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‘Ugh, it’s a difficult topic’: Positionality statements as information use in information and library science research

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Abstract

Introduction. The effects of information use remain understudied. We fill a key gap in the literature by conducting an empirical study of positionality statement use in information and library science (ILS) research. We analyse why information and library scientists endorse or object to these statements.

Method. Using Qualtrics software, we conducted an international online survey of information and library scientists. Our instrument included demographic data, closed-ended questions, Likert-type items, and open-ended questions.

Analysis. We conducted both quantitative and qualitative analyses on the data, which related to 213 respondents. Our quantitative analysis employed the statistical package SPSS, while qualitative analysis employed NVivo software.

Results. Quantitative findings showed significant correlations between variables. Qualitative findings demonstrated that participants valued positionality but felt profound ambivalence concerning positionality statement use. They registered 10 strengths and 12 weaknesses of this information use.

Conclusion(s). We offer both recommendations for practice and questions for further research. Further emphasis on raising awareness of positionality and developing both educational tools and best practices for using positionality statements is urgent. Also needed is more scholarly exploration of the effects of information use.

Introduction

As noted by scholars Given et al. (2023), Kari (2010), and Todd (1999), information use, while a protean concept, can be distilled into receiving and incorporating information. In information use, a person does something with information that in turn affects her thoughts, feelings, and/or actions. This engagement with information may lead to *knowledge construction*, i.e., conceptual, internal, or intangible use, or to *application* to a task, problem, goal, or decision, i.e., instrumental, tangible, or applied use. Positionality statements offer a compelling opportunity to explore the effects of information use, a long understudied topic (Given et al., 2023; Savolainen, 2009).

Positionality statements (PS) are ever more common in qualitative research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). But they not only remain seldom included in ILS research products, but also overlooked as a topic of empirical study in our discipline (a notable exception is Oltmann et al. (2024)). We therefore pose the following research question: Why do information and library scientists endorse or object to positionality statements' use?

First, we review the relevant literature on positionality and positionality statements. Next, we explain our methodological approach, which incorporates an international survey. Third, findings are reported. We highlight the extent to which respondents valued positionality as well as the strengths and weaknesses they perceived in positionality statements. We then discuss the implications of these findings. Finally, we present recommendations for practice and directions for future research.

Literature review

Though in ILS discussions of positionality remain scarce, scholars in other social science disciplines not only define positionality, reflection, and reflexivity, and emphasize their importance to qualitative research, but also set forth the benefits and challenges of using positionality statements. These previous studies rest largely on anecdote, however; empirical research is wanting.

Positionality

As a 'situated activity that locates the observer in the world,' qualitative research represents 'an interactive process shaped by one's personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity and those of the people in the setting' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, pp. 10, 12). No value-free, objective, neutral science exists; instead, qualitative research focuses squarely on contextual understanding. As a result, 'terms like credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 20, emphasis original).

Indebted to feminist standpoint, critical race, and Marxist theories, positionality constitutes a fundamental component of qualitative research (Anderson, 2020; Bourke, 2014; Grasswick, 2018; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Researchers advance 'truth-claims at an exact and distinct time and place with particular reasons'; therefore, the 'position' from which knowledge is enunciated will shape the very character of that knowledge' (Barker, 2012).

Positionality pivots on appreciating the researcher's place in the research, namely in relation to the subject, to the participants, and to the research context and process (Bukamal, 2022; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023; Wilson et al., 2022). It encompasses both a person's worldview and the stance she takes toward a research project and its social and political context (Holmes, 2020; Rowe, 2014). Holmes (2020) explains:

The individual's world view or 'where the researcher is coming from' concerns ontological assumptions (an individual's beliefs about the nature of social reality and what is knowable about the world), epistemological assumptions (an individual's

beliefs about the nature of knowledge) and assumptions about human nature and agency (individual's assumptions about the way we interact with our environment and relate to it) (p. 1).

In turn, social identities such as an individual's race and ethnicity, political affiliation, socioeconomic class, religion, gender, sexuality, historical and geographical location, (dis)abilities influence these assumptions (Holmes, 2020).

Reflection and reflexivity

Locating one's positionality relies upon reflection and reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Chin et al., 2022; Holmes, 2020; Olukun et al., 2021; Pascoe, 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). An emancipatory process, reflection denotes 'a process of consideration and meditation, of turning thoughts back upon themselves'; it involves 'thought and meditation about processes and products associated with a study' (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Ideally, reflection funnels into reflexivity. As a 'methodological tool to better represent, legitimize, or call into question [researchers'] data,' reflexivity 'not only contributes to producing knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced' (Pillow, 2003, pp. 176, 178). Positionality statements rely upon just such self-appraisal.

Benefits of positionality statement use

PS help convey the 'level to which the research was undertaken honestly, plausibly and effectively' (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Such statements, according to education researchers Secules et al. (2021), are 'crucial for understanding how the research was carried out, how claims were developed, and how elements of identity influenced results' (p. 31).

Scholars make five claims for positionality statements' benefits. PS potentially promote transparency (American Psychological Association, 2025; Curran & Randall, 2021; Folkes, 2023; Jadallah, 2025; Pascoe, 2022; Secules et al., 2021); evince solidarity with researchers and participants from marginalized or underrepresented populations (Massoud, 2022; Secules et al., 2021); bolster the research's or the researcher's credibility (Massoud, 2022; Secules et al., 2021); address authorial bias (American Psychological Association, 2025); help readers connect personally, intellectually, and professionally to the research (Massoud, 2022); encourage diverse collaborations (Curran & Randall, 2021); and help diversify the next generation of researchers (Massoud, 2022).

Drawbacks of positionality statement use

Scholars find it far easier to criticize PS than to offer constructive recommendations for their use. Scholars identify 10 concerns in using these statements.

Publication space

Some scholars identify the pragmatic challenge of word limits (King, 2024; Secules et al., 2021). As a result, a positionality statement may seem abortive. But prioritizing positionality statements over study participants' voices seems an unpalatable alternative (Massoud, 2022; Sibbald et al., 2025).

The insider/outsider relationship

Other writers discuss the challenges of creating a positionality statement that does justice to the insider/outsider relationship (Merton, 1972). An insider is 'a researcher or participant who works for or is a member of the participant community,' while an outsider is not (Rowe, 2014, p. 627). Debate continues as to which position is more advantageous (Holmes, 2020). But some researchers reject such a rigid dichotomy, insisting that the insider/outsider relationship occupies a spectrum (Bukamal, 2022; Htong Kham, 2024; Lu & Hodge, 2019) or that a researcher can be simultaneously an insider *and* an outsider (Bourke, 2014; Holmes, 2020; Olukun et al., 2021).

Authorial anonymity

Positionality statements imperil double-anonymous peer review (Beck, 2024; Massoud, 2022; J. Savolainen et al., 2023; Sibbald et al., 2025). In this vein, self-disclosure inherently entails vulnerability, and thus revealing one's positionality likely disproportionately—and adversely—impacts scholars from marginalized communities (Massoud, 2022; Oswald, 2024; Secules et al., 2021). But on the other hand, redacting a positionality statement insinuates that it comprises but an ancillary part of the research (Sibbald et al., 2025).

'Mesearch'

The use of positionality statements often triggers accusations of researcher narcissism (Cousin, 2010; King, 2024; Massoud, 2022). Sociologists Davis & Khonach (2020) state that members of marginalized communities remain apt to *'experience heightened accusations that their research is biased and/or a self-discovery project derogatorily referred to as 'mesearch' (p. 101).*

Labor

Additional labor—emotional and otherwise—accrues to those who use positionality statements. According to socio-legal studies scholar Massoud (2022), they may trigger *'discomfort or—when a scholar is regularly asked to represent and speak about their ethnicity or gender rather than their scholarship—exhaustion' (p. S66).*

Superficiality

Positionality statements may seem pro forma (King, 2024; Pascoe, 2022). Education researcher Jadallah (2025) underlines the *'risk of [PS] becoming a box-checking exercise for researchers, in which laying out the dimensions of our identities (as if identities were static and stable traits) is something done out of a sense of obligation for publication' (p. 231).* In the same key, the social categories to which PS often refer—namely, race, class, gender, and (dis)ability—may congeal into a *'grocery-list approach' (Rios & Patel, 2023, p. 6).* Such *'shopping list' PS, remonstrate health researchers Sibbald et al. (2025), 'can create disproportionate risk, reinforce stereotypes, and homogenize researchers identifying with marginalized groups' (p. 1).*

Not to be overlooked, the boxes most frequently checked (e.g., race, gender) may not be those most germane to a study (Rios & Patel, 2023; J. Savolainen et al., 2023). The researchers' training, expertise, and work context; the publish or perish phenomenon; and even quotidian concerns such as time of day—all may decisively impact the research (King, 2024).

Reductive

Paralleling their concerns about box-checking, some scholars find PS reductive. Mere membership in a given identity group, Sibbald et al. (2025) argue, indicates little *'about ideology, epistemology, experience, or bias' (p. 4).* *'People with ostensibly very similar positionalities or social locations, they explain, 'may have vastly differing experiences' (p. 4).* Education researcher Cousin (2010) likewise posits that PS *'risks unduly clamping people into social boxes, assigning to them an unproblematic privileged standpoint and voice' (p. 11).*

Positionalities evolve over time

Not only may PS reduce the complexities of people's identities, but they cannot capture changes in identity over the course of a research project (Folkes, 2023; Ríos & Patel, 2023; Sibbald et al., 2025). Social work scholar Berger (2015) thus urges researchers to *'continually ask themselves where they are at any given moment in relation to what they study and what are the potential ramifications of this position on their research' (p. 231).* Yet too few do so. As education researcher Dryden-Peterson (2020) laments, researchers *'often conceive of and write about positionality as if it were similarly flat and static...lifted from one context to the next with few, if any, revisions' (p. 141).*

Failure to dismantle hierarchies

While Massoud (2022) argues that PS confront disciplines' inequitable structures and colonial legacies, others evince deep skepticism. International relations scholars Gani and Khan (2024) contend that *"recognizing the other" is hardly emancipatory when this recognition occurs within, and does nothing to dismantle, a hierarchical and inherited colonial context*' (p. 9). More expansively, psychology researcher Oswald (2024) maintains that *'the notion that people have specific, categorizable identities draws upon colonial discourses of difference and order'* (p. 185).

Epistemology

The epistemology of positionality statement use remains an obdurate, perhaps insurmountable, barrier to PS use. Cousin (2010) claims that *'no one has easy, stable access to the naming of their reality'* (p. 14). Savolainen et al. (2023) bluntly assert that creating a viable positionality statement is impossible, since authors remain *'constrained by the very positionality they seek to address'* (p. 1331). Scholars *'cannot, on the one hand, claim to be burdened by their biography when conducting the research, yet, on the other hand, be emancipated from it while constructing a positionality statement'* (p. 1335). Gani & Khan (2024), too, stress this problem.

Methods

This mixed methods research is based on an international survey of information and library scientists. Purposive sampling often yields deeper insights than statistically generalizable summaries of *'average'* cases (Patton, 2002). Offering breadth and detailed description, targeted questionnaires reach a larger and more geographically diverse sample than any other technique while ensuring both anonymity and confidentiality (Pickard, 2017). Our instrument included demographic data, closed questions, Likert-type items, and open-ended questions. Open-ended questions shed new light on a topic because they encourage more intimate and subtle responses (Pickard, 2017).

After securing institutional review board (IRB) approval, we circulated our questionnaire via 12 listservs to solicit diverse international ILS researchers and practitioners between 15 June and 1 August 2025. Our analysis was both quantitative and qualitative. We calculated descriptive and inferential statistics. Most important, we reviewed Pearson correlation coefficients to test associations among three variables: caring about positionality, perceived usefulness of positionality statements, and perceived drawbacks of positionality statements. We also coded the open-ended responses through inductive thematic analysis.

Inductive thematic analysis enables rich and nuanced scrutiny (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It revolves around coding without reducing the data a priori into a specific theoretical or epistemological paradigm. We balanced realist and constructionist approaches, even as we made both semantic/explicit and latent/underlying meaning from our data. In line with Braun & Clarke (2006), we familiarized ourselves with our data (reading and re-reading, recording early impressions), generated initial codes by systematically coding the data set, teased out themes by collating all salient codes, reviewed and refined those themes, and produced our report.

Findings

Respondents disclosed the extent to which they valued positionality, positionality statements' strengths, and positionality statements' weaknesses.

Demographics

More than half of participants were between the ages of 35-54 (n = 117, 57%), with slightly less than a fifth ages 25-34 (33, 16%), followed by those ages 55-64 (29, 14%), and those ages 65-84 (20, 10%). Two thirds identified as women (134, 66%), followed by men (56, 27%), and non-binary/third gender (10, 5%). Three quarters of participants identified as white (152, 75%), followed by Hispanic or Latinx (11, 5%), Black (10, 5%), multiracial (6, 3%), Asian (4, 2%), American Indian or Alaskan Native

(2, 1%), Middle Eastern or Northern African (2, 1%), and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1, 0.5%). Most respondents (176, 88%) worked in North America, with representation also from Europe (12, 6%), Oceania (5, 3%), Africa (3, 2%), Asia (3, 2%), and South America (1, 0.5%).

Respondents had earned a broad range of undergraduate and graduate degrees. The majority had earned an MLS/MSLS/MSLIS (32, 16%), followed by those who had earned both an MLS/MSLS/MSLIS and an MA/MS (23, 11%), those who had earned an MLS/MSLS/MSLIS and a PhD (23, 11%), those who earned an MA/MS, MLS/MSLS/MSLIS, and a PhD (22, 11%), those who earned an MA/MS and a PhD (19, 9%), those who had earned an MA/MS (17, 8%), and those who had earned a PhD (12, 6%). One fifth of respondents identified as archivists (40, 20%), followed by librarians (37, 18%), associate professors (35, 17%), professors (23, 11%), assistant professors (21, 10%), and PhD students (13, 6%).

Quantitative results

More than three-fifths (61.7%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement '*I care a great deal about positionality*' (Table 1). Few (13.8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. On a Likert-type scale (1 indicating strong agreement and 5 strong disagreement), the mean value was 3.7 and the median was 4.

	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	52	24.9%
Agree	77	36.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	51	24.4%
Disagree	17	8.1%
Strongly disagree	12	5.7%
	209	

Table 1. Caring about positionality

Well over half of participants (56.5%) characterized PS as useful, while just 19% demurred (the balance took a neutral stance) (Table 2). On a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree), the mean value was 3.5, and the median was 4.

	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	38	19%
Agree	75	37.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	49	24.5%
Disagree	24	12%
Strongly disagree	14	7%
	200	

Table 2. Positionality statements are useful

Conversely, fully two-thirds of respondents (66.6%) suggested that positionality statements had drawbacks (Table 3). In fact, less than 15% (14.5%) felt that PS lacked them. On a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree), the mean value was 3.7 and the median was 4.

Agree	104	51.7%
Strongly agree	30	14.9%
Neither agree nor disagree	38	18.9%
Disagree	25	12.5%
Strongly disagree	4	2%
	201	

Table 3. Positionality statements have drawbacks

To understand the relationships between the extent to which respondents cared about positionality and their perceptions of positionality statements' strengths and weaknesses, we examined the correlations among variables (Table 4). Notably, a *strong positive correlation* obtained between the extent to which one cared about positionality and the reported usefulness of positionality statements, $r = .66$, $p < .001$. A *moderate negative correlation* meanwhile prevailed between the extent to which one cared about positionality and the belief that positionality statements had drawbacks, $r = -.36$, $p < .001$. Finally, a *weak negative correlation* was evident between the reported usefulness of positionality statements and the belief that positionality statements had drawbacks, $r = -.24$, $p < .001$.

		Mean	SD	1	2
1	Caring a great deal about positionality	3.67	1.11		
2	Positionality statements are useful	3.50	1.14	.66**	
3	Positionality statements have drawbacks	2.35	0.95	-.24**	-.36**
	** $p < .01$				

Table 4. Correlations among variables

Qualitative results

Complementing our quantitative work, we teased out respondents' perceptions of PS' potential uses and drawbacks qualitatively.

Benefits of positionality statement use

On the one hand, 80 contributors adduced 10 strengths of positionality statement use (97 comments (Table 5). Perceived benefits mostly accrued to the reader, though respondents also mentioned PS' benefits for the research, the researcher, or even the research participants.

Theme	Count	Percentage
Promote transparency	20	20.6%
Show researcher's location	18	18.6%
Encourage reflection or reflexivity	16	16.5%
Improve understanding	14	14.4%
Counter bias	11	11.3%
Insider/outsider relationship	7	7.2%
Trustworthiness or credibility	6	6.2%
Critical thinking promoted	2	2.1%
Data analysis facilitated	2	2.1%
Well-being of research and researcher	1	1.0%
	97	

Table 5. Benefits of positionality statement use

Promote transparency

Twenty participants identified transparency as a benefit of PS use. P3 noted, *'I appreciate learning about the researchers' experiences and how that informed their study,'* while P115 called PS *'useful to help the writer and the readers understand the place of the writer within various identity groups.'* More broadly, P104 opined:

I believe (and teach my students) that to do valid, repeatable, and reliable qualitative research, I need to be transparent about how I as a person, which includes my positionality, am a part of the research that I do. Otherwise, if someone were to try and repeat my research and received different results or interpreted things differently, then my research might look invalid or unreliable.

Show researcher's social location

Increased transparency channeled into another key priority: showing the researcher's social location or perspective, as 18 respondents claimed. *'They help your audience understand [sic] where you are coming from,'* according to P13, *'and form their own judgments about your work, the information you are conveying, etc.'* P38, too, thought PS *'useful to know where a researcher is 'coming from' when reading their articles etc [sic], especially with the emphasis on people with lived experience being involved in research projects in much more integrated ways now'.*

Other participants suggested that PS use gave insight into a researcher's perspective. A positionality statement, stated P179, *'demonstrates that knowledge in part is derived based on the point of view and experiences of the researcher.'* Thus, it not only could *'enhance empathy,'* but also *'encourage more modest claims about generalizability'.* Taking a holistic view, finally, P124 argued that *'Positionality statements can help situate research design, research questions, and research conclusions for researchers, participants, and readers.'*

Encourage reflection and/or reflexivity

Positionality statements' spurring researcher reflection or reflexivity was appreciated by 16 individuals. P25 characterized PS as useful *'to give oneself a time to reflect directly on ones [sic]*

position in relation to ones [sic] scholarship/creative activity.' Similarly, P28 believed that PS 'encourage people to reflect on how their identities and experiences may inform their research processes'.

PS could also engender reflexivity. Per P42:

Positionality statements make authors examine what they bring to their research in terms of their identities [sic] and experiences and how that affects the research, their subjects, and the larger community. It encourages them to question their motives and whether they are the ones who are best equipped to do the research, e.g., white researchers examining and publishing [sic] on the [sic] experiences of BIPOC communities.

Improve understanding

Fourteen respondents maintained that PS' use improved understanding of the research. This included providing context or facilitating interpretation. '[PS] are useful in helping the audience understand the research and the researcher,' said P191. A positionality statement, P21 suggested, 'helps others to understand the knowledge that [the researcher has] created'.

Additionally, PS could give vital research context. According to P50, PS' value stemmed from their belief that 'understanding who did the work is important context to interpreting & contextualizing their findings.' Positionality statements, maintained P15, 'can create context for folks viewing research from an opposite position, particularly if something 'seems off' to them.' Not to be slighted, as P171 underlined, PS 'STRONGLY help[ed] in the interpretation of a researcher's data or study esp [sic] if that study is on marginalized groups'.

Counter bias

Eleven contributors believed that PS use mitigated bias. For P158, not only did positionality statements 'illuminate potential biases (whether acknowledged or not),' but they could 'give a bit more humanity to the research process'. Extending this logic, P116 saw a dual benefit in PS: 'It's important that others understand what biases the researcher might bring to the project, and [a positionality statement] allows authors/researchers to check in with their biases'.

Notably, four contributors claimed PS aided in decentering whiteness and other hegemonic biases such as gender. According to P12, 'the academy in general (at least, in my field) still tends to be very white and male, so calling attention to that is usually a good thing'. 'Knowing the researcher's perspective and lived experience is important,' insisted P149. 'So many of the theories that we still use in today's research are based on middle class, white, male, cis-hetero perspectives, and very few seem to challenge or apply a critical lens when reading it because it's so 'standard'.

Insiders and outsiders

One of seven contributors who linked PS use to the insider/outsider relationship, P138 reflected, 'For example, if it is on a topic of Displaced/Migrated Archives i [sic] would like to know who is advocating and understand what experiences and circumstances have led to them to write about his [sic] topic'. More illiberally, P111 endorsed PS 'in filtering out research that's been written by someone who isn't a member of the group they're studying because it highlights the potential for exploitation'.

Trustworthiness and credibility

Six participants fastened upon increased trustworthiness or credibility. 'I find research papers and conference presentations more trustworthy when accompanied by a positionality statement,' reflected P83. PS, asserted P61, 'can really build trust with readers and participants'. Along the same lines, P86 called PS 'an element that builds credibility with a portion of the scholarly community with a strong affiliation with DEI'.

Critical thinking

Two others favored PS use to hone the researcher's critical thinking skills. As a result of this, 'PS *expand and strengthen the field*' (P171).

Data analysis

PS use strengthened the researcher's data analysis, asserted two participants. 'Writing my own statement earlier into my research analysis helped me...made my analysis more thoughtful,' commented P37.

Drawbacks of positionality statement use

On the other hand, 126 participants identified 12 weaknesses (184 comments) in PS use (Table 6). These potentially affected the reader, the research, and/or the researcher.

Theme	Number	Percentage
Inauthentic	52	28.3%
Privacy or confidentiality compromised	28	15.2%
Bias infused	25	13.6%
Extra labor for author	20	10.9%
Situationally relevant	13	7.1%
Reductive	11	6.0%
Ineffective	10	5.4%
Intellectually spurious	9	4.9%
Chilling effect on scholarship	7	3.8%
Lack best practices or guidelines	6	3.3%
Not universally accepted	2	1.0%
Takes up publication space	1	0.5%
	184	

Table 6. Drawbacks of positionality statement use

Inauthenticity

According to 52 respondents, PS could be specious. Many criticized PS for being performative, virtue-signaling, box checking, or a prophylactic to obviate criticism. For example, P18 decried positionality statements' *'encouraging a sort of exclusionary 'Victim Olympics' mentality.'* 'Positionality statements can feel like land acknowledgments,' wrote P111 in similar spirit. 'Lots of well intentioned virtual signaling for...what?' P6 viewed PS as 'a way for mostly white, cisgender researchers to shirk actual moral accountability.' 'I've seen too many white women use this as a reason not to interrogate their own worldview and the ways they actually reinforce systems of oppression,' she explained.

Privacy or anonymity

Twenty-eight participants worried about PS use violating author privacy or anonymity. Nearly all focused-on PS potentially outing and thereby endangering members of marginalized communities. As P34 put it, 'I don't think anyone should feel pressured to reveal personal details about themselves,

their lives, their families, or their culture just to publish an academic article'. P64 explained eloquently:

For those of us from more marginalized communities where our identities may put us at risk of, for example, not being hired at all, being passed over for promotion, being told that our research is unacceptable due to the communities it focuses on, writing a positionality statement feel [sic] like a risk. I have no interest in telling my colleagues my disability status, the complexities of my gender, or my socioeconomic background. I would also argue that there are bigger even more private things that influence my positionality, abuse survivorship, housing status, employment history, etc., that are deeply private and despite these things deeply influencing my research and the way I interact with the world, I would never disclose these things to anyone but my closest friends and family.

Notably, P27 called attention to PS use with respect to scholarly publication. *'Positionality statements can compromise anonymity,'* she argued, *'so in blind peer review contexts there is a trade-off [sic] between sharing positionality and maintaining anonymity'.*

Bias

Twenty-four participants suggested that PS use enabled editors, reviewers, or readers to marshal the researcher's position either in support of or against her (most underscored the latter). P52 explained, *"They could potentially 'out' a researcher's identity or ideology in a way that could be unfairly used to discredit or discount the validity or reliability of their findings/results'.* Just so did P109 note that PS *'could expose scholars holding marginalized identity [sic] to criticism that white scholars so often escape'.*

Extra labor

Twenty respondents worried about positionality statements imposing further work on researchers. P105 asserted, *'I don't think they should be mandatory due to considerations of labor, particularly extra burden for BIPOC and other minoritized groups.'* P149 probed this inequitable burden more fully:

Researchers who are experiencing white fragility are less likely to participate in a positionality statement. When they do so, they make positionality statements into something that puts labor on members of marginalized communities. We, members of marginalized communities, constantly have to explain ourselves. When participation in this kind of transparency is unequal, white, cis-het, able-bodied folks get out of participation because they still consider themselves the standard.

Situational relevance

Disciplinary context dictated the appropriateness of PS use for 13 participants. *'Positionality statements are generally immaterial to the substance of most research, unless, of course, the research is on positionality statements,'* P129 wrote mordantly. P24 meanwhile explained, *'My research doesn't involve participants, so my personal background doesn't seem relevant for evaluating the product.'* Also pursuing this line of reasoning, P16 remonstrated, *'there are some papers where statements of positionality may not be as relevant to the data being studied, such as papers about the laws of physics or mathematics'.* But she favored PS *'for the Humanities or papers that include data sets with race/sexuality/other identity-based data'.*

Reductive

PS seemed reductive to 11 respondents. P186 made a poignant case for PS' representational limitations:

I reflect on my lived experiences and how they affect my opinions and beliefs. In some cases, these are private, gender-based traumatic experiences that can be public should I wish to disclose them, but I should not be expected to do so. To omit them and make a positionality statement that diminishes my experience to a middle-class white woman is reductive.

More globally, P188 suggested that PS use's ineffectiveness stemmed from their epistemological grounding:

The categories traditionally understood in the English-speaking, Western academia vary a lot across societies. There are multiple ways of existing in the world. At present, researchers writing positionality statements need to accommodate the Western paradigm regardless of their background (e.g., indigenous people, gender nonconforming people from the Global south, races that do fall outside the scope of the US categorization). Though unintentional, the impact of such adaptation is a significant loss of information.

Ineffective

Ten people interrogated the efficacy of PS. P13 deemed them superfluous: *'anyone who is researching and publishing without thinking about their own biases is a poor researcher'*. In like mind, P201 observed, *'The statements in and of themselves are not inherently useful; rather, the process of truly reflecting on one's standpoint in the world is useful'*.

Intellectually suspect

PS seemed intellectually untenable to 10 respondents. P45 called PS *'the most restrictive form of gatekeeping.'* *'Research,'* she expatiated, *'should be judged on its own merits, not on the ability of the researcher to pander to the perceived expectations of the editors'*. Extending this critique, P75 pointed out, *'Reflexivity is an emergent property of thought and not something for which one can make a statement without that statement also requiring a statement of positionality. It invites either a resolution into stereotype or an infinite regress'*.

Chilling effect on scholarship

Seven participants feared PS use chilling scholarly inquiry. Admitting *'Ugh, it's a difficult topic,'* P11 posited, *'It feels like positionality statements might stifle cross-cultural exchange or appreciation?'* Indeed, a *'rather intrusive'* PS request forestalled P190 from submitting to a journal. *'I'm mixed race and have spent a lot of my personal life justifying my race and practicing my culture,'* she stated. *'I get that same feeling of needing to justify myself through the positionality statement.'* In short, she found that a PS *'prompt[ed] me to self-identify about parts of myself that I frankly don't want to discuss with faceless editors'*.

Lack of guidance

A half dozen respondents bemoaned the lack of best practices or training opportunities for PS use. P104 claimed,

there needs to be some scaffolding around what is needed in a positionality statement and why they are important, using a theory such as intersectionality (Crenshaw) to help researchers whose identities cross both dominant and historically marginalized areas understand the importance of sharing those identities.

Not universally accepted

A lack of widespread adoption and approval of PS use was registered by two individuals. PS *'can be viewed as controversial by administration,'* commented P15 to this point.

Word count

Finally, as P91, for one, pointed out, PS *'take up space in already limited journal articles'*.

Ultimately, participants adduced 10 possible strengths and 12 possible weaknesses of positionality statement use.

Discussion

This research offers a baseline for further exploration of the place of positionality and positionality statements in ILS and other social science disciplines. More broadly, it contributes to our understanding of information use, namely its *effects*, thereby addressing the lacuna underlined by Given et al. (2023) and Savolainen (2009).

Regardless of their demographics, just over three-fifths of our participants cared a lot about positionality. They expressed a deeply sincere commitment to performing ethical, equitable, and inclusive research. But they proved far more ambivalent about the use of positionality *statements*.

Statistical analysis showed that respondents who cared more about positionality tended to see positionality statements as more useful than those who cared less—although the former conceded PS' drawbacks. This suggests that caring for positionality *increases* an individual's overall positive view of positionality statements, even if she identifies concerns. Remarkably, respondents who found positionality statements useful tended to be more aware of PS' *drawbacks* as well. As one engages with positionality statements in practice, in other words, she becomes more aware of the benefits *and* weaknesses of their use.

Benefits of positionality statement use

Many respondents described how positionality statement use *changed the knowledge* of the reader, the researcher or less frequently, the research participants, for the *better*. This finding shores up the overarching information use scholarship (Given et al., 2023; Kari, 2010; Todd, 1999).

Most often, participants invoked the transparency conferred by PS use. This finding provides empirical ballast to the prior literature (Jadallah, 2025; Pascoe, 2022; Secules et al., 2021) and is a bedrock component of best practices in qualitative research (Pickard, 2017).

Closely related to transparency, showing a researcher's social location proved another affordance of PS use. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) observe, *'Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity'* (p. 17). In just this way, a number of participants suggested that PS improved the audience's understanding of the research and/or the researcher.

A substantial number of respondents also emphasized that PS use encouraged reflection and reflexivity, which helped show their social location and be transparent about their research. This point dovetails with previous scholarship (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Further, reflection and reflexivity helped mitigate bias (e.g., whiteness, maleness) by acknowledging and interrogating those biases.

Some respondents fastened on PS' salutary effect on the insider/outsider relationship. Surprisingly, our participants framed the insider/outsider relationship in traditional, rigidly dichotomous terms, not in line with more recent research that characterizes as far more fluid (Bourke, 2014; Bukamal, 2022; Holmes, 2020; Htong Kham, 2024; Lu & Hodge, 2019; Olukiun et al., 2021).

Several participants suggested that PS use conferred added trustworthiness or credibility upon the research at hand. This sentiment bolsters the claims of Massoud (2022) and Secules et al. (2021) and aligns, too, with best practices for qualitative research (Pickard, 2017).

Notably, a few respondents applauded PS use as a gatekeeping mechanism. They contended that an individual's social identity/ies (namely, whiteness) ipso facto disqualified that person from writing about those with different identity/ies (namely, BIPOC people). This intellectual parochialism has not been reported in previous PS scholarship.

Although many of our findings generally aligned with previous literature, unlike previous scholars none of our participants suggested that PS use represented solidarity with marginalized populations (Massoud, 2022; Secules et al., 2021), facilitated diverse collaborations (Curran & Randall, 2021), or helped diversify the next generation(s) of scholars (Massoud, 2022). Our sample population's claims remained far more modest.

Drawbacks of positionality statement use

Respondents mostly described how the use of PS *changed the knowledge* of the reader or the researcher (or both) for the worse. Moreover, some described how information use *failed* to change the knowledge of either party. This is a crucial contribution to the literature on information use and demands further study.

Even as they emphasized their commitment to equitable and inclusive research, the majority of participants pointed out weaknesses of PS use. Most frequently, participants objected to possible inauthenticity in PS use. These individuals saw such statements as disingenuous, potentially little more than a vehicle for making an advantageous presentation of self to effect a desired public impression (Goffman, 1959). Effective PS, some underscored, depended upon a good faith effort what P93 called '*sincerity, honest [sic], and love.*'

Many respondents feared that PS use trampled the researcher's right to privacy, putting those from vulnerable communities particularly at risk. Not to be slighted, PS undercut double anonymous peer review. These findings align with prior literature, although the sense of urgency expressed by our participants was far more palpable (Massoud, 2022; Oswald, 2024; J. Savolainen et al., 2023; Secules et al., 2021; Sibbald et al., 2025).

Just as some participants believed that PS use militated *against* bias (e.g., whiteness, maleness), so did others argue that PS *introduced* bias. Most stressed the potential for PS to prejudice readers against researchers, especially—but not solely—if the latter belonged to a marginalized community. Likewise showing concern for the latter and following Massoud (2022), a number of our contributors emphasized that PS use required extra uncompensated labor.

Positionality statement use's reducing the complexity of individuals' social identities concerned an important slice of our sample population. This concern embraced members of *both* minority and majority communities and bolsters Cousin (2010) and Sibbald et al. (2025).

Harkening to positivist tenets, some people maintained that only 'soft' disciplines demanded PS use (e.g., Disability Studies, but not mathematics) or only human subject-based research. This finding goes against emergency medicine scholar Jafar (2018), who favours PS in quantitative work.

In much the same way, some individuals characterized PS use as intellectually spurious, undercutting validity, reproducibility, or generalizability, on the one hand, or distracting attention from the study itself, on the other. This finding buttresses previous scholars' assertions that PS use can engender accusations of 'mesearch' (Davis & Khonach, 2020).

The practical ineffectiveness of PS use was also bruited. These respondents echoed the sentiments of Gani and Khan (2024) and Oswald (2024). In short, PS themselves did *not* affect social change. Any value stemmed from their encouraging individual reflection and reflexivity.

Some participants feared that PS use chilled scholarly inquiry, discouraging researchers, whether from majority or minority populations, from exploring a particular topic or contributing to a particular venue. This constitutes a noteworthy new finding that merits further exploration.

An important minority of respondents expressed concern that PS suffered from a lack of best practices for their use, or were not universally expected or endorsed, two other novel findings that might be extended in the future.

Ultimately, this research provides nuanced empirical data that anchors new, evidence-based, scholarly claims, even as it supports several previous, largely anecdotal, ones.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study of positionality statement use in ILS, and among the first in the social sciences. It has vital implications for practice. First, we suggest that PS must be used in *good faith*. Second, research methods courses offer an opportune venue for positionality pedagogy. University and college libraries might augment their campus instructional presence by engaging this issue. Third and most important, in light of our participants' deep ambivalence about PS, *use of a PS in a scholarly publication should be at the author's, not the reviewer's or editor's, discretion*.

Additionally, this paper points to opportunities for fruitful future research. First, what types of training and education on PS use are most effective? Second, how can PS use avoid chilling scholarly inquiry? Third, how can PS use account for identities' changing over time? Fourth, how can the epistemological limitations of PS be overcome? Fifth, how can PS be yoked to broader social changes? Sixth and most broadly, in what other arenas might information use might be studied profitably?

Positionality is a *sine qua non* of qualitative research. By extension, positionality statements, *if done voluntarily and in good faith*, may promote scholarly inclusion and belonging. Encapsulating the ambivalence so prevalent in our study, P145 summed up, 'In theory, I'm in favor [of PS use], but in practice not so much.'

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