positioning within them (Boveda and Annamma 2023, Gani and Khan 2024) – ostensibly to enhance credibility. Ríos and Patel (2023) push back against the prevailing discourse and question whether they are of any value at all, preferring instead to leverage positionality as praxis within research. Savolainen **et al.** (2023) are even more definitive and suggest that they should be avoided, in favour of an emphasis on methodological rigour and transparency – though it should be noted that their focus orients towards the scientific, as opposed to the social. More recently, Zembylas (2025, p. 466) has proposed a reframing of positionality statements to reflect a more dynamic and future-facing perspective, 'rather than backward-looking identity narratives aimed primarily at affirming the researcher's legitimacy'. This approach emphasizes solidarity, rejects the performative and, crucially, emphasizes action to bring about change. The nascent move away from positionality statements and the embracing of this more holistic, context-embedded approach to positionality is dependent on a reflexive stance that is highly introspective, dynamic and multi-directional.

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Managing positionality through reflexivity

Reflexivity is a critical part of rigorous research (Tracy 2010). While a universally accepted definition for this 'multi-dimensional construct' (Yip 2024, p. 230) remains elusive, at a rudimentary level it broadly involves the examining and re-examining of one's personal feelings, reactions and emotions in relation to a research topic (Holmes 2010). It is an iterative process involving the 'conscious revelation of the role of ... beliefs and values' in key research decisions (Hellowell 2006, p. 483). Warin (2011) describes it as an awareness of how the researcher is influencing participants' perceptions and how their perceptions are simultaneously influencing

the researcher's outlook – positioning reflexivity in multi-directional terms. Documenting these influences plays a crucial role in interrogating them and identifying their impact on the research outcomes (Olmos Vega *et al.* 2023). Maintaining a journal, keeping memos and bracketing personal beliefs are reflexive strategies that can be used to enhance the trustworthiness of findings (Patnaik 2013) and are often key planks of the methodological approaches taken by many student researchers.

Methodology

This research was part of a broader, multi-strand, qualitative inquiry aimed at exploring the learning futures of doctoral education in Ireland and the USA, and was approved by the research ethics committees at both Dublin City University and Arizona State University (approval numbers: DCUREC/2022/242 and STUDY00016751).

Research question and analytic focus

The research question for this strand of the study was:

- What role does doctoral education have in addressing collective responsibility and a shared vision for social justice?

Data were gathered from doctoral students who were completing either the Doctor of Philosophy or Doctor of Education programmes in the respective schools of education at both universities. This paper reports on the positionality theme that emerged from addressing that question, because of its pervasiveness across the dataset and its identifi-

cation by students as both a barrier and an enabler for addressing social justice issues in academic research. The analytic goal here is to demonstrate how perceptions and experiences of positionality manifested within participants' own doctoral projects and within their responses to accounts of peers' research.

Interpretivist lens for understanding student experiences

The study was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm because our lived experiences of conducting and supervising research shaped the inquiry at different stages. Initially, we were influenced by the continuing growth of doctoral programmes internationally (Sarrico 2022, Taylor 2023) and saw an opportunity for developing our field by exploring

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new learning futures in terms of how they were provided – in this sense, we recognized that there may be alternative ways of doing doctoral research than the traditional way. In gathering data, what we saw and observed about the students' projects was inevitably mediated through our experiences as supervisors; rather than shying away from this or building in ways to create distance, we leaned into it

because that enabled us to probe subtleties in real time. In analyzing data, our unique insights into doctoral supervision at our respective universities allowed us to identify nuances and unspoken meanings in students' articulations – this would not have been possible without our institutional knowledge bases.

Participants and context

The sample represented a diverse range of professional backgrounds and research interests, although all participants were researching education-related areas, within the respective schools of education at both universities. Some participants were undertaking their doctoral studies full-time, while others were studying part-time; some participants were practicing education professionals (e.g. teachers, curriculum advisors, school leaders), while others were either full-time researchers or working outside of education altogether. In keeping with our interpretivist lens, we did not seek to categorize participants

by their specific fields of study or prior methodological training. Instead, we focused on their individual and shared experiences of undertaking doctoral research. Our inquiry proceeded from the assumption that participants possessed a baseline research and methodological literacy consistent with postgraduate standing – although we acknowledge that all participants were at disparate stages of the doctoral trajectory with varying levels of research maturity.

The context for the study was two ($n = 2$) ***Research in Progress Seminars*** (RiPS), which took place via Zoom and lasted 90 minutes each. The efficacy of Zoom for the purposes of gathering research data has been established repeatedly in recent years (Archibald *et al.* 2019, Gray *et al.* 2020, Olliffe *et al.* 2021, Lim and Kaveri 2023) and for this project it had the added benefit of readily facilitating participant assembly and collaboration, in circumstances where participants were on two different continents. In advance of the first session, all doctoral students at the schools of education in both universities were invited via email to participate. Participation was on the basis of informed consent and students could withdraw at any time. At the first session there were twenty doctoral students ($n = 20$) and at the second session there were eighteen doctoral students ($n = 18$); two students ($n = 2$) withdrew.

Data-gathering instruments

At each seminar, two doctoral students ($n = 2$) presented their research – one Irish student and one American student. The other students observed and textually responded to the presentations, using an array of pedagogical tools, including jamboards, mentimeters and questionnaires. Data were divided into three categories:

1. Presenter data – PowerPoint presentation and speaking notes from the doctoral students who presented at each RiPS session

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2. Observer data – textual inputs gathered from doctoral students who observed the presenters, using the pedagogical tools outlined above
3. RiPS entry/exit questionnaire data – qualitative open-ended questions, where

participants provided narrative accounts of their experiences

Data analysis

Presenter, observer and questionnaire data were subsequently coded by the authors and then analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step framework that is widely employed in educational research. The coding process took place in pairs to enhance rigour and Microsoft Excel and Dedoose were used to aid in the thematic organization of data. The entry and exit questionnaires were instrumental in capturing key learning during the project. Although addressing positionality was not part of the original objective or scope for the project, it was a core theme generated by interpretative engagement with the data. The rationale for focusing solely on that theme here is to facilitate a rigorous analysis of the concept, in circumstances where understandings of it are being strongly debated and where this journal has emerged as a critical platform for the evolution of that debate. Table 1 overviews all data sources and identifiers used in our reportage in later sections.

Rigour and trustworthiness

While our situated perspectives enabled the harnessing of deeper layers of understanding at different points in the research process, we recognized the need to embed features that enhanced the trustworthiness of our findings. Reflexivity was critical in this regard to ensure the integrity and credibility of the research. Detailed notes were kept by each researcher at all points in the research process, from the moment the project was conceptualized, right through to the end of the project. Regular meetings were held online where we discussed aspects of the project and our reflections concerning decisions we had made and issues that were emerging. We challenged each other's views, as we sought consensus on the best approaches to take; often, this involved compromise or taking a different approach than we would otherwise have taken if we were conducting this research individually. After each RiPS session, we held a debriefing where we discussed what we heard. Thereafter, we divided into pairs so that the coding of data was

Table 1. Data source identifiers.

RiPS Session 1 (A) RiPS Session 2 (B)	
Identifier	Data source
AM	Opening Mentimeter BP1 Presentation 1 AVR Jamboard Video Response BP1R Jamboard Reflection (Presentation 1) AP1 Presentation 1 BP2 Presentation 2 AP1R Jamboard Reflection (Presentation 1) BP2N Presentation 2 Notes AP2 Presentation 2 BP2R Jamboard Reflection (presentation 2) AP2N Presentation 2 Notes BM Closing Mentimeter AP2R Jamboard Reflection (Presentation 2) BS Exit Questionnaire AS Entry Questionnaire BC Chat in Zoom AC Chat in Zoom
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more robust. We cross-checked each other's coding to enhance rigour and we agreed that the final themes were a well-substantiated reflection on the data we gathered. The purpose of these reflexive actions was not to eliminate bias entirely because, fundamentally, that is impossible under interpretivism (Junjie and Yingxin

2022); rather, the purpose was to give the reader the knowledge necessary to understand and account for the possible impact it may have had.

Our composite positionality

We believe the paradigmatic clarity, methodological rigour and multi-layered reflexivity with which we have undertaken this study render it, in and of itself, fully robust, without having to provide any additional validation. However, we also recognize that positionality statements are a prevailing, normative feature of academic research and are valued by many in our discipline. To this end, and influenced by Ríos and Patel (2023), we present below a composite positionality statement that captures the dynamic nature of our relationships with each other, our participants and with the topic under investigation here. We present this statement, not as a performative defence of our positions or because we think that the statement is necessary to justify or provide legitimacy to our work. Rather, we present it in a spirit of openness, as an expansion of our positions, to allow the readers to decide for themselves whether or not it is important in their individual interpretations of our work. This is consistent with emerging perceptions of positionality statements as being forward-looking and more far sighted (Zembylas 2025), in supporting greater understanding of findings and their application to other contexts.

Our positionalities as five authors were not fixed but continuously shifting, shaped by the inter sections of our professional roles, mentoring relationships, gendered and racial identities, and the hierarchies of higher education. All of us identify as White, which afforded us privilege in navigating predominantly white academic spaces while also obligating us to remain reflexive about the blind spots such positioning creates. Our shared history of professional interactions through conferences and collaborative networks meant that we entered the project with an existing layer of familiarity and collegiality. Before our professional interactions, some of us began our relationships with other researchers on this project as doctoral students, studying under the direction of others on the project - for example, the first and second author originally had a student-supervisor relationship, as did the fourth and fifth author. Over time, our relationships shifted into collegial and personal friendships, showing the fluid boundary between mentorship and collaboration. While all of us have individual research interests in areas such as educational leadership, inclusive education, special education and teacher professional learning, it was our shared interest in equity and social justice that formed the basis of our work on this project.

As academics on the doctoral programmes at our respective universities, we have broad experience with quantitative, qualitative, mixed and multi methods research - although our individual published works orient more towards the qualitative and mixed methods spheres.

Power structures within higher education also shaped our collective positionality on this project. Three of us held associate professor roles (second, third and fifth authors) with high institutional authority, while the other two of us initially navigated less privileged positions. Such structural positioning may have implicitly shaped who was perceived as carrying decision-making authority and interpretive legitimacy within the project. In response, we aimed to create spaces for shared reflection, mutual accountability and voice, though we recognise these efforts could not erase structural asymmetries. At the same time, we acknowledge that despite the internal

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differences in status on the research team, all of us occupied institutional roles that carried power over the student participants in the study. This shaped how participants may have perceived us and how openly they felt able to engage. Temporal positioning further complicated our roles. The fourth author joined the team late, after the research design and data collection, entering at the interpretive and analytical stage with both constraints (less influence on the project's framing) and new affordances (they could ask questions as a newcomer that provided opportunities for reflection across the group). Our roles also shifted as the research progressed. During the write-up stage, the first author began working on a permanent basis in the university, while the second author retired from her position. The third author moved to a new institution, while the fourth author apprenticed into programme direction under the fifth author's mentorship. These transitions underscore the fluid and momentary nature of our positionalities. Taken together, our intertwined growth and changing shared experiences exemplify what we will argue later in this paper: that positionality is not static but momentary, relational and contested, located on shifting continua of insider/outsider, authority/vulnerability and privilege/marginality. Our research identities, relationships and roles intersected with

broader structures of power in higher education and were further shaped by how participants and colleagues perceived us. These will continue to be shaped unconsciously, by external perception, when readers of this journal engage with our work.

Of course, this positionality statement is inevitably incomplete, because it would be impossible to fully articulate the complexity of oscillating positionalities on paper and, when, at a holistic level, it also involves how others (including readers here) perceive our positions. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that a positionality statement does allow for an assessment of our work against established benchmarks and facilitates the integration of our findings into the ongoing scholarly discourse on positionality.

Findings

The findings presented here result from the systematic analysis of recurring patterns and codes that informed the overall positionality theme, within the wider project. These patterns and codes provide deep insights into how doctoral students grapple with positionality and how they struggle to fully grasp the pervasive, operational complexities of it at the research coalface. On the round, we established that doctoral students did not construe positionality as a continuum or spectrum; rather, they conceptualized it in traditional binary terms where researchers were seen to be either insiders or outsiders. We found that the presenting doctoral students, who generally self-identified as insider researchers, negotiated complex identities throughout the research process and problematized 'insiderness'. To provide a more granular analysis of their experiences, we have organized the overarching positionality theme into three subthemes, which we have characterized here as two dilemmas and the associated methodological modes of response.

The proximity dilemma

The 'proximity' (BP1R) to their research participants under various different criteria, and arising from their perceived insiderness, gave rise to the first positionality dilemma experienced by doctoral students:

How much can a researcher assimilate their personal investment and experience with a topic into their research, without compromising their credibility as researcher?
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This dilemma was most prominent in relation to the American students who were researching immigrant experiences, as immigrants themselves. Representation and being 'role models matters' (AVR), according to participants, and this cannot be overlooked. The 'nuances of identity' (BP1) created a 'bricolage' (AP1) of research experiences that needed to be managed to optimize credibility, as participants saw it. This arises from the fact that 'research is fuelled by personal circumstances a lot more than we would like to admit' (BS). While the 'lived experiences' of researchers was important, according to participants, this needed to be balanced with being 'mindful of being objective' (BP2R). Managing nuances effectively was critical in gaining credibility for establishing the 'coun

terspace to empower' those who had hitherto been ignored (AP1). The characterization of the **counterspace** is interesting, insofar as it appeared, on the surface at least, to emphasize establishing an **other**, separate space rather than changing or improving the existing one. The tendency towards a binary gave rise to a certain sense of **othering** – whether this was conscious or unconscious remains to be seen.

Awareness of the proximity dilemma was less tacitly articulated in the presenting doctoral students from Ireland, with their presentations emphasizing their quest to address perceived 'inequities' (AP2) rather than their positionality in relation to each perceived inequity. One of the Irish presenters included a photo of their family to illustrate their positionality, signifying the extent to which their experience as a parent informed how they viewed and understood equity in the disability sphere (BP2). This gave them a greater insight into the experiences of their participants and enabled them to probe with greater sophistication, thus establishing an insider positionality as a significant asset.

While the dilemma was generally recognized by the presenting students, the extent to which the observing students appreciated the dilemma was questionable. This was evident in the overwhelming majority of positionality comments posted to the jam boards, which problematized proximity and cast some doubt on whether it was 'possible to be unbiased' on the part of some presenters. The problematizing tendency was most acute in relation to the research concerning immigration, where 'examining biases' (AP1R) was identified as a priority in need of exploration:

... tension between how well-placed he is to conduct the research and the bias created by his proximity to the subject matter ... Aspects of his identity are following him and impacting on his freedom to carry out the research ... Does insider bias have a part to play here? (BP1R)

Proximity was viewed by observers as a negative that needed to be managed, rather than an opportunity to explore, thereby indicating that the dilemma was not fully understood. This was despite general acceptance from all participants that 'representation' (AVR), 'visibility' (BM) and 'space for voice' (AP2R) was needed to tackle 'historical ... systems of oppression' (AC) that are a feature of many education systems. This notion of oppression gave rise to the second dilemma.

POWER V. EMPOWERMENT DILEMMA

The systems through which research is currently conducted were seen to have been conceptualized 'by those who have never experienced prejudice' and were therefore slanted in favour of maintaining the status quo (AVR). This kind of discourse had the effect of situating the students as insiders, who had experienced those prejudices, and whose

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articulation of them betrayed a perceived insider vulnerability. They anticipated that their proximity to the research context would necessitate greater epistemological justification to pre-empt the dismissal of their work as inherently biased or diminished. This was true for the American students, where the scars of slavery were evident in the data collected and for the Irish students where medical (as distinct from social) models of disability were still prominent in the discourse. The

desire to create change within such systems, and fix the 'power imbalance' (BM) presented the doctoral students with a key dilemma:

- How can a researcher leverage the power of research within current systems to bring about greater equity, without reinforcing inequities by researching within them in the first place, from a comparative position of power?

While presenting and observing doctoral students demonstrated their understanding of this dilemma and their desire to work through it to achieve 'systemic change' (BM), they simultaneously pointed to limitations. For example, they were adamant in 'what I can't do' (BP1) and 'what he can't do' (B1PR) in attempting to resolve the dilemma. While these kinds of limiters were prominent across the dataset, there was also strong evidence that students saw the 'empowerment' (AM) potential of carefully crafted research and a 'we can do' attitude to accompany it (B1PR) – indicating clearly that the dilemma was understood. Effecting a balance between limiters and enablers was critical to mitigating the dilemma. However, crucially, while participants noted the prevalence of 'intersectionality' or 'multiple forms of marginalisation' for many disadvantaged groups (AP2), only one of the presenting students noted the functionality of 'intersectional frameworks' (AP2N) for systematically addressing these multiple marginalisations.

The concept of 'voice', in particular 'marginalized' voice (AS) and 'authentic' voice (BS), came to the fore in relation to the power v. empowerment dilemma; this was most apparent in the entry and exit questionnaires. Students felt that, historically, 'Indigenous' voices (AS) and those from the 'Global South' were sidestepped and that if current research did not redress that imbalance it was 'ahistoric' and 'performative' (AS). Students reported that they had 'a responsibility to enact positive change ... to honour' (BS) the commu-

nities they do research with and for – clearly rooting their work in an emancipatory domain but not considering the possibility that positive change might not accrue and therefore not considering the knock-on effect that this would have on communities who might have expected that change. Tensions arose around who determines what issues are selected for redressing and when, with power being linked to money as a causal predictor – 'who holds the power, where is the funding coming from?' (AS). Ethical dilemmas were implied in relation to funding and how this can 'subjugate' research that aims to address inequities because if research is to bring about equity, it will often require the 'fundamental deconstruction' (AS) of existing systems. The perceived difficulty with funding was that often it comes from the 'elites of society' who 'lack the lived experience of the struggling masses' (AS). If research does not challenge this, then it is 'just a selfish intellectual exercise' (AS). Notably, much of the data concerning how to include marginalized voices emanated from the survey administered on the first RiPS session; the survey administered on the second RiPS session did not demonstrate the same level of concern. This illustrates the possibility that the communal learning

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experience of participating in the RiPS session supported students in thinking about and addressing the dilemma.

Responding to dilemmas – a focus on methodology

All presenting students had an awareness of the various dilemmas associated with positionality and how methodologies, in a general sense, could be deployed to go about responding to them. Methodologies which reflected co-construction were prioritized and these included phenomenological approaches and critical participatory action research. However, presenters did not provide granular data on how these methodologies would be executed to address specific positionality questions identified in their research, prompting one observer to note that they hoped ‘the methods they use are also huma

nizing and decolonizing’ (BS). Rather, presenter contributions reflected a general knowledge of how approaches could be used to ensure authentic voices were gathered and then used to create new insights. Despite the four presenting students coming to the research with experience and various insider perspectives on their research topic, none appeared to explore ‘auto-ethnographic possibilities’ (AS), as a means of harvesting those perspectives systematically. Curiously, reflexivity was not addressed in any of the presentations, where the focus was mainly on gathering the data to address the equity issues, rather than systematically reflecting on how the researcher’s perspective may have impacted the data. It was notable that across the full dataset, the word ‘reflexivity’ (BS) appeared only once – in the exit questionnaire, where an observer noted that the ‘whys’ (BS) of research projects needed to be thought about more. This has important implications for the design of research courses and we have synthesized these data below into a preliminary conceptual model to support doctoral students in articulating their positionality.

Discussion

This study extends the current debate on how researcher positionality is conceptualized and addressed, by focusing on doctoral students – a population group that have, hitherto, been relatively unexamined in relation to positionality conceptualizations. Our exploration of this cohort’s perceptions and experiences with the concept is forward-looking. The unveiling of their dilemmas supports the broader academic community, and supervisors particularly, in identifying the guidance and interventions that these early-career researchers may need, as they progress. This work serves to prevent positionality from descending into the performative (Southern 2021, p. 23), at a general level, and to mitigate different types of positionalities being structured hierarchically, at more specific levels. Given the proliferation of doctoral programmes internationally (Sarrico 2022, Taylor 2023), we argue that a focus on this group is imperative for sustaining academic rigour and ensuring transparency in academic reportage. Our findings highlight the importance of reasserting the relevance of continua or spectral approaches to positionality (Chavez 2008, Chhabra 2020) that are manifested across multiple axes (Hellawell 2006). Broadly-speaking, all presenting doctoral students in this research regarded themselves as insiders, and aimed for their research to disrupt myriad temporalities that have marginalized some groups and individuals, in line with what many have intimated is the

reason for the historical emergence of insider research in the first place (Banks 1998, Garung 2020). However, participants' insider self-identifications appeared to be the result of adopting surface-level understandings of insiderness, without consideration of factors that may have rendered them outsiders – or at the very least, lesser insiders than they may have assumed. A binary understanding of positionality appeared to prevail in many instances, whereby positionality was fixed and being an insider was the opposite of being an outsider. This was most evident in the argument for the 'counter space' (AP1) which was essentially conceptualized as the corrective for a previous research focus that excluded marginalized voices and reproduced 'oppressive systems' (AP2N). While observing doctoral students in this research appreciated the focus on insiderness to make positive change, concerns were expressed over the impact of 'insider bias' and 'aspects of ... identity' (BP1R) impacting on the way research is carried out – mirroring some of the common criticisms of insider research (Smyth and Holian 2008). This high lights two important considerations for providers of doctoral education in this sphere moving forward.

Renawakening multiple and fluid positionality perspectives

The data collected for this research found no evidence that doctoral students fully understood positionality as a continuum, in line with what has been established as best research practice (Hellawell 2006, Chavez 2008, Chhabra 2020); instead, their understand ings reflected a more traditional, binary and less nuanced approach, which proved limit ing in many circumstances. Had they viewed positionality as a continuum, some of their concerns, in particular the concern about 'power imbalance' (BM) might have been reme died and their conversations around positionality may have moved towards unveiling more of the intersectionalities that were an obvious presence in some of the research pro jects. For instance, one of the presenting students who was a first generation immigrant (AP1) and positioned themselves as an insider, had participants or 'co-researchers' (AP1), who may have regarded the presenter as an outsider (e.g. a participant who was a second generation immigrant, an immigrant who was a member of the LGBTQ + community and an immigrant who was considerably older than the researcher). This underscores the cur rency of Hellawell's (2006) multiple, parallel insider continua and highlights some of what those parallel continua might be. Figure 1 identifies a multitude of possible positionality continua experienced by researchers and plots them on a spectrum from surface-levels to deeper-levels of positionality.

While these continua are helpful in situating positionalities, we suggest that continua placement should be interpreted as momentary in many cases (Warren and Davis 2009) and that placement can shift over time and over the course of a project (Bukamal 2022) – as we have demonstrated above regarding our own positionalities at different stages of this project. We further argue that some positionalities are surface-level, which are easier to identify and easier to infer impact. Other positionalities are more penetrating and complex, and are often impacted by 'motives, presuppositions and personal history' (Czerniawski 2023, p. 1376). As the latter are more deeply-rooted and frequently inter twined with identity, authority and privilege structures, they are more difficult to assess or surface,

because we may not be fully aware of what their impact is (or may be). Where we can articulate the positionality – and we recognize that this may not always

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Figure 1. Parallel Positionality Continua (*This simplified spectrum is offered solely for illustration and does not purport to be an exhaustive representation of how positionality can manifest. Given the inherent complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept, any abstract representation is necessarily non exhaustive*).

be possible – it may be best left up to the reader to determine the impact, rather than being told what it is. This spectrum of continua is not exhaustive; not all will be relevant to every research project, and there will be some continua not identified above that will be highly relevant to other research projects. It should not be taken as a methodological elixir to solve problems of positionality but rather as a scaffold for prompting doctoral students to think about their positionalities – bringing together some of the key learnings from research over many years, on positionality being fluid (Chhabra 2020), momentary (Warren and Davis 2009) and scalar (Hellawell 2006). In other words, what we are propos

ing is intended to support doctoral students in articulating their positional perspectives across multiple dimensions, so they can situate their work in such a way as to enable readers' discernment of the impact those perspectives may have had on the study overall.

The question will surely arise regarding how a researcher might accurately locate

themselves on a relevant positionality continuum at different times. This spotlights the importance of reflexivity (Yip 2024) and researchers interrogating their positionality across all of its relevant dimensions (Czerniawski 2023). Reflexive strategies such as

memoing and journaling (Patnaik 2013) are critical in that regard, but so is the role of doctoral programmes in drawing attention to their importance, and the research supervisor in particular for asking pertinent questions aimed at supporting the student in unveiling that positionality. Some of the initial continua in Figure 1 above, will require less effort on the part of the researcher in understanding and reflecting on their positionality. Conversely, some of the latter continua will require time, deep thought and effort to settle on appropriate positioning – and even that initial settling may be incomplete and unfinished. Other continua will also emerge, along the surface-level to deeper-level spectrum, which reflexivity will play a key role in situating. Reflexivity will naturally result in ‘shifting’ positionalities (Bukamal 2022, p. 331), and so placement along each continuum will be fluid and subject to change – contrary to the approach that students in the RiPS sessions adopted, where positionality seemed to be fixed at the outset, along surface-level criteria. This apparent rigidity spotlights a key role on the part of doctoral programmes and research supervisors. Recording the positionality journey, particularly changing positionalities, ought to be a key part of writing up research findings so that the research audience can have confidence in the rigour underpinning the study. Only with such a transparent approach to key influences can insider research push boundaries to the limits and truly realize the disruptive potential of insiderness.

Insider research as a tool for disruption

This research illustrated that doctoral students perceive assumed insider research as requiring greater justification than assumed outsider research and that many doctoral students believe that bias is an inevitability in insider research. However, this contention overlooks two key points. First, every kind of research needs tailored-justification depending on the nature of it (Carter and Little 2007), whether that is insider or outsider research, and the extent of justification will depend on myriad factors, beyond context alone. There is no standard justification threshold across or within research types. Second, bias is an inherent possibility in all types of research and must be controlled for (Florczak 2011), including in putative outsider research where assumptions can intervene or where values can impact how data is chosen, treated and analyzed. While the cautious approach adopted by doctoral students in this study was understandable, care needs to be taken to ensure that over-caution does not cut off the potential values of insiderness. While this may present greater risks, the rewards in terms of access and insights are significant.

To this end, insiderness must be repositioned as a positive tool for disruption, in particular in the social justice sphere, where marginalized groups have often been excluded from engaging in research or where research has been done unto, and not for or with, them. Data from this research illustrate the unique insights of immigrant researchers into inequities that made it challenging for them to engage in doctoral research and prevented many other immigrants from pursuing similar work in the American context. Data also illustrate the insights of researchers with family

members who have disabilities, shed light on the barriers that inhibit those family members from reaching their full potential. All of these insights position insiders with a unique perspective on what needs to be done to disrupt and dismantle inequities that have kept marginalized groups marginalized. This ambition gets to the core of what social justice or emancipatory research is intended to achieve – to reject positivist views around researcher neutrality and

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embrace approaches that nurture ‘a politics of the possible by confronting social oppression at whatever level it occurs’ (Sharma 2019, p. 4). Our RiPS research illustrates, however, that to ensure the integrity of their research, doctoral students need to place greater emphasis on reflexivity. The purpose of this reflexivity is not to blunt the impact or the rawness of a researcher’s experiences. Rather, it is to sharpen the clarity of those experiences by unveiling the influences that informed them, so that the reader can appraise the impact they may have had.

Limitations

While our research revealed some important insights on how doctoral students construed positionality generally, and their own positionalities specifically, the findings should be viewed in the context of four limitations. First among these relates to the data informing them, which emerged from a study where positionality was not the core focus and where we did not probe in relation to it. Rather, these positionality data formed a central theme of our investigation into the role of doctoral education in the social justice sphere, where students emphatically identified tensions around positionality as a significant consideration. Thus, our look at positionality was a retrospective one, after the data had been gathered. This may have resulted in gaps in what participants could have contributed, because we were not focused on their experiences of positionality at that time. The risk of data over-interpretation also arises in any retrospective examination, though it should be noted that we mitigated this risk by having each of the authors critically review each interpretation to ensure a balanced, well-rounded analysis. Second, some of the doctoral students participating in the RiPS sessions were being supervised by members of the research team. This may have given rise to power dynamics that the reader will have to consider in interpreting our findings. Third, given our focus on the processual nature of doctoral education, specific demographic data, disciplinary variables and participants’ prior methodological competencies were not formally documented. However, by engaging with participants at diverse stages of the research journey and with varying degrees of reflexive proficiency, we were able to capture a wider spectrum of experiences. Fourth, the transferability of our research is limited due to the relatively small sample size and due to the fact that our participants were located only in the social justice domain – a relatively niche area in social science. Nevertheless, doctoral researchers across disciplines share common experiences, and what we have proposed here offers a launchpad for examinations of its applicability in other research disciplines. It will be up to readers to determine transferability to their own contexts, based on the thick descriptions we have provided. Further, we make no claims that the perceptions held by our sample of doctoral students are representative of the broader research community but we believe they offer valuable points of departure for future research into how

positionality is navigated by researchers more widely.

Conclusion

This paper sought to present an authentic account of doctoral students' perceptions of positionality in research. The reflections presented here represent the lived experiences of the students' interactions with positionality as they carried out their research. In

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contrast with what is recommended in more recent studies, the doctoral students generally occupied binary positions in relation to positionality in their work – and veered towards categorizing themselves on the insider end of the binary, even when this did not always capture the nuances of their positions. The need for students to disrupt this binary occupation was even more pertinent when their research sites were rooted firmly in social justice themes. These contexts are messy and require doctoral students to use a more reflexive approach to positionality. Richer discussions should be documen

ted in doctoral research with an acceptance of several positions along positionality continua, using a spectral framework like what we have suggested above for illustrative purposes. This has important implications for research supervision and should prompt a reorientation of the supervisory relationship from a purely technical one (e.g. advising on methods and data analysis) to a more holistic one that emphasizes self-reflection and personal/professional growth. Doctoral programmes, at design and practice levels, must support this reorientation by centralizing reflexivity in research methods and ethics courses – and in professional learning provided to supervisors. This investment is vital for maintaining rigour and integrity in academic research, in the context of sustained growth in doctoral programmes internationally (Sarrico 2022, Taylor 2023). We hope that this study, by highlighting key positionality dilemmas and how they can be authentically and rigorously responded to, has shone a light on how doctoral research can continue to be a force for unlocking disruptive possibilities.

Note

1. Author voice: throughout this article, the first-person pronouns 'we', 'our' and 'us' are frequently used to refer specifically to the collective authorship team (save for where we have specified otherwise). This stylistic choice represents a deliberate epistemological alignment with our focus on positionality. We contend that adopting a personal, reflexive narrative here is essential to maintain congruency between the subject of our inquiry and its presentation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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