

# Chapter 1

## Re-positioning Power and Re-imagining Reflexivity: Examining Positionality and Building Validity Through Reconstructive Horizon Analysis



Meagan Call-Cummings and Karen Ross

**Abstract** In this chapter, we explore how researchers might engage in reflexivity. Reflexivity is closely related to the concept of positionality, which refers to the way we as researchers view our *position* in the world in relation to others, especially those who are involved in or may read our research. Often reflexivity is issued as a call—an important step to take to establish the validity, rigor, or ethical nature of the research being done. Here we engage in reconstructive horizon analysis (RHA), which is an approach for examining taken-for-granted claims made by ourselves and our research participants. We find that by engaging in RHA, we build moments for dialogue and communication into the research process that allow assumptions, structures, and roles to be made explicit.

Over the past 20 years, much discussion and debate in methodological literature has revolved around reflexivity: what it means, what it looks and feels like, and how it is best “done.” Linda Finlay and Gough, in her (2008) edited volume, *Reflexivity: A Practical Guide for Researchers in Health and Social Sciences*, defines reflexivity as “thoughtful, self-aware analysis of the intersubjective dynamics between researcher and the researched” (p. ix), acknowledging that “reflexivity both challenges treasured research traditions and is challenging to apply in practice” (p. ix).

---

Both authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

M. Call-Cummings (✉)  
George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA  
e-mail: [mcallcum@gmu.edu](mailto:mcallcum@gmu.edu)

K. Ross  
University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, MA, USA  
e-mail: [karen.ross@umb.edu](mailto:karen.ross@umb.edu)

In this chapter, we explore these issues by focusing on *how* we as researchers can engage in reflexivity, a concept we define as purposeful, often challenging reflection about ourselves, how we identify, and what we take for granted as true or right. Reflexivity is closely related to the concept of positionality, which refers to the way we as researchers view our *position* in the world in relation to others, especially those who are involved in or may read our research. In particular, positionality requires us to think about how our background and experiences play a role in our relationships with participants and in how we carry out research: for instance, how might one's gender/race/class/religion or other aspect of one's identity affect the choices one makes about what questions to ask an interview participant or how one interacts with participants of similar or different backgrounds during the interview? Being explicit about our positionality is important as a way of helping readers understand how the lens through which we see the world is reflected in our research.

As our opening paragraph suggests, there is agreement among many (though not all) methodologists about the importance of exploring positionality and reflexivity, especially in order to be transparent about how our backgrounds shape both the process and results of our research. However, there is much less agreement about how to engage in reflexivity in productive ways. Scholars have illuminated challenges to doing so through discussions of reflexive practice as well as through what scholars have learned from engaging reflexively. Most often, reflexivity is issued as a call—an important step to take to establish the validity, rigor, or ethical nature of the research being done, especially for scholars who are determined to engage in knowledge production that is critical, participatory, emancipatory, and democratized. Often these calls relate to concerns about the representation of participants. For example, Milner (2007) charges researchers to engage in the process of cultural and racial introspection in their research in order to avoid some of the potential dangers of (mis)representation that can occur in varying research contexts. He argues that researchers in the process of conducting research “pose racially and culturally grounded questions about themselves,” and that attention to these questions can “bring the researcher awareness and consciousness of known (seen), unknown (unseen), and unanticipated (unforeseen) issues, perspective, epistemologies, and positions” (p. 395). By researching the self in relation to others, Milner (2007) maintains, researchers can better understand issues of power and self-interest, which can overshadow the interests of participants. This kind of “engaged reflection and representation” (p. 396) can allow researchers and participants to explore together what is happening in that particular research community, allowing the research findings to become products of shared interpretation and perspective.

Pillow (2003) calls for researchers to work toward an uncomfortable reflexivity—a reflexive practice that seeks to “know while at the same time situate this knowing as tenuous” (p. 188). Her work highlights the often vulnerable and personally challenging aspect of reflexivity, and she urges researchers to understand reflexivity as a “methodological tool interruptive of practices of gathering data” to produce what she acknowledges are likely uncomfortable “tellings” (p. 192). She suggests that reflexivity is about more than just an accounting of researchers' struggles with representation but should also attend to accountability to that representation.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) advocate for a kind of reflexivity that they connect to the concept of “ethics in practice” (p. 262). They suggest that ethical engagement in the research process requires a constant monitoring of the ethical implications of one’s choices as a researcher. This practice of continuous scrutiny—of relationships between researcher and participant, research context, and the purposes of research, in addition to methods—is, in Guillemin and Gillam’s view, a form of reflexivity.

This idea expands the role of reflexivity beyond the examination of epistemological aspects of research, to its use as a conceptual tool for understanding how researchers might exercise ethical practice in research. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) say that researchers should develop ways to address and respond to ethical issues that arise in the research process. By so doing, researchers can prepare for potential problems and even prevent them. Framing reflexivity as a skill in this way—the ability to recognize and effectively navigate ethically important moments—is exciting, but still begs the question: how? How can researchers examine and account for their positionalities in research that works toward equity and social justice? And when? Is reflexivity only called for upon completion of a study? Or, like Milner (2007) and Pillow (2003) seem to suggest, is there something about the role of reflexivity that demands its use throughout the process of knowledge production? Lastly, we ask, with whom? Finlay and Gough (2008) is explicit that reflexivity allows intersubjective understandings and dynamics between and among the researcher and the researched to emerge. Yet the literature on reflexivity as a whole emphasizes internal introspection focused on *oneself*, thus leaving it unclear how self-reflection might occur in a way that opens up possibilities for position-taking and deeper intersubjective understanding of meaning.

## Reconstructive Horizon Analysis: An Introduction

Carspecken’s (1996) reconstructive horizon analysis (RHA) is a methodological tool that can help researchers in this quest to “do” reflexivity in a way that is meaningful. In particular, RHA is a tool that requires individuals to position-take, that is, to explicitly take the position or perspective of other actors (such as research participants) in a way that is conscious and explicit rather than in the tacit, implicit manner that is characteristic of most interactions (Carspecken, 1996). Moreover, as Dennis (2017) states, “when we listen to the claims of others, our interpretations involve position-taking, which intrinsically require our self-commitments and positionings within the interpretations” (p. 112). As a tool used to deepen understanding of a participant’s speech acts, RHA can be understood as a form of “listening” to the claims of others, wherein the attempt is made to hear those claims more clearly. As such, it requires position-taking from the perspective of the participant as well as from one’s position—this inherently creates a *dialogic* approach to reflexivity, wherein a researcher is moving through multiple positions in attempting to bring tacit claims into explicit discourse.

According to Carspecken (1996), who bases his work in Habermas' (1984, 1985) Theory of Communicative Action, the implicit reasons behind an action or communicative claim fall into one of four categories of validity claims: objective (based on the principle of multiple access), subjective (based on the principle of unique access by the communicator), normative-evaluative (relating to norms by which we operate in a given society or culture), or identity claims (references by the communicator to who that person is in the world); these reasons also differ based on "how immediately they are referenced in the original act (foregrounded) or how remotely they are referenced (backgrounded)" (p. 111). RHA is an approach for examining taken-for-granted claims made by ourselves and our research participants that allows us to locate the source of discomfort that is central to reflexivity.

We offer four examples from our fieldwork to highlight how this can be done. Our use of RHA entails the creation of what Carspecken (1996) refers to as a *validity horizon*, which puts into explicit discourse the tacit validity and identity claims articulated in a specific communicative act.

### *Example 1*

In the midst of an interview with Bayan,<sup>1</sup> a Palestinian woman, I (Karen) found myself discussing enlistment in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Our conversation had focused on Bayan's experiences, several years prior, in a program designed to bring Jewish and Palestinian youth together for joint learning and education toward activism. As we spoke, Bayan discussed the issue of enlistment among her Jewish friends from the program, how some had enlisted and some had not, and how this had helped her understand that there is more complexity among the Jewish population in Israel than she had previously thought. In the midst of discussing this, Bayan suddenly asked me, "Did you enlist?" I found myself extremely uncomfortable in that moment and unsure how to respond. Ultimately, the conversation went like this:

*Karen:* Yes, I enlisted. I enlisted out of a belief that I could try to change things from... inside the military.

*Bayan:* Yes, one of my friends, I heard the same thing from her, about trying to change things from the inside.

*Karen:* Yes. I'm not totally sure it's possible, to be honest.

*Bayan:* That's exactly what I told her.

*Karen:* But, anyway, for me, it was a long time ago, and the way I see things now is not the same way that I saw things then. Today if I were in the same position I am sure that I would not enlist. But it's something that...it's a process that takes time, for everyone.

By reconstructing the validity claims and identity claims in this example, we can better understand the discomfort I experienced in this conversation and its source (Table 1.1). In particular, the source of this discomfort can be addressed through a validity horizon focusing in the statement,

But, anyway, for me, it was a long time ago, and the way I see things now is not the same way that I saw things then. Today if I were in the same position I am sure that I would not enlist. But it's something that...it's a process that takes time, for everyone.

**Table 1.1** Validity horizon for Example 1

	Objective claim	Subjective claim	Normative-evaluative claim	Identity claim
Foreground	The IDF requires Jewish citizens of Israel to enlist.	I am uncomfortable telling Bayan that I enlisted.	Researchers should be honest with their research participants.	<i>I am an honest person.</i>
Mid-ground	There are ways for Jewish citizens to avoid enlisting.	I am concerned about how Bayan will react to my response. <i>I want Bayan to feel comfortable narrating her authentic self.</i>	Researchers should value relationships with their participants. Jewish citizens should not enlist without understanding why they do so.	I am a person who is willing to challenge the status quo.
Background	Enlistment in the IDF is not something that all Israeli citizens agree with.	I do not want Bayan to think I blindly submit to societal pressure.	<i>It is appropriate for research participants to ask researchers questions that make them uncomfortable.</i>	I am a person who is willing to acknowledge poor decisions in my past.

Using RHA to create a validity horizon allows for a much better understanding of where my discomfort, as a researcher, came from, *as well as* my own normative beliefs and the role they played in creating discomfort. Although this validity horizon focused on a comment *I* had made, the tacit claims it put into explicit discourse highlight how in the process of speaking these words, *I* was engaged in a process of trying to reconcile my perspective with Bayan's, based on my presumed understanding of her position. Specifically, the italicized subjective, normative-evaluative, and identity claims illustrate a situation where my desire for authentic interaction with Bayan stood in tension with my sense of self as an honest individual. Ultimately, it is difficult to know whether my response facilitated or mitigated a sense of comfort on Bayan's part to express herself honestly; however, the validity horizon makes clear the different pulls on my sense of accountability to her as a research participant and to myself in the process of data collection.

## ***Example 2***

After the conclusion of a semester-long participatory research project with English Language Learners at a local middle school, my (Meagan's) graduate research assistant interviewed me about my experience as one of the faculty leaders of the group. We were conducting these interviews with all those who were involved in the project because some of the graduate students who acted as "mentors" to the research participants had expressed frustration about their roles and the roles faculty members played during the project. They felt like there were power dynamics that

**Table 1.2** Validity horizon for Example 2

	Objective claim	Subjective claim	Normative-evaluative claim	Identity claim
Foreground	I am a new faculty member here.	I am aware that I put my professional needs first.	People should be honest. People should not be selfish.	I am an honest person.
Mid-ground	My main focus at the beginning of this project was my career, not you or the participants.	Sometimes I feel torn between my needs and attending to my students' needs.	Sometimes it's okay to be selfish if it's for a good reason.	I need others to think I am honest. I am not really selfish, I am just trying to move my career forward.
Background	New faculty members need to begin to conduct research quickly in order to be competitive for tenure.	<i>I didn't think this through fully before I signed on for this project. I was not being transparent about whose needs I was attending to and the role I was taking in this project.</i>	<i>Researchers should clarify their expectations before engaging in research. Researchers should be transparent and intentional about their goals and their roles as they engage in research.</i>	I am an ambitious person. <i>Sometimes I am not as thoughtful or intentional or transparent as I should be.</i>

were not explicitly attended to. Overall, they felt like the project did not live up to its full potential. Conducting these interviews became an opportunity to reflect on what happened, understand each other's perspectives on what maybe went wrong, and plan for more ethical work in the future. During my interview, Marie, my research assistant, asked me about the expectations I had coming into the project (Table 1.2).

*Marie:* So you said your expectations were kind of undefined, when you went in. But what did you hope to gain from it, or what was your objective in joining?

*Meagan:* This is probably really selfish, but as a new faculty member, honestly I was just trying to get into a school or into a space. I was trying to start research and hit the ground running. Coming here as a new assistant professor. Trying to get contacts in schools, start working with you, you guys as students, doctoral students. Get some research under my belt. That type of thing. I mean, of course I love photovoice, and of course I wanted to work with students, but I think that was kind of secondary or different than really just wanting to get into schools and start—start doing good research.

Focusing in on my first sentence here helps to illuminate more backgrounded truth claims:

*This is probably really selfish, but as a new faculty member, honestly I was just trying to get into a school or into a space.*

The act of constructing this RHA table allowed me to see the validity claims that I had taken for granted when I was speaking. When I spoke these words, I was aware that I was speaking about professional priorities. After examining the horizon of these claims, however, I realized that I was also indicating my lack of intentionality, thoughtfulness, and transparency as I took the project on. This realization makes me extraordinarily uncomfortable, even now as I write. I see an implied act of power in my original dismissal of my lack of thoughtfulness and intentionality as I put my own needs ahead of the needs of my students. Engaging in RHA allowed me to see my actions and understand the justification of those actions from others' positions. Through this exercise, I clarified my need to be accountable not only to my own professional needs but also to those of my students.

## Redistributing Power Through Reflexive Reconstructions

The preceding examples are meant to illustrate that researcher engagement with RHA can allow for a better understanding of one's own positionality (through the process of making backgrounded validity claims explicit), as well as for articulating points of tension in the data collection (and larger research) process that can shape the validity of findings. RHA is useful not only for making explicit issues of power and other taken-for-granted claims that arise in research contexts but also for position-taking and thus making the reflexive process more dialogically oriented.

Yet, we wonder about the challenge of using RHA in a fully democratized and dialogic way that moves the researcher and the researched toward greater intersubjective understanding. In our experience, the use of RHA almost always happens as a retrospective or reflective/reflexive analytical exercise (i.e., after "being in the moment" of discomfort in a fieldwork situation). Engaging in this analysis allows us to learn from what has happened in the past, and even potentially think about how we can "do better" the next time around as a result of what has been learned. But, if we think back to Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) idea that, by building the skill of reflexivity, researchers can prepare for and even prevent moments that are ethically troubling, we wonder how RHA might offer a clear path for examining and accounting for our own positionalities "in the moment"? Is that even possible? And how can engaging in RHA "in the moment" and *with* our participants build a stronger intersubjective understanding of each other's positions and positionalities?

One possibility we suggest is to use RHA not only as a tool for better understanding one's positionality in an intersubjective way but also as a tool that can help us be more accountable to our participants. Specifically, we suggest that RHA might become a part of a multilayered member checking process, and thus a basis for dialogue and a more explicit position-taking process with our participants. In the following examples, we illustrate situations where we believe dialogic engagement *with* RHA could potentially have been used as the basis for developing a deeper understanding of our own and our research participants' perspectives.

### Example 3

In 2012, I (Meagan) conducted several interviews with people in Jamaica who were involved in peace education, either as teachers, principals, school counselors, non-profit staff members, or other members of civil society. Principal Nathan, the principal of a high school renowned for students that “behaved badly,” agreed to be interviewed but did not want to have her interview audio recorded. Therefore, I wrote notes during the interview and then wrote up everything I remembered immediately following the interview. Any verbatim speech I had captured in my notes were set off in italics:

She is talking about talking to teachers, giving them advice on how to treat difficult students. *Treat the issue like a Doberman or (other dog, comments missed) comes to attack you. Don't show your fear. Treat it with authority. Spare the rod, spoil the child.*

*I beat. You can write that. (A few seconds pass as she talks more.) My warning: I'm not going to back off from any student. (She puts more force into the word “any” with more volume, and more depth, as if she’s punching someone with her voice.)*

*Pickney fi' afraid of adult.*

I emailed the notes to Principal Nathan for her comments. She responded to the section above:

Thank you for sending this to me. It seems like you are doing good work; however, your notes indicate that you possibly do not understand Jamaica or the children I am charged with educating and controlling as well as you might think. The only words you wrote down or remembered paint a picture of me as a person who only wants control or vengeance.

Although I knew she might have been upset seeing the transcription and notes, I was still taken aback by her comments. I did not know what to do. Now, I envision working through an RHA on her comments emailed back to me to try and take Principal Nathan’s perspective (position-take) to understand better points where there has been a breakdown in meaning and thus in validity (Table 1.3).

**Table 1.3** Validity horizon for Example 3

	Objective claim	Subjective claim	Normative-evaluative claim	Identity claim
Foreground	You do not understand me.	It is important to me that you understand me.	You should try to understand me.	I am an educator who works hard to serve students.
Mid-ground	You do not understand my job or this context.	My job is really hard and it is frustrating that you do not seem to understand that.	Researchers who do not fully understand a context should not conduct research on that context.	I am misunderstood.
Background	You did not fairly represent me or what I said.	I do not feel understood and that is hurtful.	<i>Researchers should be understanding. Good and valid research reflects understanding.</i>	<i>I am someone who is often misunderstood.</i>

After working through the process of parsing out the various validity claims implicit in her statements, I attempted to try to take Principal Nathan's position so as to understand better her perspective instead of jumping to my conclusions and feeling defensive. Doing so, and narrowing in on the backgrounded normative and identity claims Principal Nathan may have implied through her email, I clarified for myself the possible justifications she may have made for her words. Looking back, I could have delved deeper into my assumptions through RHA and then met with Principal Nathan to discuss the backgrounded claims and taken-for-granted assumptions I had uncovered. In this way I could have engaged more dialogically, reaching toward intersubjective understanding. Discussing these assumptions *with* Principal Nathan would have also enabled her to comment on my interpretation of her words and mitigate the power imbalance that exists when researchers make monological decisions about the meaning of their participants' statements.

### Example 4

At the end of one of my (Karen's) interviews when living in Tel Aviv conducting my dissertation research, Neta, the woman I had spent the evening conversing with, offered me a ride part-way back to my apartment. As we sat in the car, we spoke about my research, and I mentioned that some participants had told me they enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on some aspects of their lives. Neta nodded her head and then said to me, "The reason I agreed to do this interview was because I knew it would help you out, and I'm the type of person who helps people out, always."

Neta's statement gave me pause. I found myself wondering, what did her statement suggest about the authenticity of her words? About the power dynamic between us? What should I take away from what she said? A validity horizon helped clarify my understanding of Neta's comment (Table 1.4).

**Table 1.4** Validity horizon for Example 4

	Objective claim	Subjective claim	Normative-evaluative claim	Identity claim
Foreground	I helped you tonight with your research.	I feel good about helping you.	It is important to help other people.	I am a helpful person.
Mid-ground	Researchers need help in order to do their work.	It is important to me that you understand I did this for you.	<i>Researchers should appreciate the help they get from their participants.</i>	I am a person who is willing to do things for others even if they don't benefit me.
Background	Participants' choice of whether to help or not affects the end result of the research process.	<i>I am confident that I helped you tonight more than you helped me.</i>	<i>Research participants should be explicit about their reasons for participating in research projects.</i>	I am a person who is not afraid to share my thoughts.

It was only through going through the process of creating this validity horizon and attempting to understand Neta's position better that I had a sense of why her statement gave me pause: the highlighted mid-grounded and backgrounded normative-evaluative claims, and the backgrounded subjective claim, clarified for me what I understood to be Neta's perspective, and helped me realize that I had not spent sufficient time considering my own perspective on what the benefits of research participation should be and for whom. Engaging in the process of RHA, therefore, helped me clarify my perspectives on this issue. However, had I shared this validity horizon with Neta, I believe it would have been the basis for a rich dialogue about shared assumptions and misunderstandings that would have both allowed for a more accurate interpretation of her words *and* provided Neta with an opportunity to participate in the process of meaning-making and interpretation. In other words, using this validity horizon as the basis for a joint conversation could have served as a powerful tool for democratizing the meaning-making process that is an inherent part of interpretive research.

## Conclusion

The examples above point to the utility of RHA as a tool for carrying out the "engaged reflection and representation" that Milner (2007) suggests is necessary for better understanding issues of power and self-interest. In particular, we believe RHA is an important tool because it requires researchers to position-take with respect to their research participants. This makes RHA unique as a tool for reflexivity, which generally occurs only as an introspective, self-focused exercise where researchers better aim to understand *their* perspectives. Because RHA requires making explicit the backgrounded claims that are central to one's understanding of both self *and* others, it moves us closer toward a communicatively based, intersubjectively structured understanding of meaning and process of sensemaking. Thus, RHA not only deepens the process of reflection but it also enables a potentially more accurate understanding of meaning and thus a more precise interpretation in the (intersubjective) analytical process.

We suggest that beyond its utility for researchers, moreover, RHA can be used to democratize the analytical process itself if used as part of member checking with participants. While it is not necessarily possible for us to engage in RHA during specific moments of fieldwork, it is possible for us to share and engage in dialogue about validity horizons with our research participants. Doing so provides an opportunity for participants thus to be part of the conversation about the assumptions that are made, and therefore to address the power imbalance that generally exists within the interpretive process. By engaging in RHA, we build moments for dialogue and communication into the research process that allow taken-for-granted assumptions, structures, and roles to be made explicit (Call-Cummings, 2017). Thus, this process carries with it the potential to enhance the validity of our interpretations as well as of the larger meaning-making projects in which we are engaged.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>

This article is useful because it explicitly addresses how a researcher's social position, lived experiences, and beliefs interact with the process of reflexivity.

Chan, A. (2017). Reflection, reflexivity, reconceptualisation: Life story inquiry and the complex positionings of a researcher. *Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology*, 8(1), 27–39. <https://doi.org/10.7577/erm.2544>

This is an example of reflection and reflexivity that can be useful, especially for those just starting to engage in qualitative inquiry, as well as for those interested in learning new approaches to become more reflexive.

## Note

1. We use pseudonyms for all individuals referenced in this chapter, in order to protect confidentiality.

## References

- Call-Cummings, M. (2017). Establishing communicative validity: Discovering theory through practice. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(3), 192–200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416657101>
- Carspecken, P. F. (1996). *Critical ethnography in educational research: A theoretical and practical guide*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Dennis, B. (2017). Validity as research praxis: A study of self-reflection and engagement in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 24(2), 109–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416686371>
- Finlay, L., & Gough, B. (Eds.). (2008). *Reflexivity: A practical guide for researchers in health and social sciences*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and “ethically important moments” in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360>
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 1). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1985). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Milner IV, H. R. (2007). Race, culture, and researcher positionalality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 388–400. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07309471>
- Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839032000060635>