Multiple and Fluid Positionalities in Community Research With Socially Excluded Families: A Case for Reflexive Sociology

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Abstract: Intersectionality and positionality are critical issues to consider in community research. Drawing on ten years of research in white, working-class communities in Northwestern England (WILSON, 2024a), I present a critical reflection on the temporal and structural dimensions of positionality through the application of reflexive sociology (BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992). Focusing specifically on my maternal positionality and my journey from being a childless researcher into that of a mother, I attempt to articulate the complex task of negotiating the intersectionalities of class, gender and motherhood in community research in areas experiencing economic disadvantage. The centrality of relational practice is highlighted as key in overcoming potential conflicts or discrepancies in identities or positionalities, thus helping to build trust in the research context.

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1. Introduction

In this article, I aim to provide a critical reflection on my evolving research journey as an early-career researcher and postdoctoral researcher, specialising in participatory research methods in Northern England. I reflect on my fluid and multiple positionalities (both professional and personal) and use BOURDIEU's reflexive sociology (BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992) as a conceptual framework to understand these experiences. The critical role of a reflexive approach to researcher positionality is well documented (FOLKES, 2023; HALILOVICH, 2022; JAMIESON, GOVAART & POWNALL, 2023; ST. LOUIS & BARTON, 2002) and is held as a form of quality control within qualitative research (JACOBSON & MUSTAFA, 2019). The contemporary debate concerning researcher positionality has evolved beyond a dualism of *insider/outsider* to be viewed through an intersectional lens, with a stronger focus on the multiple and fluid positionalities researchers may assume throughout the research process and in different contexts (CREAN, 2020; DEW, McENTYRE & VAUGHAN, 2019; LOKOT, 2022; MOSSELSON, 2014; NOWICKA & RYAN, 2015; RYAN, 2015). In this reflexive paper, I contribute to the literature around the intersectional nature of researcher positionality. Specifically, I respond to an invitation to apply a reflexive participatory sociology (KENNELLY, LARKINS & ROY, 2024), drawing on BOURDIEU's perspective in applying reflexivity within my research journey as an early career researcher with a number of shifting social identities, including becoming a mother. I will apply a constructivist structuralism approach to understand the differing positionalities in community research, appreciating the objective and subjective conditions that shape experience. Within this lens, I will critically reflect on the concept of relational positionality (CROSSA, 2012, p.115) and how it impacts the research process. [1]

1.1 Literature on positionality: Negotiating multiple positionalities in qualitative research

Relations between the researchers and participants impact the research. Relational considerations of importance include interpersonal dynamics (MELLOR, INGRAM, ABRAHAMS & BEEDELL, 2014) and different roles within the research context (MOSSELSON, 2014). A conceptual framework acknowledging the centrality of relationships in reflective practice has been offered, presenting a way to overcome the relational and ethical dilemmas that may present in qualitative research (BETTEZ, 2015). Here, it is argued that the multiple fluid social identities must be consciously acknowledged by the researcher (assemblage) and that the researcher must engage in critically reflexive practice, a conscious self-scrutiny of the subjective dimensions research brings to the research process (PILLOW, 2003, p.177). Finally, communion (otherwise understood as trusting relationships), which creates meaningful connections, is argued to build ethical and trusting relationships in the research context. Like all relationships, these interactions are influenced by complex power dynamics. [2]

Power dynamics, which function within the context of relationships during the research process, are acknowledged as central through various approaches, including constructive structuralism and post-structuralism. How these power dynamics are manifested in the research context, however, varies across approaches. For example, the constructive structuralist lens would argue that individuals are socialised into the values, norms and cultures of our societies through both ideology and state apparatuses (BOURDIEU, 1984 [1979]). Post-structuralists would argue that these positions are internalised (FOUCAULT, 1982 [1968]) and accepted as hegemony (GRAMSCI, 1971 [1947]). From a positionality perspective, these power dynamics must also be understood as multi-directional and fluid (MELLOR et al., 2014). As will be described, my critical reflection adopts a constructive structuralist approach, with a specific focus on my maternal working-class identities, both of which are temporally and spatially dynamic. [3]

Most critical reflections on multiple positionalities in qualitative research draw on feminist (RYAN, 2015; TARRANT, 2014) or critical theory (BETTEZ, 2015; MOSSELSON, 2014) epistemologies. These perspectives posit that positionalities are both spatially and temporally constructed (PARAMESWARAN, 2021) and that socially constructed power relations are of central concern for the reflexive researcher. Monolithic notions of positionality have been challenged in various research contexts, including studies involving refugees (MOSSELSON, 2014), migrants (RYAN, 2015), and working-class participants (MELLOR et al., 2014). These authors have argued that power relations are critical within qualitative research and have highlighted how interpersonal dynamics may shape interactions. Such factors are considered central to generating engagement and honest responses from research participants. Here, authors have warned against taken-for-granted assumptions of homogeneity of status and experience to build rapport and establish a research relationship (MOSSELSON, 2014). One way in which this monolithic approach to positionality is evident is through self-disclosure, particularly when researchers feel they share an experience or identity with their participants. [4]

The sharing of personal experience within research is particularly salient considering positionality, which has been conceptualised within the following reflexive typology: reflexivity when the researcher shares the experience of study participants; reflexivity when the researcher moves from the position of an *outsider* to the position of an *insider* in the course of the study; and reflexivity when the researcher has no personal familiarity of experience with what is being studied (BERGER, 2015). Self-disclosure, particularly concerning assumed shared experience, may impact research by facilitating or inhibiting access to the desired field and information, influencing the relationship between the researcher and participant, and affecting the interpretation of data (ibid., see also MOSSELSON, 2014). One example of a complex positionality shared by many is that of motherhood, which can have significant implications for the research relationship and power dynamics. [5]

1.2 Maternal researcher positionality: Mothers researching motherhood

The significance of motherhood is receiving increasing attention as a dimension of positionality, predominantly from a feminist theory perspective. Personal reflexive accounts have been provided by researchers who are also mothers, working in a number of contexts, including access to higher education (COOPER & ROGERS, 2015), Covid-19 (WIANT CUMMINGS & BRANNON, 2022) and lone motherhood (BAZ, 2023). Intersectionality in motherhood has been articulated in the contexts of LGBT motherhood (ALMACK, 2008) and HIV-positive mothers in South Africa (ADEAGBO, 2021). Maternal researchers have also reflected on their experiences working with mothers whose children were involved in the youth justice system (FROST & HOLT, 2014) and those with special educational needs (ROGERS, 2020). In my reflective account, I aim to contribute to this literature, particularly within the context of low-income coastal communities, where I have navigated the multiple, intersecting identities of researcher, resident, and mother. [6]

The complexity of the maternal researcher positionality goes beyond traditional *insider/outsider* and gendered dualisms (ADEAGBO, 2021; ALMACK, 2008, COOPER & ROGERS, 2015), where fluid, socially constructed identities and positionalities impact on the research process (BAZ, 2023). Intersectional maternal identities have been argued to influence several research processes, including access to gatekeepers and participants, as well as observations and interviews (ibid.). Research topics, access to participants, methods of data collection, and researchers' performance of maternal identity have also been found to be influenced by the status of the mother (FROST & HOLT, 2014). Presenting a shared status with maternal participants has been argued to support access and recruitment of hidden populations and develop rapport through information sharing (ALMACK, 2008). This "blurring of the interpersonal and intrapersonal" (COOPER & ROGERS, 2015, p.14), when sharing mothering experiences familiar to both participants and researchers, has also been proposed to add nuance and ambiguity to research (ADEAGBO, 2021). It is my experimentation with this blurring of motherhood that I will reflect on later in my analysis. [7]

Another way in which maternal positionality has been used within research is through autoethnography (AUTRET & VAN EEDEN-MOOREFIELD, 2024; LeBLANC, SPRADLEY, BEAL, BURROW & CROSS, 2022; SOTIRIN, 2010). There is an emerging literature on the concept of the "mother scholar", defined as those who creatively weave their maternal identities into their scholarly spaces (ABETZ, 2019; JAIMES, 2020; LAC, 2021; LAPAYESE, 2012). Through an autoethnographic process, mother scholars have reflected on their dual identities. However, most research in this area has focused on the lived experience of negotiating the two, often conflicting roles, rather than reflecting on the use of the positionality of the mother within the research process. I aim to address this gap in the literature by critically reflecting on my own evolution as a researcher as I engaged with communities within a specific region of the UK. [8]

Through this reflexive account, I present my developing personal identity as an early career researcher, situated within the specific context of working-class coastal communities. In contrast to the predominant application of feminist theory within this subject area, I will utilise BOURDIEU's social reproduction theory, making specific reference to different forms of capital that influence the research process and the doxic, taken-for-granted assumptions in class positioning. This contributes to the literature detailing how scholars have applied BOURDIEU (1989 [1986]) to examine the intersection between class and gender (CROZIER, REAY & CLAYTON, 2019; REAY, 1998), focusing on power and relationships. However, unlike most literature, I focus on the relational dynamics between the researcher and participants rather than the participants' relationships with others, seeking to contribute to the limited literature by adopting a reflexive sociological approach to gender (SWEET, 2020). [9]

I will begin with a description of the research context in which this paper is situated, summarising each research project and presenting my positionality (Section 2). After that, I will introduce my theoretical lens for class-based analysis of structural inequalities and the process by which I deployed this lens within my systematic reflection (Section 3). This will be followed by my analysis of the ways in which my positionality as a researcher has evolved and reflections on how this may have impacted on the research process (Section 4). I will discuss these reflections within the context of existing literature and make the case for a more explicit focus on positionality in research, before offering concluding comments (Section 5). [10]

2. Research Context

In order to situate the critical reflection presented in this paper, I will first provide the geo-historical-political context in which the research took place. All research sought to understand and address social exclusion in low-income coastal communities in the UK. I conceptualise social exclusion as experiencing a "lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas" (LEVITAS et al., 2007, p.9). Coastal areas in the UK are more likely to have higher levels of deprivation than non-coastal towns, attributed to factors such as slower levels of population and employment growth, accompanied by declining industries (DICKS, WADDINGTON & CRITCHER, 2002; McDOWELL & BONNER-THOMPSON, 2020; TELFORD, 2021; TELFORD & LLOYD, 2020; WHITTY, 2021). My research is situated in post-industrial, ex-mining towns located directly on the Cumbrian coastline. These embody characteristics of what has become known as *left-behind* communities or those which "suffer from significant levels of economic and social deprivation based on existing accepted definitions" (LOCAL TRUST, 2019, p.11). The communities I worked with faced significant social exclusion in terms of education (OVENDEN-HOPE & PASSY, 2019; RICHARDS, 2022), community development (WENHAM, 2020) and democratic participation (FELDMAN, GUY & IAMMARINO, 2021; FLORIDA, 2021; MACKINNON et al., 2022; MARTIN, GARDINER, PIKE, SUNLEY &

TYLER, 2021; McKAY, 2019; RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, TERRERO-DÁVILA & LEE, 2023). [11]

In this paper, I reflect on three research projects I led where I worked directly with 237 and indirectly with 646 residents in a specific geographic area over a ten-year period, focusing on policy areas such as education, community development, and democratic participation. I adopted a range of methodologies, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and participatory methods. Within "In This Together" (2014-2017), I employed focus groups and interviews with 77 parents and carers to understand the barriers they perceived as hindering their support for their children's secondary school education. In response to the findings, I developed a solution-focused brief mentoring programme, involving six one-to-one sessions with 25 parents to explore strategies for overcoming their perceived challenges in supporting their children's secondary education. [12]

Within "Connected Communities Cumbria" (2017-2021), I trained 120 children and young people as community researchers, who conducted 646 doorstep interviews with residents from four low-income coastal communities. The results were co-analysed, and community researchers shared their findings with key community stakeholders, identifying opportunities for co-produced interventions to meet the community's needs as identified through the research. [13]

I responded to findings from the "Connected Communities Cumbria" research to promote collaboration between communities and the Council in order to co-produce a means to involve communities in decisions that impact on them. In "Community Power" (2021-2024), I worked with 40 residents in four left-behind communities, participatory workshops explored enablers and barriers to democratic participation, and aspirations for relationships and participatory practices in the future. Co-creative forums were held in all communities, bringing together policy actors and residents to co-produce new strategies for democratic participation. During this research journey, I also experienced several significant life events, including marriage, family bereavements, and, most importantly for me, becoming a mother for the first time. These events all contributed to an evolving sense of self, both within my personal and professional identity. [14]

Before embarking on the reflexive narrative, I present a positionality statement to situate myself within the accounts described: *I self-identify as a white, heterosexual female who grew up in a working-class household but now holds a professional position. I strongly identify with my northern English heritage, have recently become a mother for the first time, and would describe myself as a mother-scholar-activist.* [15]

Throughout my adult life, I have been dedicated to promoting social inclusion, and I have consistently demonstrated this commitment through both my practice and research. My various paid and voluntary positions include clinical psychology and community mental health, educational governance, and community development. As an applied and socially conscious researcher, my ambition is that all my research contributes to promoting social inclusion through

recommendations for local and central government and third-sector organisations. Within this critical reflection, I recognise the possible tension or synergy between my researcher role and my personal positioning. However, as a reflexive researcher, these personal reflections are critical in developing an inclusive research practice. Like BOURDIEU, I believe in the application of theory, and am inspired by his stance on the responsibility of social research to make a positive contribution to society: "Those who have good fortune to be able to devote their lives to the study of the social world cannot stand aside, neutral and indifferent, from the struggles in which the future of that world is at stake" (2003, p.11). [16]

3. The Application of a Reflexive Sociology

3.1 The social reproduction of inequality

In order to adequately understand the interaction between individual experiences and the field in which one operates, BOURDIEU proposed that "structural constructivism [presents a] dialectical relationship between positivist and interpretive" (1989 [1986], p.16). In this approach, he rejected objective and unidimensional images of stratification, along with essentialist conceptions, in favour of a relational approach that is fluid and context-dependent. A brief overview of the central concepts I applied to my reflective practice, habitus, capital, field and doxa, will be followed by an introduction to sociological reflexivity, providing a conceptual and methodological framework for the succeeding analysis and discussion. [17]

The concept of habitus is understood to be a central tenet of BOURDIEU's overarching theoretical framework. BOURDIEU offered numerous definitions of habitus, but the simplest summary is one's "feel for the game" (BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992, p.128), by which "deeply internalised dispositions that generate action" (SWARTZ, 1997, p.101) are meant. Habituses are cognitions "internalised and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices" (BOURDIEU, 1984 [1979], p.170). These internalised dispositions, BOURDIEU argued, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, "beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will" (p.466). These result in an unconscious, taken-for-granted acceptance of social hierarchies, thereby maintaining the social exclusion of certain groups, where individuals gain a "sense of one's place" (BOURDIEU, 1989 [1986]) p.17). [18]

In presenting his forms of capital, BOURDIEU (1986) extended the Marxist idea of capital to all forms of power, whether they be material, cultural, social or symbolic, arguing that these can be drawn on to maintain and enhance positions in the social order. Different kinds of knowledge are socially constructed and ascribed a value; if it is culturally appropriate, knowledge is considered an *asset* in the same sense that economic theory ascribes value to capital. These forms of power and their unequal distribution amongst individuals and groups are argued to be the fundamental causes of societal inequality. [19]

Field is a spatial metaphor for defining the structure of the social setting in which habitus and capital operate, appreciating the relationship between the objective and subjective forces that shape experience (BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992). Specifically, BOURDIEU emphasised the symbolic location in which individuals with different levels of capital operate, highlighting the "force" and "struggle" (1998 [1994], p.32) present in a given field. He stressed the reciprocal relationship between objective structures of social fields (the game itself) and the interpretive structures of the habitus (the feel for the game) as being embedded within the conception of field. [20]

Social order is reproduced through "inscrib[ing] itself in bodies" (BOURDIEU, 2000 [1997], p.141) through symbolic power, "the power to make people see and believe certain visions of the world rather than others" (BOURDIEU, 1991, p.70). This potentially creates doxic dispositions, whereby one perceives and experiences a "sense of limits", dictated by the dominant class. By this, BOURDIEU argued, individuals' experience of a sense of their *fit* within "objective structures" (1990 [1980], p.41) and that this perception of position is unquestioned and taken-for-granted as "natural" (p. 69). These principles are used to understand power and dominance in the social world and encourage researchers to adopt them in their own practice through exercising sociological reflexivity (BOURDIEU, 1990; BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992; WACQUANT, 1989). [21]

3.2 Sociological reflexivity

In his approach to empirical investigation, BOURDIEU stressed the importance of avoiding positivism and was strongly critical of the "intellectualist bias" within institutions where researchers neglect the "presuppositions inscribed in the act of thinking about the world" (BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992, p.39). Furthermore, BOURDIEU was focused on application within the development of his theory of practice. In response to this, BOURDIEU urged scholars to read his works as a practical guide rather than abstract theories and stressed the importance of empirical investigation (NAVARRO, 2006). Building upon this notion, BOURDIEU developed a meta-theory of reflexive sociology that requires continuous adjustment to empirical conditions and as such, does not provide precise recommendations in methodological terms. As SWARTZ asserted:

> "Bourdieu insists that socio analysis simultaneously requires reflexivity, that is, a systematic and rigorous self-critical practice of social science ... standards of critical inquiry he applied to observing social scientists as well as to their objects of observation ... he sees a sociology of sociology as a necessary means for freeing the social scientist from the constraints of symbolic struggle in the field of science ... the practice of genuine science requires a 'reflexive turn' upon itself (1997, pp.10-11) [22]

Furthermore, BOURDIEU argued that reflexivity is not a solo endeavour, but that of the entire sociological field. Sociological reflexivity is a collective practice which aims to uncover the socially conditioned, subconscious structures that form perceptions of the social world (BOURDIEU & WACQUANT, 1992). It is through

this lens that I attempt to critically view my evolving position as a community researcher, considering how structural power dynamics may have influenced the research process. [23]

3.3 The reflective process

Through presenting my own reflexive analysis in the field of social inclusion, I hope to share my experience with the wider academic community, encouraging others to adopt reflexive practice as part of the research process with socially excluded communities (HEAPHY, 2008; KENNEDY et al., 2024; MOOSAVI, 2023; TOWNSEND & CUSHION, 2021). Through the application of a constructivist structuralist approach, I also hope to contribute to the understanding of the differing positionalities in community research, in a way that evidences both the importance of the objective and subjective conditions that shape experience and the implicit structural and symbolic inequalities which can exist in social inclusion research. [24]

The data linked to this analysis were obtained from various sources, most notably ethnographic field notes, which included observations about the research process and key findings of the research itself. I considered safeguarding issues and observations concerning power dynamics within the research process or the wider environment (for example, between stakeholder organisations and participants). In addition, research journals were used throughout the research process to provide a holistic perspective on the research and my thoughts and feelings surrounding it. Audio recordings of focus groups and interviews were also used; however, most data presented in this paper come from field notes, as these are where the most significant moments tended to occur (i.e. outside the formal research context). Combining traditional and ethnographic approaches this way has been recognised as a creative and innovative way to approach qualitative research (O'BYRNE, 2007). [25]

A series of analytical stages was employed in developing reflexive practice, drawing on autoethnographic methodologies applied elsewhere regarding research positionality (RYAN, 2015). All data were analysed using NVivo, applying a deductive thematic analysis (SALDAÑA & OMASTA, 2016), with BOURDIEU's theory as the analytical framework. A deductive approach was favoured over an inductive analysis as my continual reflection on the data and research process had led me to identify the synergies between my understanding of the interactions between participants and myself over time, and BOURDIEU's structural constructivism. [26]

Data selection: Like RYAN (2015, §22), I have chosen particular "moments" from the research process as my data for analysis, where explicit reference to my positionality was made, for example, when participants made reference to how they perceived me or in how I introduced myself to participants. Although all research projects included men and women, I have decided to focus only on female participants for this paper, due to the significant role of motherhood in my shifting researcher positionality. I do not suggest that the data I have drawn on

necessarily represent all interactions with participants. However, these particular examples highlight themes emerging through the various research processes. [27]

Thematic analysis (SALDAÑA & OMASTA, 2016): Following the review of these moments and the identification of key themes, a process of deep reflection and free writing ensued. Issues related to reflexive practice were discussed during supervision, including positionality, power dynamics, and subjectivity, and bracketing was consistently applied, with me consciously acknowledging my prejudices and assumptions as part of the research process. The learning and outcomes from these stages were consolidated into one working document, where a theoretical perspective was identified to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis. The personal contemplation and supervision that formed the reflexive process created a psychological space for in-depth reflection on issues concerning power and positionality. This resulted in a deepened understanding of symbolic power in the research process and a rejection of doxic assumptions, thereby strengthening the rigour of the overall methodological approach. [28]

Theoretical application: As mentioned above, I engaged in continual reflection on the theoretical framework to understand my experiences throughout my time as a researcher. Over the years, I have considered several theoretical approaches to critically consider my reflexivity of the research process, including a typology of the role of an action researcher (JHAGROE, 2018), social identity theory (TAJFEL & TURNER, 1979) and reflexive sociology (BOURDIEU, 1990; BOURDIEU & WACQUANT 1992). For this paper, I considered reflexive sociology the most appropriate approach, given that all research was concerned with issues surrounding power and class, which complement the dominant epistemological positioning of the research. This also relates most closely to my own theoretical orientation. This application of reflexive sociology builds on the limited literature where authors have employed this reflexive method in participatory action research, highlighting the complex power dynamics inherent in this particular research methodology (KENNELLY et al., 2024). [29]

4. Applying a Reflexive Sociology to Relational Community Research

4.1 Educational research with parents

Within "In This Together", which was my first community research project as an early career researcher, I was conscious of how I would be viewed by women in the communities I worked in. The several identities I chose to present were those of someone who lived locally, and although I could not relate to their experience of being mothers, I wanted to listen. "In This Together" was conducted within what can be understood as the symbolic field of education, that is, the social and structural world of education. Within this field, I was aware of the discrepancy in capital between the participants and myself. Working with parents receiving benefits, I was aware of my presumed higher income, holding a paid position at a university, which presumably provided me with a more comfortable standard of living than the families I was working with. Differing social capital, although less marked, was evident through my institutional social connections within the field of

education, principally those with teachers. I was aware of my congenial and respectful relationship with teachers, something which parents expressed they did not enjoy. Cultural capital felt to hold more salience in how I experienced the discrepancies between myself and families, expressed through my level of education and through embodied practices such as language. [30]

Considering the capital discrepancies within this field, it could be argued that my habitus was aligned with the academic establishment and misaligned with parents, who perceived antagonism between themselves and the school (WILSON & McGUIRE, 2022; WILSON & WORSLEY, 2021). The habitus misalignment was particularly salient, given that I, too, was part of an academic institution, an institution that potentially imposed dominance and symbolic power over the parents I was working with. Evidence of a doxic taken-for-granted acceptance of my belonging to *the institution* was revealed in an encounter with two mothers after completion of the study, in which they declared, "I thought you were posh." It did not feel appropriate to probe this statement at the time, but the statement followed the mothers' discovery that I lived less than half a mile away from the community centre where the research was based, dispelling their assumption that I was based in a distant city. I was surprised by the comment; given my working-class upbringing, I did not associate myself with being *posh*. I was also disappointed; I had been conscious of limiting embodied cultural capital discrepancies through the language I used and the clothes I wore. This encounter highlights the importance of conscious reflection on one's positionality within the research process, and that even when considering efforts to achieve an *insider* status, subtle and unconscious processes may still be at play. [31]

Not being a mother at the time of the research concerned me, as I had little basis to share experiences, and I worried about how this might influence mothers' perceptions of me. Specifically, I was worried that I would be perceived as a young *outsider* who could not possibly understand their experiences and that this would be met with resistance. To counter this, I made an effort to be congruent throughout my time with parents and carers, positioning myself as someone open and eager to listen. [32]

From a Bourdieusian perspective, the mothers' habitus differed significantly from my own. Although already different in terms of class positioning, I was conscious that I was ill-informed about the ways in which financial, social, cultural, and symbolic capital operated in parenthood. [33]

Despite my own taken-for-granted positioning as a working-class woman, this was rejected by mothers, who, despite conscious effort, viewed me as a professional. However, the success I had in recruitment and engagement in the research suggests that trusting relationships can be built in the research process. This can be achieved by demonstrating a commitment to understanding mothers' experiences and a genuine drive to reduce educational inequalities. I learnt that perceived differences in positioning must be critically reflected upon rather than taken-for-granted, which may potentially impede the research process, something of which I applied within my next research project. [34]

4.2 Community-based youth participatory action research

Community development was the field in which "Connected Communities Cumbria" took place. After reflecting on my experiences from "In This Together", I sought to present myself as an individual committed to equality and participation and continued to be consistent within my research practice. Armed with more experience, I felt more confident in how I positioned myself, although I remained cognisant of the stark differences in social positioning. I presented myself as a researcher (i.e. someone from an educational institution), who was committed to social justice and working with communities to better understand and strengthen them (i.e. an activist). I also shared that I had a personal interest in the area, as I lived in the same town. Within this position, I was explicitly recognising my simultaneous *insider* and *outsider* status. [35]

Discrepancies in financial capital were evident throughout the research, and this disparity also manifested in symbolic power. An example that struck me as significant relates to a time I provided a group of children from a community facing considerable economic and social challenges with expensive pizzas (in response to their request). This was done to demonstrate the value I placed on the children's participation, but it also highlighted the unequal capital disruption and the symbolic power that it imposes. The excitement and surprise that the children expressed at having this brand of pizza was something I will never forget. It made me feel uncomfortable having the power and privilege to provide this, although the children enjoyed it. Facilitators told me this was one of the main things the children remembered about the session, implying the impact that such strategies can have, which I hope brought feelings of value. [36]

Social capital was felt to have less impact on the power differentials within this research, principally due to existing links between the gatekeeping organisations, and children and young people, and these being more informal in nature. As with the previous research, disparities in cultural capital were evident through differing educational levels, language and cultural practices, such as personal tastes in music and clothes. I did attempt to counter some of this through how I dressed, often wearing hoodies and jeans. Though not the clothes I usually wear for work, I believed this choice of clothing would provide a balance of being both authentic and non-threatening. [37]

In contrast with the "In This Together" research, I perceived an aligned habitus based on shared values concerned with community wellbeing in that we were all working towards the same goal. Although doxic, taken-for-granted assumptions around more formal institutions, such as universities and the police, presented themselves, these were addressed through open, dialogical relationships. Moreover, I was deeply committed to this project, which undoubtedly brought a degree of subjectivity. I became attached to the children and young people involved and felt a sense of duty towards them. I reflected on my previous experience working in mental health, focusing on professional boundaries, and sought to develop a way to reconcile these boundaries with relational practice. I

achieved this through personal reflection, debriefs after every session, maintaining field notes and professional supervision. [38]

This project involved a significant amount of work with parents, particularly mothers. For example, in one community, many mothers offered to volunteer at community events, and one joined a new community organisation established as a result of the research. In another community, mothers were actively involved in the community research. Subsequently, they established a new community group to develop projects that addressed the needs of the community as identified through the research. [39]

Working with children and young people, I was again cognisant that I had little experience of the social world of families: that is, we possessed differing habituses. Again, I responded to this through humility and congruency, acknowledging my limited experience with mothers. For example, when mothers shared any struggles they were experiencing, I responded by saying "I can only imagine what this must be like". Warmth and humour were shared between myself and many mothers throughout the research, which also helped to foster productive and trusting relationships. [40]

The central learning from "Connected Communities Cumbria" was that long-term, relational methods can bring added value. The value of these can be seen in the individual outcomes associated with children and young people's involvement in the research, as well as the strong relationships built with gatekeeping organisations, which supported future research (WILSON, RIDLEY & MORRIS, 2024). Unlike "In This Together", positive relationships were also formed between formal institutions and communities, arguably shaped by a long-term, place-based approach that emphasised shared goals and values. An equitable approach to power sharing further supported this relational approach, where children and young people chose their roles within the action research process. [41]

Engaging in the reflexive process led to an understanding that I positioned myself in a subordinate position to mothers in these two research projects. Specifically, I attempted to present myself as someone who lacked motherhood capital, a "non-elite cultural resource" (LO, 2016, p.696) derived through expertise gained from informal caregiving and deployed in interactions with institutions. I believe this was an unconscious attempt from myself to create a symbolic field which appreciates the capital possessed by mothers to promote feelings of power and ownership in the research process. I believe that this strategy was effective in establishing rapport and building relationships with parents, based on humility, respect, empathy, shared values, and congruency. [42]

4.3 Democratic participatory action research

"Community Power" was based in the field of local democratic participation, which began as the world was recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. I was now also a mother of a small child. With this in mind, I subconsciously and automatically positioned myself within this research as not only someone passionate about social justice for communities, but also a mother. [43]

I would introduce myself to participants as a researcher, explaining the purpose of the research, and conclude the introduction by stating that I live locally and have a young son. Several significant moments related to my motherhood experience had a profound impact on the research. For example, one community group I was working with consisted of women, all mothers at various stages, including a mother who attended with a son of the same age as mine. Throughout the research, we engaged in many conversations about the challenges associated with motherhood (feeding difficulties, lack of sleep, and sense of loneliness), usually before the focused research activity began and digital audio devices were started. My son experienced colic and subsequent digestive issues, impacting on his sleep. I shared these challenges with these mothers, who offered me both empathy and advice, and asked for updates every time we met. [44]

Issues surrounding financial capital were a dominant theme throughout the formal research, which undoubtedly impacted on the research process itself. This was exemplified in the dominant discussions surrounding the increased cost of living, which most likely impacted participants harder than myself. For example, in one community group, an unemployed young single mother told me about an upcoming NHS event at the community centre, where free vitamins were being distributed. This led me to reflect that I was unaware of the support freely available from statutory services, as I had not had reason to consider this option. At every session, this same mother would also utilise the food and baby pantry provided at the community centre, and she would discuss the price and quality differences between premium and budget nappies with me. Again, these interactions led me to reflect on my own financial privilege in motherhood, as I did not experience the additional stress of having to conduct such comparisons. [45]

Like "In This Together", this research involved working with the social network of a formal institution, this time, the local government. Again, from a social capital perspective, the social relationships between participants and local political actors were tumultuous, with substantial power inequalities being perceived, whereas on the whole, I enjoyed a respectful and positive relationship. The complex social and relational dynamics between participants and the local government are analysed in detail elsewhere (WILSON, 2024a). [46]

As with the two previous research projects, cultural capital presented significant discrepancies in educational background and cultural practices. The differences in cultural practices were particularly marked when comparing child-rearing practices of other mothers. For example, my child attended nursery while I

worked full-time, whereas other mothers of young children were either
unemployed or received childcare support from close family members. In one
community, an older lady would ask where my son was at the start of every
session, which I interpreted as her assuming that my young son would be in my
care. In turn, this made me feel both guilty for working when my son was so
young and worried about how this may be perceived by the participants. [47]

Viewed through the lens of habitus, a conflicting habitus was observed
throughout the research, and again, this impacted on the research process. The
community presented a strong civic habitus, and in the adult groups, this exerted
a degree of symbolic power within the community workshops. The symbolic
power was presented in an embodied way in how they told their stories, in what
they told me (and did not) and in the strong language they used. These power
dynamics were most marked in older female members of the community,
highlighting that intersectional issues concerning age and gender can impact on
the research process (TARRANT, 2014). I experienced this symbolic power
exerted on myself, and in response, I engaged in a critical reflection on power
positions and what position I am prepared to accept in this social world. [48]

On the other hand, local political actors exerted their symbolic power within the
research process through unpredictable levels of engagement in the research
and through holding the power to respond to or reject the research findings.
When brought together in the research, through the co-creation forums, some
(but not all) elected members exerting their power in their field, evidenced by
practices and language, i.e. their habitus, embodied through interrupting
community participants, using jargon, and pointing fingers at participants. Such
behaviours are exemplified by a moment in one co-creation forum, where an
elected member repeatedly interrupted community members when they
attempted to speak, dismissing their plans for democratic participation by
claiming that residents could exercise their power by writing a letter to her. I was
also told I must share the research findings and "not have them stuck in a
drawer". [49]

I was struck by the seemingly unconscious, passive position the previously
dominant community participants assigned themselves. I expected an angry
response, but they disengaged in any dialogue. These interactions demonstrate
the taken-for-granted, symbolic power that political actors held within the
research space, despite numerous efforts to create an equitable environment
between the two groups. I observed the local government and community
participants expressed doxic taken-for-granted assumptions towards each other
throughout the research process, a consequence of the misaligned habitus. [50]

This research was grounded in a subjective epistemology, and a critical reflection
on my subjectivity was vital. As someone committed to social justice, I again felt a
sense of duty towards the participants. At times, I shared their indignation
towards political actors for behaving in ways that I felt were unacceptable. I was
cognisant of this indignation and consciously tried to act in a neutral manner,
although it is not possible to know how many unconscious cues I may have

displayed. There were also instances where community participants expressed values in conflict with my own, mainly around immigration and foreign policy, creating some cognitive dissonance considering my affinity and commitment to the community. Rather than take these views for granted, I probed for more depth in subsequent sessions, which provided a rich insight into the contributing factors shaping these beliefs. Through this increased understanding, I felt able to resolve this cognitive dissonance, accepting that I may disagree with their beliefs, but I understood the reasoning behind them. [51]

In an attempt to build rapport and a sense of shared experience, I tried to deploy motherhood capital, presenting myself as someone who knew the *rules of the game* of motherhood. I engaged in conversations about the challenges I was facing around feeding and sleep in an attempt to show some vulnerability and reduce any perceived power hierarchies. However, as I further reflected on my positioning, I became conscious of the conditions of my own privileges and felt this perspective was somewhat reductionist. [52]

Applying a sociological reflexive lens, these conditions can be understood as being embodied in financial, social and cultural capital. I was aware that I possessed the financial resources to access products and services that were helpful in early motherhood, such as owning a car and attending a private ante-natal walking group in the Lake District, which provided access to a new social group. I was aware of the social capital within my new social circles; I had become friends with many GPs, nurses, and scientists. This, in turn, provided me with direct access to medical advice and other financial, social and cultural benefits. The cultural capital I possessed provided me with ease in navigating this field, which differed significantly from the social worlds of the mothers involved in the "Community Power" research. [53]

Upon reflection, my initial assumption that motherhood would provide common ground proved to be superficial. I believed that the "com-passion" (HOLLWAY, 2015, p.22) created by motherhood was enough to bond us, but I had not taken into account the impact of the external conditions that shape motherhood. Rather, it was a doxic exercise where I took the experience of motherhood for granted; no matter how noble my intentions were, our habituses would never be truly aligned. This led me to conclude that meaningful research relationships can be built based on the positioning of motherhood; however, structural conditions shaping the social world of mothers must also be considered, particularly the relative privileges of women within the research community. [54]

"Community Power" offered a multitude of learning experiences, with the most significant being the diverse forms of power present in policy-community research. The power that all stakeholders can exert over the research process was discussed in the project report, acknowledging the interrelatedness between the power held by the research, policy actors, gatekeeping organisations and participants (WILSON, 2024b). Through this research, I have come to understand that I have limited control over the research process and that valuable lessons can be learned from these experiences. Furthermore, the reflexive practice

surrounding my positioning as a mother has highlighted the complex intersection between social identity and structural inequalities in community research, exemplifying the critical role that this reflexive practice plays in avoiding unconscious, doxic assumptions in the research process. [55]

5. Discussion

The critical reflection of the Northwestern English communities included in this research highlights the subjective dimension of positionality in community research. Drawing on different forms of capital and the concept of habitus, I have highlighted the ways in which relational power can impact the research process. These concerns are crucial to any empirical investigation that aims to understand inequalities and their contribution to social exclusion in low-income coastal communities. Discrepancies in the material circumstances between myself and mothers were evident throughout the research, illuminating the unequal distribution of financial capital between myself and the research participants. Social capital presented a more complicated relationship; the more formal the institutions involved, the starker the differences were between myself and families. Differences in cultural capital were reflected in education and embodied in clothes, actions and cultural preferences. Hence, my critical reflection on the research process contributes to the limited literature on researcher positionality in motherhood (ADEAGBO, 2021; ALMACK, 2008; BAZ, 2023; COOPER & ROGERS, 2015; FROST & HOLT, 2014; ROGERS, 2020; WIANT CUMMINS & BRANNON, 2022). [56]

There are three principal limitations within this paper, all of which highlight the need for further research. Firstly, this reflexive paper, by nature, is wholly subjective, drawing on my interpretation of interactions with mothers through the research process. Thus, this interpretation is subject to biases, assumptions and stereotypes, which may have influenced my interpretation. Although bracketing and reflexive practice were applied throughout the research process, it is difficult to understand the potential impact this subjectivity had on the interpretation of results. Whilst acknowledging the limitations that subjectivity can bring to the research process, it is critical that these experiences are explicitly recognised and discussed. [57]

Secondly, the research did not speak directly to those involved in the research about their perceptions of me. Gaining insights into participants' experiences would provide further insight into the research process. However, this would be challenging, as the research process may compound these accounts. An anonymised survey, with both open and closed questions, may be the most appropriate method to capture these data, although further research is needed to develop innovative methodologies that enable participants to share their experiences of the research process. Thirdly, this reflection is situated within a very narrow geographic and demographic context. Further reflexive practice should be documented so that different intersecting dimensions of motherhood, including class, race, citizenship status, sexuality, and gender, can be adequately considered. [58]

Adopting a Bourdieusian approach within this reflexive process enabled me to appreciate how different socially constructed facets impact the dynamics between research and participants. Multiple social identities of motherhood highlight that a monolithic definition of motherhood in policy is problematic. It is shaped by class distinctions, and these need to be explicitly appreciated. The consequences of not doing so threaten the research relationship between the researchers and participants. Likewise, the importance of intersectionality and positionality consciousness in community research must be included as fundamental in any research training. [59]

Embracing notions of capital beyond the conflict-power dynamics of BOURDIEU can add to our understanding of how people possess different assets that they exchange in the relational process. Motherhood capital recognises the unique strengths possessed by mothers (LO, 2016), and I would argue that these strengths need to be further recognised and celebrated. [60]

The reflections on motherhood capital demonstrate that power is multi-directional and that nonelite capitals are essential and can impact the research process. Although some conditions were the same, e.g., the same status of motherhood and living in close proximity, the habitus I possessed and the one of the mothers I worked with were often different. We were not necessarily in conflict, but came from symbolically different places. In considering the supportive evidence for sharing personal experience in maternal research (ADEAGBO, 2021; ALMACK, 2008; BERGER, 2015; COOPER & ROGERS, 2015; MOSSELSON, 2014), caution must be exercised when presenting a positionality that claims shared status. [61]

A conscious appreciation of relational dynamics informed the development of what I felt were effective strategies for building effective and trusting relationships within the research process, being attentive to interpersonal skills and my interactions with participants. These strategies were centred around the guiding principles of interpersonal dynamics, including respect, humility, honesty, empathy, congruency, humour, and warmth, which align with the literature where authors advocated these principles within the research environment (MELLOR et al., 2014). Relational positionality within the research process is complex (CROSSA, 2012; MOSSELSON, 2014). I would argue that, despite our differences, trusting relationships were formed, which BETTEZ (2015) described as communion, characterised by meaningful connections, thereby fostering ethical and trusting relationships in the research context. This is because time and consideration were built into the research process (relational practice), which created the conditions to build relationships (ibid.). The interactions I have presented exemplify that relational dynamics are multidirectional (ibid., see also MELLOR, et al., 2014); all actors hold some form of relational power (WILSON, 2024b). [62]

The strengths of a relational approach to community research lie in appreciating power dynamics and attempts to share power wherever possible. Through working with trusted and respected organisations, many barriers to recruitment

were potentially removed, which also provided access to community venues to conduct research. Through these inclusive practices, closely associated with a community organisation, relationships can be built with potential participants, which can lead to meaningful and insightful participation in the research. However, recruiting through existing groups, by nature, excludes other groups, and community organisations themselves have complex and historical power dynamics that can be beyond the researcher's knowledge and control. Furthermore, developing meaningful relationships is time-consuming and requires strong interpersonal skills, which can often only be developed through practice. Nonetheless, the projects I have described demonstrate the value of relational research, recognising the need for a conscious and continual reflection on the challenges faced, accompanied by reflexive practice. [63]

To conclude, through this reflexive paper, I have attempted to draw attention to the importance of intersectionality and positionality in research. Within this, a conscious understanding of individual and structural factors that shape social reality is needed, and some caution must be taken when researchers propose to assume a *shared status*. Drawing attention to the positionality of motherhood, I have argued that differences within a certain status must be recognised. My critical reflection on relational practice and strategies adopted within the research to overcome these tensions provides examples of how relational dynamics in the research process can create more equitable research environments; I would like to encourage the academic community to engage in a similar reflexive process within their respective fields to promoting authentic engagement and quality research. [64]

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