

Chapter 3

Researcher Positionality in the Dissertation in Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores first the role of researcher perspective in the research process, then the unique nuances of the researcher positionality in dissertations in practice, followed by a discussion of the advantages and limitations of the unique positionality assumed by dissertations in practice. This chapter concludes by noting the importance of constructing conceptual coherence between the implications of the scholarly-practitioner's positionality statement and the discussion of the dissertation's ethical considerations and limitations. The dissertation in practice, more so than with traditional Ph.D. dissertations, assumes that the researcher holds close personal connections to the research site, participants, and contexts. Far from envisioning the researcher as an objective outside observer, the dissertation in practice assumes that the researcher has a vested interest in solving the professional problem of practice within their place of employment in the presence of colleagues. For this reason, the full disclosure of the researcher's positionality becomes all the more important.

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INTRODUCTION: PROBLEM AND HISTORY OF PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATES AND RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

Ed.D. dissertations in practice often differ from traditional Ph.D. dissertations in the origin of the questions, the foci of the study, and the positionality. While Ph.D. dissertation questions typically stem from published theory and research, Ed.D. dissertations in practice employ what is often identified as “action research” or “applied research” (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Buss & Zambo, 2014). Drawing from the historic methodological roots of ethnography and the more contemporary, though well-established, practices of action research or applied research (Graham & Hudson-Ross, 1999; Kosnick, 2000; Moore, 1999; Ostorga & Lopez, 2009), Ed.D. dissertations in practice are grounded in an overarching philosophical worldview that emphasizes the *emic* (insider) perspective of the scholarly practitioner whose depth and breadth of contextual understanding of the problem under consideration uniquely position the researcher to undertake a study with applied precision. Most Ed.D. programs operate under the assumption that Ed.D. students will select foci for their problem of practice that they consider to be pragmatically important or relevant (e.g., Archbald, 2008; Willis et al., 2010; Zambo, 2011; Belzer & Ryan, 2013; Storey, 2017). Students will then use that dissertation in practice to make improvements in their disciplinary settings (Perry et al., 2015; Buss & Zambo, 2016; Ma et al., 2018). The crux of the Ed.D. dissertation in practice then roots in its pragmatism: the value is often judged more by its ability and potential to solve specific or local problems (Archbald, 2008; Belzer & Ryan, 2013) rather than in its capacity to generate generalizable findings. Researchers are caught in between professional contexts that exist before and after their research study, which may limit their ability to conduct research more typical of a Ph.D. dissertation in which the site is removed from the researcher’s personal and professional contexts.

This proximity of the researcher to the problem means that in dissertations in practice, researcher positionality statements are all the more necessary not only for the benefit of the reader but also for that of the researcher to reflect on their connections to the research and the effect those connections has on the study. To better determine the contours of this discussion, the following chapter explores first the role of researcher perspective in the research process, then the unique nuances of the researcher positionality in dissertations in practice, followed by a discussion of the advantages and limitations of the unique positionality assumed by dissertations in practice. This chapter concludes by noting the importance of constructing conceptual coherence between the implications of the scholarly-practitioner’s positionality statement in the dissertation in practice and the discussion of the dissertations’ ethical considerations and limitations.

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