

Opinion

Positionality Statements in Health Professions Education: A Practical Guide for Novice Researchers

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Abstract

Positionality refers to a researcher's stance within the social context of their research study. It can include information such as gender, race and class, and other characteristics like location. In addition, positionality statements can also include researchers' personal traits, such as their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. They convey a researcher's position and are incorporated within research articles to make readers aware of the beliefs and assumptions that a scholar may be bringing into the study. Describing one's positionality can be particularly beneficial within health professions education (HPE) research, where complex power dynamics often exist between the researcher and participants. However, there is currently limited literature on how positionality statements should be written for HPE research. This paper aims to present an introductory guide on how a novice researcher can write a positionality statement within HPE research, including elements such as reflexivity, location and context, power dynamics, and insider–outsider positioning, as well as the potential risks tied to positionality statements. Additionally, this paper provides readers with a practical step-by-step guide and a real-life example to follow when developing their own positionality statement. By practicing reflexivity and considering how their location and presence impact the research process and participants, a scholar can articulate how their identity and context shape their research approach. Consequently, adding a positionality statement can increase trustworthiness and enhance transparency of a study when they are reflexive, context-specific, ethically constructed and integrated into the research process.

Keywords: positionality statement; health professions education; reflexivity; guide



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1. Introduction

There has been a growing focus on researcher positionality, with more research journals and programs requesting scholars to write and incorporate positionality statements within their research and manuscripts (Holmes, 2020; Martin et al., 2022; Savolainen et al., 2023). Positionality refers to “the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study” (Rowe, 2014, p. 627). A researcher's positionality is shaped by many factors, including typically fixed characteristics such as their gender, age, race, sexuality, and religion (Holmes, 2020). They also include aspects that are constantly evolving, such as location and lived experiences (Holmes, 2020). These factors form the preconceptions and beliefs that a scholar holds, which could influence how the research is carried out by them (Holmes, 2020; Secules et al., 2021). Including a positionality statement

helps readers determine the extent of the researchers' impact on the study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2025). Furthermore, describing the potential influences that the scholar may have had on the study can increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the research, i.e., if it is specific, reflexive, ethically considered and connected to methodological decisions (Mclaughlin, 2024).

Despite the increased calls for including positionality statements, there is limited literature regarding how they should be written, particularly within health professions education (HPE), where reflexivity is only starting to gain attention (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Research within HPE often involves complex power dynamics, including faculty–student relationships, clinician–patient relationships and interprofessional hierarchies (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). By describing one's positionality, both the researcher and reader can be made aware of potential assumptions and power dynamics that exist and ensure they were mitigated (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). However, there are few published examples of what a positionality statement should look like in HPE contexts. We acknowledge that HPE encompasses multiple professions, including medicine, nursing, pharmacy and more, which may have differing positionality issues due to different professional cultures and power structures. Hence, we provide an introductory guide about the main elements, along with a step-by-step guide and a real example for novice researchers to follow when writing a positionality statement. The main objectives of this paper include (1) defining positionality and outlining the key components of effective positionality statements and (2) providing practical guidance for novice researchers.

2. Practicing Reflexivity in Positionality Statements

Reflexivity refers to “researchers' own reactions to the study, their position and location in the study, and the relationships encountered” (Holloway & Biley, 2011, p. 971). This is often an ongoing process by the researcher, as they assess their thoughts and assumptions throughout a study (Finlay, 2002; Miled, 2019; Rowe, 2014). Engaging in reflexivity during the study can assist researchers with evaluating their assumptions, especially through the use of field notes, memos, and audit trails, where researchers take note of their observations, thoughts and feelings about the phenomenon they are observing (Rashid et al., 2019; Tracy, 2010). Other strategies include conducting follow-up interviews with participants and member checking after data analysis (Berger, 2015). Additionally, being reflexive of one's position within their research study can also illuminate areas that require change for the next study (Pillow, 2003). While researchers engage in reflexivity from the beginning until the end of a study, a positionality statement provides a snapshot of this reflexive process, capturing a researcher's position at a particular moment in time (Bayeck, 2022). They allow scholars to understand how the researcher's position may have impacted their research and also lets them get a glimpse of the steps the researcher took to mitigate these impacts as part of their ongoing reflexivity (Jamieson et al., 2023). Positionality often changes across studies, as it is context-dependent, but it also changes over time, as scholars accumulate more experiences (Bayeck, 2022; Holmes, 2020). Positionality often begins with researchers reflecting on who they are as individuals, which can include their background, lived experiences, predisposed assumptions, education, and interests (Goundar, 2025). These characteristics can then be expanded upon to describe how they influenced and inspired their study (Goundar, 2025). For instance, a researcher's lived experiences with discrimination may motivate them to investigate the discrimination that others face. Consequently, we recommend researchers to describe their background and the motivations surrounding their research to provide readers transparency regarding the rationale behind the topic, research question, and participants chosen (Savin-Baden & Major, 2025).

3. Consider the Impact of Location

Location is another aspect of a researcher that can impact their positionality, and, as a result, the research they do. For example, the institution where an individual is conducting their research influences their perspective and shapes how they see the world. This is often reflected in the research topics chosen, the research questions asked, how they relate to participants and how they interpret participant words. Those at prestigious institutions are often considered to be in a powerful position, as they likely have easier access to resources, may receive more funding and have powerful networks (Mclaughlin, 2024). However, there may also be challenges they face within these institutions that may disadvantage them, such as structural inequalities. Many healthcare workers from underrepresented minority groups have reported facing discrimination at their institutions or from their employers (Hennein et al., 2022). For instance, a study conducted on physicians, trainees, nurses, and other healthcare workers found that a common form of racial discrimination was receiving fewer opportunities for promotions and receiving more work without additional remuneration (Hennein et al., 2022). Additionally, some may face discrimination due to two or more intersecting aspects of their identity, known as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins & Bilge, 2016).

In addition to one's institution, a researcher's geographical or cultural context can also impact their research. For example, Berger (2015) describes how their lived experiences as an immigrant in the US assisted with a study looking at the experiences of immigrant women. Furthermore, positionality may also be shaped by different historical, political and social realities, such as in the Global South (Sultana, 2007). We recommend researchers to describe the advantages and disadvantages of where they are situated to clarify and make readers aware of the privileges and challenges they face. Elaborating on these challenges can help eliminate any assumptions that readers may have about the researcher's power dynamics.

4. The Impact of the Scholar's Position and Power Dynamics

Describing potential influences on each stage of the study can enhance accountability regarding the researcher's decisions and processes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2025). A researcher's position not only influences the research questions they decide to pursue, but it also impacts the data collection, recruitment process and analysis stages of the study (Miled, 2019). A scholar's choice of methodology and methods used to collect data can be influenced by their beliefs and position (Mclaughlin, 2024). Additionally, during recruitment, a researcher's position may make it easier to recruit participants (Mclaughlin, 2024). However, it is important to keep in mind that these connections may lead to issues related to coercion due to power dynamics (Mclaughlin, 2024). Particularly within HPE research, power dynamics can arise from faculty–student, supervisor–trainee or clinician–patient relationships, as well as intra- or interprofessional hierarchies. For example, faculty members interviewing their own students, program directors recruiting residents or clinician-educators interviewing their junior colleagues can cause potential power dynamic issues. Participants may feel obligated to participate if they are recruited by someone in an authoritative role to them, as they may believe that they will face negative repercussions otherwise. Conversely, some might feel discouraged from participating if they believe their response may negatively impact their relationships. In addition, a scholar's position is inherently subjective, as researchers inevitably filter data through their own experiences and perspectives, shaping how they understand and represent the data (Mclaughlin, 2024). One way to mitigate these issues is through reflexivity and a positionality statement, as it can make researchers aware of any potential power differentials and ethical dilemmas that may exist and help them create a plan to reduce these issues.

5. Consider the Insider/Outsider Perspectives When Conducting Research

It is essential to consider whether a scholar is an insider or an outsider in relation to their population. Insiders are those who share similar lived experiences to their research population, while outsiders are those who do not (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). These shared experiences could be due to similar characteristics, like gender and race or other shared experiences (Asselin, 2003). However, it must be noted that current literature is increasingly viewing the insider–outsider positioning as a continuum, where researchers occupy a position somewhere between being an insider and an outsider, depending on the experiences they share (Yip, 2024). For example, new leadership looking to promote joy at the workplace might be an insider regarding the department’s challenges; however, as an outsider in their new role, they can also objectively assess practices that may be hindering joy. Furthermore, the insider/outsider position has some limitations that researchers need to consider. For instance, participants might be less likely to open up to an outsider, while insiders might overlook important details they consider too familiar. Reflecting on one’s position can help them address such potential pitfalls and capture more accurate, nuanced stories from participants (Holmes, 2020).

Additionally, the relation to participants is important to consider, as researchers may come from different communities or contexts compared to the participants they are conducting research with (Holmes, 2020). Particularly within HPE, there is a continued focus on research regarding diverse and vulnerable populations (Patrick et al., 2018). Therefore, researchers must strive to attain the racial and cultural knowledge they need to interpret their participants’ voices properly, regardless of being an insider or an outsider (Milner, 2007). Milner (2007), in particular, has developed a framework that researchers can use to reflect on how their unique perspectives not only shape the interpretations drawn from their study data, but also how the research process, conclusions and implications of a study may affect the participants’ and communities’ wellbeing (Milner, 2007).

6. Navigating Positionality and Its Risks

It is vital to keep in mind that while positionality statements are normally viewed as important for improving research transparency and trustworthiness, a growing body of literature reveals the caveats and risks inherent in their mainstream adoption (Boveda & Annamma, 2023; Gani & Khan, 2024; King, 2024; Macfarlane, 2021; Massoud, 2022; Zembylas, 2025). Some scholars increasingly caution against the danger of these disclosures devolving into “performative” gestures, where listing identity categories satisfies institutional mandates without prompting deeper, ongoing self-reflexivity (King, 2024; Macfarlane, 2021). This formulaic approach risks reducing complex lived experiences into tokenistic and coercive practices. This may create dilemmas regarding coercive disclosure, over-disclosure, and the violation of personal privacy, mostly in the case of scholars and researchers from structurally marginalized populations and backgrounds (Massoud, 2022; Sibbald et al., 2025). However, this does not mean that the critiques mentioned here undermine the value of reflexivity and post-positivity statements, but rather, it indicates that researchers must take a more careful approach. In this paper, we engage with positionality not as a static, formulaic symbol of trustworthiness, but as a significant tool focusing on how researchers’ viewpoints directly shaped their data collection and analysis.

To help and guide scholars in health professions education through this reflexive process, we have created a step-by-step guide by combining existing literature on qualitative research with our own firsthand experiences (Table 1). We took complex, theoretical ideas about bias and identity and turned them into a straightforward practical tool. This combination of existing literature and real-world practice ensures that the final guide is both academically useful and easy for researchers to use. We hope that this helps novice

scholars to think critically and reflectively about their work and research. Additionally, we would like to highlight that this guide is not a definitive list of elements to include; researchers should only disclose aspects of their positionality that are analytically, ethically or methodologically relevant to their study.

Table 1. Step-by-step guide for developing a positionality statement.

Step #	Step Description	Focus Areas & Checklist
1.	Reflect and visualize your positionality statement	Take a moment to reflect on the following: - Map who you are as an individual, outlining your core values and traits. - Determine exactly how your unique identity pertains to your study. - Identify any systemic privileges you hold alongside your personal background. - Unpack the marginalized or intersecting aspects of your background. - Reflect on your personal experiences and your position within your research.
2.	Create an outline of your ideas	Compose a rough draft or create bulleted notes on the elements you want to include. Consider using the following structure to organize your ideas into a unified statement: - Start by asking yourself: Which aspects of my identity, role, institutional location or relationship to participants are relevant to this specific study? What should not be disclosed due to it being irrelevant, unsafe or unnecessarily personal? Provide only the personal details considered pertinent to your research study. - Connect your background and personal interests to your research study, detailing what exactly drew you to this specific topic. - Describe any potential biases you may have toward any aspect of your research, explicitly stating them and explaining how you mitigated them throughout the process. Consider answering: How did reflexivity shape research design, recruitment, data collection, interpretation or analysis? - Explain how intersecting aspects of your identity impacted your research, specifically influencing your research question, participant interactions, data analysis, and participant recruitment. - Describe any power dynamics between you and your participants, if relevant, explaining exactly how you ensured these ethical concerns were addressed. What concrete safeguards were used to manage power dynamics?
3.	Determine your writing style and tone	Before writing your full statement, establish the tone and style you will use. Key factors to consider including: - Point of View (POV): Write from a first-person perspective using “my” and “I” statements, giving you complete ownership of your lived experiences. - Tone: Express your insights with a direct and straightforward tone, focusing on a deep reflection of who you are as a person while avoiding being defensive or apologetic. - Clear Language: Write clearly by ensuring that all field-specific jargon is removed and only a lay summary remains available. - Audience: Broaden your clarity to allow diverse audiences from any academic field to read and understand both you and your research much better.
4.	Review notes, integrate, and refine your statement	Review your jot notes to ensure every element added is relevant to your project. Finalize your statement and determine its placement within your paper (typically within the Introduction or Methodology section). Keep the following ongoing requirements in mind: - Actionable Content: Ensure your statement explicitly states the concrete steps taken to actively mitigate biases and potential participant power dynamics. - Get Feedback: Share your draft with trusted peers or mentors to get critical feedback regarding clarity and depth. - Length Management: Manage the length of your work, ensuring your statement stays within the target length (typically 150 to 300 words). - Ongoing Updates: This is an iterative process that changes along with our lived experiences, as we navigate aspects of our everyday lives. Therefore, revisit and update this statement dynamically as your relationship with participants or data evolves over the life cycle of the project.

7. Putting It All Together—A Real Example

Thus far, in the existing literature, we have not encountered a published sample of what a positionality statement looks like within HPE literature. Hence, we provide a real example of a positionality statement by presenting an annotated example based on the first author's lived experiences and research work to highlight the core concepts that a positionality statement should include. We have noted the aspects that we recommend including as "essential" and aspects that are "context-dependent", which may differ across studies. However, we would like to highlight that this positionality statement serves as one form among many and that researchers do not need to disclose biographical details that are not relevant to their research study or that might impact their confidentiality.

"Having been born in Canada to first-generation immigrant parents, I have been fortunate enough to learn about the struggles that immigrants face without having to experience many of them firsthand. Living in Canada has privileged me in many ways, including being able to receive a high-quality education from knowledgeable mentors at a reputable institution. Additionally, I have had the advantage of having enough resources to support my growth both personally and professionally. [1: Privilege—context-dependent, as my research looks at improving EDI in HPE in Canada]. Although I had the opportunity to grow up in a diverse community, as a woman of visible minority status, I am often reminded of the discrimination and structural inequalities that still exist within our society. Facing discriminatory experiences as a visible minority has driven me to conduct research examining the impact of intersecting aspects of identity within the structurally marginalized HPE field and has therefore informed my research questions. [2: Intersectionality—context-dependent, as my lived experiences inspire my research]. My position grants me the knowledge of the biases and systemic barriers that exist against marginalized communities, providing me with insider knowledge regarding these experiences. [3: Insider Status—context-dependent, as I share similar lived experiences with the potential participants]. However, as someone who does not work at the frontline of healthcare, I am an outsider to the experiences healthcare professionals encounter. [4: Outsider Status—context-dependent, since I do not have the lived experiences of participants who are medical professionals]. Nevertheless, I aim to use my academic training to illuminate these experiences, as my academic background provides me with a platform that many of my community members do not have access to. Furthermore, I aim to remove potential power dynamics that may exist by asking the administration to send recruitment emails to potential participants. [5: Power Dynamics—essential and context-dependent, as my work does not have any direct power dynamic issues]. Although my experiences and assumptions will likely influence my research study, I can mitigate these influences by practicing reflexivity and conducting peer debriefings with my research team and scholars with similar backgrounds and lived experiences. Additionally, I plan to conduct member checking after data analysis to ensure that I have captured my participants' true experiences. [6: Reflexivity and Ethical Issues—essential to report]. I aspire to use my positionality ethically, by advocating for marginalized communities and ensuring that the true voices of my community members are heard."

8. Conclusions

Positionality statements provide readers and researchers with awareness regarding the assumptions brought into a study and how they may have impacted it. Consequently,

describing one's positionality can enhance transparency when they are reflexive, context-specific, ethically constructed, and integrated into the research process rather than treated as formulaic declarations. We acknowledge that there are some limitations to this paper, including how it is unable to provide recommendations for specific HPE professions; however, we hope that this paper provides a general overview and starting point for novice researchers looking to write a positionality statement. The elements elaborated on in this manuscript, including the impact of reflexivity, location, power dynamics and insider–outsider position, along with a real life example, should assist with writing a clear and effective positionality statement within HPE research.

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