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Diljeet Kaur Bhachu & Ruth Currie
Guest Editors

Lee Higgins
Editor

**Inside, Outside, Upside, Downside:
Navigating Positionality as a Composer in Community Music**
Fiona Evison

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Abstract

Despite its frequent description in the literature as binary and extreme, positionality is actually multifaceted and shifting. Using an autoethnographic approach, this paper explores the upsides and downsides of such fluid inside-between-outside paradoxes in relation to community music research and practice, as experienced by the author in her composition work and investigation of the roles of composers in community music. Researchers and practitioners must consider multiple aspects of positionality because of its impact on interactions and interpretations. Consequently, student researchers, who may include those who have returned to academia after significant time as practitioners, will benefit from being intentionally exposed to multiple models of positionality and given time to hear about, discuss, reflect upon, write about, and make sense of the inside-outside-upside-downside nature of their positionality.

Keywords: positionality, insider, outsider, multi-faceted, relational composition, research pedagogy

Introduction

When my children were young, we enjoyed singing together an action song that began: ‘I’m inside, outside, upside, downside happy all the time!’ These lyrics inspired the title and imagery of this paper, but they intend to depict quite different emotions provoked by grappling with my own researcher positionality. ‘Inside-outside-upside-downside’ portrays the confusion and disorientation that might be felt by someone who has just disembarked from an amusement park ride—not sure where they are and what direction they are facing. Despite this bewilderment, careful consideration about the theoretical and practical implications of positionality as a student, researcher, community musician, and human is vital.

I am inspired by Richardson (2005) to use writing to closely examine my experiences and understandings in an effort to make sense of my changing worlds (and locations within them) of community music (CM), composition, music education, and academia. In this paper, I will use the eclectic approach of autoethnography. This methodology seeks to describe and analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011), allowing me to zoom in and out and pay attention to details and connections, while considering broader implications (Chang, 2016). I have done so by alternating between investigating my personal learning of positionality, then making broader pedagogical musings—alternations that also reflect my current

fluid positions as student and educator. There are a variety of written approaches to autoethnography beyond the typical ‘evocative’ creative style that intentionally disrupts academic reporting. *Analytic autoethnography* (Anderson, 2006; Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2015) aligns well with my more-yet-less structured exploration of the upsides and downsides of fluid inside-outside paradoxes in relation to research and practice. With my position now as a music education doctoral student, thinking pedagogically about issues has assumed new importance, and so I have also incorporated a pedagogical theme by asking how we can help students in their journey to understanding positionality. This is the ‘so what?’ question that underscores all research, and shifts my article from a graduate student memoir into a critical call for change (Herrmann & Adams, 2022). I begin, therefore, by reflecting upon my introduction to qualitative research and the concept of positionality.

Encountering Positionality

I am relatively new to the notion of positionality, having never heard the term before 2018, when I began graduate studies. This lack of familiarity aligns with Holmes’s (2020) observations that graduate students are often required to outline their positionality, but are challenged by their inexperience in doing so. Situated within the tradition of graduate programs with compulsory coursework, I first encountered positionality through reading a course textbook in the beginning weeks of a qualitative research course in a CM degree program. The textbook by Creswell and Poth (2018) discusses the term in sections on axiology, social constructivism, study design, and reporting. The authors present positionality as a key feature of qualitative research that is essential to research proposals and reports, stating: ‘All researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study’ (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). Researchers do this disclosure by being open about the values undergirding the study and about their own values and biases regarding the research topic and context.

The text further states that researchers should describe their social position, including gender, age, race, as well as personal experiences and political and professional beliefs. When researchers position themselves in their research, they acknowledge that their data interpretation is through the lens of their personal, cultural, and historical experiences, which impact and shape their understanding of the investigation. Creswell and Poth (2018) cite Wolcott, who presents positionality more emphatically as being an element of ethical practice:

Our readers have a right to know about us [...] They want to know what prompts our interest in the topics we investigate, to whom we are reporting, and what we personally stand to gain from our study. (Wolcott, 2010, p. 36)

As I reread the preceding statements, the feelings of those first days in a new educational venture come flooding back. All senses were on high alert with my return to academia as a mature student, and nervous excitement and curiosity—tempered by some dread—filled my being. As a lifelong CM participant, beginning community singing while I was a small child (which continues to this day), and a seasoned CM leader (for 35 years at that time), I was eager for the CM coursework. In typical prepared fashion, I had already read and annotated Higgins's (2012) *Community Music in Theory and Practice* and course papers from a friend-alumnus that summer. My anticipation about the research course was markedly different because it represented entry into a serious field of study, accompanied by intricate language and novel concepts. Undertaking research ethics' training (Government of Canada, n.d.) in the first week reinforced the immense responsibilities of researchers. As a result, my positionality reading was accompanied by a staggering amount of other new information and a sense of trepidation.

Pedagogical Pondering 1: For new researchers, positionality will be just one of many new, possibly overwhelming, concepts encountered (Bettez, 2015; Niehaus et al., 2018), and positionality's relevance and importance depends on a number of elements, such as the ways in which the course materials, assignments, and pedagogical approaches create new scaffolds for understanding (Ormrod, 2019). Oakley and Sejnowski (n.d.) describe this process as growing a neuro-scaffold to hang your thinking upon, which is best done with a little work every day—but this plan does not always fit with graduate study. In my case, I was juggling caregiving and relational responsibilities, a two hour commute to the university, two positions as a CM practitioner, research assistant duties, studio teaching, and extremely heavy reading schedules and coursework. I was not unique—my classmates were facing their own versions of life-on-steroids. I wonder, what alternate ways might be used to introduce positionality, so that it is not lost amid sensory overload?

The full-time CM program at this university accommodates working educators; thus, two three-hour courses are held on the same day, with a short break in between. The course held after Research Methods had a different professor and focussed on music's social meanings. Its initial class

introduced another unfamiliar concept, *location*, with a first assignment of writing an introductory blog in which students ‘located’ themselves. In 1041 words and pictures, I (over)addressed my Scottish-Canadian heritage and name, family, religious identity, and musical influences, education, and activity. Since I was writing in a different context from the research course, however, I did not connect *location* with *positionality*, or consider the ways in which location might influence my research.

Pedagogical Pondering 2: Missed learning opportunities can arise from disconnected program content. When connected, students are able to strengthen scaffolds, practice expressing and using concepts, and gain broader pictures of how concepts might be related. My new-to-me deep reflection about social location would have benefitted from considerations about my researcher positionality. This leads me to ask, how can courses become better aligned?

In the research class, the professor emphasized reflexivity rather than positionality; however, I clung to the textbook for academic survival like a woman overboard, clutching a life preserver. Consequently, because the authors mentioned positionality, I identified my potential biases in the mock research proposal assignment’s opening paragraph and methods section. My final methodology paragraph shows an attempt to unravel the influence of positionality:

As a composer, I have a definite bias about composers having a role in community music, because I am currently working as a composer with various community groups, including adult and children's community and faith-based choirs, instrumental groups, and soloists.

A statement about possibly being ‘star struck’ by participants came next since I planned to interview CM scholars and leaders—some who were my ‘heroes’ and others who would become so. Although I had never read about this specific bias, I had mentally envisioned my interviewer self and realized this possible hazard. Consequently, I wrote that I would attempt to avoid bias and identify influences on data analysis through coding and peer review of findings. I now recognize that avoiding bias is impossible, but my statement reflects class discussions on validity (although I was unclear about what validity entailed). As someone who learns by doing, the opportunity to observe research in process with an experienced researcher could have brought many fuzzy concepts to life and corrected misunderstandings.

Pedagogical Pondering 3: Research training in graduate school does not always prepare researchers for field research (Chavez, 2008), and institutional systems do not always effectively benefit individual student development (Cantwell et al., 2017; Golde & Dore, 2001; O'Regan, 2022). The development of student researchers is often stated to be the prime purpose of Ph.D. degrees, 'teaching junior scholars to conduct sound, rigorous research [...] under the tutelage of their advisors, learning the intricacies of research, and becoming increasingly independent scholars' (Golde & Dore, 2001, p. 9). How this is accomplished varies among and within disciplines, but researcher development is a key issue that has become its own topic of research (Cerrato Lara et al., 2019). Consequently, some scholars are rethinking approaches, and are including positionality within that reassessment. For example, Roegman et al.'s (2016) investigation of doctoral students learning to do culturally sensitive research found that positionality is indispensable to learning and enacting research procedures. The authors tell how, through positionality explorations, several students uncovered fears about representing participants. Guided research was used to apply course concepts, and in this case, representation fears and issues were addressed through attention to specific aspects of the collaborative methodology and report writing. Without this guidance, students (and participants) might have struggled to have ethical encounters. Roegman et al. (2016) appear to present an effective example of apprenticeship modelling in which novice students are guided through a complex process by modelling, coaching, scaffolding, explaining, reflecting, exploring, and increasing task complexity with an expert mentor (Ormrod, 2019). In a different example, Reed-Danahay (2017) has students write their own critical autoethnographies, then discuss them in class as a way to better understand positionality.

These were not my experiences, and my concerns likely require a program overhaul to address, but they are also symptomatic of broader issues with academia, including underfunding, understaffing, and overworked faculty. Nevertheless, our CM program allowed for negotiated curriculum, which could have opened a path for positionality pedagogy. Negotiated curriculum is a learner-centred approach that constructs curriculum around learners' expressed needs and interests (Wallace, 2015). Had I known then what I know now about positionality, I could have negotiated inclusion of assignments related to reflexivity and positionality similar to those in my forthcoming section, 'Developing Positionality Awareness.'

The research course included assessed forum activities that required students to reflect upon and respond to qualitative research prompts, but positionality was not a forum topic. In the course on music's social meanings, we did comment on each other's location blogs, but not with research in mind. For example, in my opening blog where I unknowingly partially positioned myself, responses were: 'I love this post. Thanks for all of the insight into who you are,' and, 'I enjoyed very much learning about your history, your love of family, your faith, and to hear some of your work. I am very much looking forward to being shaped by you as we learn together.' These affirmative, collegial responses were typical of our cohort's blogging interactions, but I view them now as missed opportunities for deeper reflection related to research. Although I now position myself as researcher, locating that identity within community music, I did not do so then. Linking related concepts in the two courses could have started a personal awareness process, while also illustrating positionality mobility—that positionality is fluid and travels within and across multiple social and geographic locations (Roegman et al., 2016).

Pedagogical Pondering 4: Personal blogging and forum assignments are common in tertiary education (Loncar et al., 2014), often allowing students to write reflections more informally than in a written paper. Forums are a community-oriented approach to reflection (Panke & Stephens, 2018) that is a continuation of reflective practice (Panke & Stephens, 2018; Radović et al., 2021, 2022). Interactive forum posts have also been found to deepen reflection (Radović et al., 2021, 2022). Consequently, given that positionality awareness arises from reflection, forum prompts on positionality are a natural partnership and offer more latitude than might be available in class to engage with everyone's thoughts. Blogging and forum assignments also have an inherent feedback mechanism with potential to enrich reflection and reveal blind spots (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2018). This leads me to ask, what other less formal, community-based activities could encourage students to consider their identities and histories' influence upon data gathering and interpretation?

I am not criticizing my CM program or professors, but am 'writing aloud' about what might have helped me address my inside-outside-upside-downside dilemma sooner and under mentorship. I see course disconnection as a result of problematic institutionalized educational norms that result in fragmented learning and experiences. I have maintained a friendship with the research professor, and this article has provided an opportunity for them to also reflect on positionality, check my perceptions, and acknowledge that the course content reflected what they learned as a research

student—which illustrates how knowledge reproduction is not always in students' best interests. The professor reminded me, however, that they had emphasized reflexivity, which is closely linked to positionality, and the importance of considering researcher and participant biases. Valuable course assignments had included guided reading and analysis of music research journal articles, and we both remembered that one researcher had not positioned themselves until the end of their article, and how problematic that was for understanding the study.

As researchers progress along their academic paths, they have opportunities to grow in understanding and re-examine practices. That growth has happened for my former professor, who affirms the importance of teaching positionality, and for me in wondering if I had positioned myself well in research. This personal question arose in my doctoral coursework, in which further reading and practice in crafting positionality statements led to my suspicion that I had previously just completed my own textbook inspired 'to-do' list. That is, I made statements about who I was and what my biases might be, but I did not continue to think about these points during data gathering or while interpreting findings. This is illustrated by the public presentation of my master's research, which provided another opportunity to address positionality. I did so in my introduction, where I located myself as a music lover, mature student, and CM leader and composer. I did not, however, elaborate much on how this might have influenced my interpretations, and I overlooked a new position as an almost-graduate of an 'interventionist' CM program. This was an important distinction to make since North American philosophies regarding community music-making can be broader than the theory of CM as a counter-cultural intervention (e.g., see Bartleet & Higgins, 2018a; Bush & Krikun, 2013; Veblen, 2007).

Inside-Outside-Upside-Downside

In these first attempts at positionality, I presented and understood my position to be fixed. However, as I have continued to reflect, research, and write, I have sometimes felt uncertain about handling insider/outsider status. Even during the writing of the ICCM conference presentation related to this paper (Evison, 2021b), I found myself again mentally turning around and around (inside-outside-upside-downside) in attempts to decipher my positionality. This journal provides another important opportunity to consider the experiences and thinking that have enormous potential to influence my research:

‘I’m inside...’ Decades of experience as an amateur community musician beginning in childhood position me as a CM insider. Yet, not all of my CM activities align with the interventionist definition that is prevalent in the literature (Bartleet & Higgins, 2018; Higgins & Willingham, 2017; Higgins, 2012). So, am I truly inside?

My introduction to CM academia resulted from a desire for deeper foundations to my community-related composition work. My ensuing research and master’s degree appear to place me inside of scholarly CM circles. Yet, it has only been since 2018 that I have had access to research and theory on the academic fields of community music and music education. I often feel like an outsider, having been a practitioner for a much longer time period. So, am I an insider, outsider, ‘border crosser’ (Douglas & Nganga, 2015), or interloper?

‘I’m outside...’ My formal higher education in music, which only began in my mid-30s, is sometimes seen by community musicians as now placing me in a different space from them. This divide is even more apparent now that I have undertaken graduate work. Disturbing comments such as, ‘You’re the professional’ and, ‘You are on a different level’ force me to navigate additional complexities as I undertake research with participants from my own community. Again, am I truly outside?

Furthermore, since the 19th century, composers have often been associated with prestige and power (Small, 1998). This connotation does not reflect my compositional practice, but I have found that community members, as well as professional musicians, can cling to stereotypes and ‘romantic, mythical views of the individual composer that abound among classical music audiences, music curricula and textbooks’ (Rusinek, 2016, p. 185), leading them to position me differently. This manifests itself in various ways, such as when collaboration attempts produce comments such as, ‘But you’re the composer, so tell me what you want me to do.’ Consequently, I am continually navigating around music-makers’ positioning of me, attempting to overcome the genius-composer myth and to encourage participants’ creative ideas, participation, and risk-taking. This example shows again that I could be outside in certain contexts, but inside in others. For example, my training, output, and professional associations as a composer locate me as an insider in the composition field, but my values, goals, and methodologies as a community composer-researcher align with democratic music education. Does this not place me on the outside of a music composition field that often focuses on the composer’s voice, individual vision, and performance

values (Evison, forthcomingb)? In addition, I do not have a composition degree, but my lifelong learning has included self-study, private lessons, and university composition courses. Therefore, some composers do not consider me a ‘proper’ composer. Is this further proof of my ‘outsideness,’ and how might it affect my research questions, approaches, and interpretations?

Adding further perplexity, one research focus has been exploring the roles and training of CM composers (Evison, 2021a, forthcominga, forthcomingb), and my resulting theory of relational composition places community composers on the inside of communities. Yet, literature searches indicate that the term *composer* seldom appears in CM discourses, and some of my composer research participants variously positioned themselves as outsiders to the composition field, as CM facilitators inside the CM field who don’t use the label *composer*, or as CM outsiders who might not use the term *community music* at all. For example:

Some of the terms even that you are using, and I think even some of the research and some of the practises of what is called ‘community music’ are still within something that I find problematic [...] I don’t feel that I am inside something then trying to do community music. So, I don’t use that term for what I do at all. I have never used that term. (Composer research participant, interview with author, 2019)

Most of my research participants recognized that they operate along a spectrum of creative control and embraced their multiple positions (Evison, forthcominga). I, too, accept this practice continuum for myself, but regarding research, I have struggled to make sense of it all. My upcoming doctoral action research in which I will use relational composition in the context of a community choir’s pandemic recovery—a choir in which I am not only a composer but co-conductor—adds more positions and affirms the importance of finding solid ground. Once again, though, it feels like being on a Ferris wheel ride that circles inside-outside-upside-downside.

I relate these experiences in order to demonstrate the oft-acknowledged difficulties of navigating positionality. It is a process fraught with questions and implications for research and practice, and though sometimes described in the literature as binary and extreme, researchers are starting to understand the non-binary nature of positionality as multifaceted and shifting (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2018; Johnson-Bailey, 2003). Though some positions are normally fixed, such as race and nationality, others exist on a continuum, resulting in a researcher holding many different positions

all at the same time (Holmes, 2020, p. 6). While fluid positionality is discussed in the literature, I had not encountered it previously, and so have been left feeling unsure of where I should locate myself.

To some readers, my reflexivity might appear self-indulgent (Atkinson, 2006; Pillow, 2003), but it marks growing self-awareness about a serious matter: conscientious and ethical researchers need to understand the nature of their positionality since it carries implications about knowledge, interpretation, and, ultimately, power. For example, Banks's (1998, p. 7) four categories of researcher positionality developed in response to debates about 'whose knowledge is authentic, who can know what, and who speaks for whom.' Researchers hold a powerful position in the research process since they write the final narrative and benefit from publication (Johnson-Bailey, 2003). Furthermore, positionalities not only impact final reports, but the entire research process, with ability to '**filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue**' (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17) all aspects of inquiry.

Thus, reflexivity has a key role in coming to terms with my positionality since 'having a position is expected; knowing your position is important; naming one's positions is vital, [as is] critically reflecting on how your havings, knowings, and namings may impact your interactions' (Douglas & Nganga, 2015, p. 77). I had not been guided to think through all of my havings, knowings, and namings, and I now see that careful self-examination is part of the hard work of positionality. All research phases—the literature review, the research design, ethics approval submissions, securing access to participants, conducting the research, analyzing data, composing findings, and sharing the results (Delamont, 2018)—require this work. It is not a one-time event or something to do at the beginning of each new investigation, but is a process that circles around and back again. Maybe my inside-outside-upside-downsideness makes perfect sense after all, and I should just hold on tightly and enjoy the ride?

Developing Positionality Awareness

If positionality goes far beyond check marking a box that indicates we have included a position statement in reports or papers, how might student researchers be helped to think about positionality and its effects upon knowledge production and interpretation? If teaching qualitative research is more than teaching content or techniques, but actually involves socializing graduate students 'into

ways of thinking and learning' (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2018, p. v), what kind of tools, ideas, and exercises will build reflexive communities of research practice?

In my pedagogical ponderings, I have already mentioned that positionality is but one of many new concepts that emerging researchers face (Bettez, 2015; Niehaus et al., 2018). Students have limited time in graduate studies, yet are expected to become competent and ethical researchers who understand philosophical frameworks and methodologies, and have devised a novel idea accompanied by explicit research questions to pursue using a specific framework and methodology (Young, 2001). Adding a new—potentially messy and conflicting (Bettez, 2015)—process of positionality development is vital, but students' perceptions about positionality's relevance and importance depends on how instructors craft and utilize course materials, assignments, and pedagogical approaches. In and out of the classroom, seasoned researchers can design formal and informal curricula that intentionally develop students' awareness and ability to articulate positionality through course readings, writing assignments, and discussions (Roegman et al., 2016; Throne & Bourke, 2019). In addition to my argument that students benefit from program revisioning in order to incorporate research apprenticeship models, attempting to connect concepts across coursework and to previous experiences is also important as it helps to strengthen neuro-scaffolding and provides a broader picture of how concepts intersect within diverse contexts. Thus, instructors will need to network with one another to discuss how they incorporate positionality and reflexivity pedagogy into their course content. Discussions with students about where they might have encountered positionality previously can also help them to gain wider perspectives on the ubiquity of positioning, and that it is not restricted to a certain course or subject.

Although there are many textbooks available on qualitative research methods, they vary in emphasis and approach to positionality. Supplemental materials such as the reflexive exercises developed by Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2018) could fill gaps. One activity (pp. 65-66) gives students time to write down how they would describe/identify themselves and what factors shape their perspectives of others. This is followed by small peer group discussion on how identity affects perceptions of the world, how positionality relates to identity, how empathy helps, and what thoughts this exercise prompts about future research participants. The exercise is then debriefed by the professor.

Models from experienced researchers are also valuable for showing diverse ways of acknowledging that research findings are filtered through individual voice. These ways include: writing about

positionality in the methods section; writing self into the work to implicitly reveal position; and using inquiry forms such as autoethnography that explicitly incorporates positionality (Clift et al., 2018b). The choice is influenced by disciplinary traditions, but if textbooks or readings focus on just one approach, students benefit from alternative demonstrations. Analyzing individual journal articles for positionality could be eye-opening and provoke discussion. Dissertations, which are more likely to demonstrate how other students have acknowledged their positionality, should also be considered. Examining publications dedicated to exploring positionality through different lenses, such as this journal and the symposium collection, *How Do We Belong?* (Clift et al., 2018a) are valuable, as is attending or organizing a positionality symposium.

Opportunities to learn about fluid researcher identity could be scheduled at different points throughout a course as a way of showing that reflexivity is not a task, but an ongoing process (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2018). For example, identity reflection papers, interactive blogs or forum posts, ‘think-pair-share’ activities, and intentional discussions with mentors can provide vital peer input and questions that encourage students toward deeper thinking. Naturally, such activities take time and ‘much soul searching’ (Holmes, 2020, p. 4). They should not be rushed; however, busy course schedules, deadlines, or word count limitations might lead to brief, even shallow, positionality statements (Clift et al., 2018b). Consequently, multiple options for revision and resubmission will aid the development process.

Continuing to Find a Way

This autoethnography on encountering positionality addresses graduate research pedagogy, but it also sits within broader discourses of CM scholarship, the field’s culture of inquiry, the training of CM researchers, and what kind of research is acceptable and preferable (Higgins, 2012; Higgins et al., 2016; Higgins & Willingham, 2017; Willingham, 2014, 2016; Willingham et al., 2018; Willingham & Carruthers, 2018), as well as considerations of where and how CM leadership should be taught, who should be trained, what should be taught, and how this knowledge can be accessed (Dowdall, 2016; Gray, 2019; McKay & Higham, 2011). I have reflected on disconnections and issues in one CM graduate program, and I further argue that within the context of CM higher education, research pedagogy must be considered in relation to the potential inexperience of students who have been practitioners, not academics, or are mature students returning to academia, along with the likelihood of their multiple identities and histories. I have considered some alternative pedagogical approaches, but see a research need for investigating these issues.

As a community-oriented musician and researcher, I am drawn towards community approaches to learning about and refining positionality, and so I have also offered collaborative positionality/research teaching ideas. Positionality, however, requires individual self-reflection, and in the process of writing this article, I have benefitted from focussed reading and reflecting on this topic. It has resulted in a clearer sense that my positionality is ever-changing since positions are not fixed. We are all multifaceted insiders, outsiders, border-crossers, in-betweeners, straddlers, and other types of *-ers*, depending on our contexts, roles, and interactions. We are in a complex ‘space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction’ (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). This realization helps us to make better sense of all the positions we occupy, such as those I described earlier, and suggests how to move forward in our practice and research with heightened awareness. As for me, even though I will need to do ongoing reflection about my positionality, I have realized that I do not need to be confused by being so inside-outside-upside-downside after all.

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