Chapter 3
Standpoint, Style and Self in Writing

Nesta Devine

Abstract This chapter uses a post-structuralist approach to examine the ethical and epistemological difficulties involved in positioning oneself as an academic writer, or not. To author a paper signals a willingness to take not only credit but also responsibility for it; to stand behind what is written. The traditional scientific paper eschews the personal, which is seen as irrelevant, in favour of appeals to a universal truth. But in the social sciences, such forms of truth may not exist, and scientific anonymity can result in a concealed form of subjectivity and bias. It may be more honest to acknowledge one's self and one's perspectives. Given the collective nature of language, this chapter argues, none of us can claim complete, final authorship of anything we write; indeed, it might rather be said that our writing claims us.

Keywords Authorship · Positioning · Standpoint · Style

> A very wise Tongan elder once said, "Human reality is human creation; if we fail to create our own reality, someone else will do it for us". (Epeli Hau'ofa, cited in Ka'ili 2020, unpaginated)

When we write a paper, we write it over a name, or a group of names. That name has significance in that a career can be built upon a series of such papers, and, more importantly, because the name signifies a willingness to stand behind the facts, logic and opinion expressed in the written piece. The name signals that the author takes responsibility, as well as credit. The author(s)—you, they—have to take a position as a narrator, in order to write a paper. Even if we try not to do so, we do. A 'scientific' paper, which endeavours to suppress all trace of personality or idiosyncrasy, is still taking on the persona of 'scientific narrator'. In social science writing, there are arguments both for and against the deliberate positioning of oneself as the narrator, and the equally deliberate refusal to position oneself in that way.

This chapter was originally written to encourage a particular group of emergent writers, and retains some of the tone of the original: hence, I continue to address the

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putative reader as 'you', because I have in my mind a strong image of the person I am addressing, and who I hope to assist in doing this work.

My methodological approach is post-structuralist, and to some extent post-humanist, or at least, post-Cartesian; that is to say, sceptical of 'grand narratives', and particularly of the heroic, self-aware, individual recognised by Descartes. This approach makes it difficult, of course, to think of 'the author', as someone potentially other than exactly that rational self, self-conscious (conscious of self), and, by default, male, white, and middleclass. But this philosophical approach allows for 'bricolage': the assembling of an idea by purloining bits and pieces from a multitude of sources, all the while being conscious of the inheritance—the 'trace' or 'genealogy' those bits and pieces bring with them, from their own grand narratives. A post-structuralist position allows me to resist the claims of any specific theory to total truth, but simultaneously to acknowledge the value of many perspectives. By way of example: I don't subscribe to the modernism of Sandra Harding's views (e.g. Harding 2004), but I acknowledge the importance of her contribution to the development of standpoint theory, and the significance of her contribution to the important traditions of social justice.

In this chapter I shall look at the difficulties of 'positioning' and raise the question of whether we can avoid it and consider what ethical considerations arise in both avoiding *and* embracing explicit positioning as the author.

'What's Yours Is Mine'

Let's agree that 'language', broadly conceived, is a collective endeavour. None of us owns it, although all of us use it. It works only in a collective mode—of speaking, hearing, reading, writing, transmitting, inheriting. So, there is a sense in which nothing we say is our own. Or rather it is "ours," not belonging to a "mine" although it could be a 'theirs'.

Everything we write (or say) depends on the uses of language which have gone before us. We ride on the shoulders of giants, as the usual metaphor would have it, even as we speak in our 'own' i.e. native language(s). In this sense, none of us can claim complete, authentic, original authorship. Even our most 'original' ideas are usually recycled older ideas, dusted off for contemporary purposes, or ideas from different sources, brought together to make a new amalgam. We thus need to exercise some modesty about the extent to which our writing is a personal creation. Indeed, it can be argued that the writing, and the discourses which form it, are part of what creates the person. Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré explain the relationship between discourse and the shifting creation and performance of personhood:

> An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and other's

> discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives. (Davies and Harre 1990, p. 46)

Having said that, we have some slight degree of choice, perhaps, as to which groups of ideas we sling together to make a sentence, a rejoinder, a claim, an argument—a style. And the way we put ideas together can certainly create something that has never quite been said before.

Many of us—particularly if we were educated in a certain time and tradition—have been taught to write as if we are the mouthpieces of tradition, not individual persons who can make some choice of their discursive claims at all. The reason for this was clearly understood in the social sciences: the personal was not important and was felt to be at least stylistically off-putting, at worst irrelevant or self-indulgent. What mattered was the truth of what we had to say, carefully established through referencing, logic and argument. Although this position has been disputed for decades, it lingers on, and many emerging writers have to struggle to get past their own assumptions of the desirability of 'objectivity'.

This form of anonymity is not the same as recognising the earlier point made above about how embedded we all are in the community with which we share language, values, beliefs, practices; i.e. 'discourses'. Rather, this anonymity is an appeal to an absolute truth that lies beyond any one of us, beyond any society in which we live: a kind of cosmic—or 'scientific'—truth, which depends on facts and rationality, and is impervious to both the personal and the social. Clearly, this notion of truth appeals to those who hold religious or ideological positions that depend on such an understanding of the universal. Lyotard (1984) regards the questioning of this mode of thought as the defining characteristic of post-modern or post-structural thinking: the scepticism towards grand narratives.

I have to confess, however, to a sneaking regard for this position—it at least avoids the self-indulgence of belief instead of evidence, creed instead of argument. But it does have a fatal flaw, in its appeal to a notion of a universal truth. In the social sciences (as distinct from hard sciences) a form of truth that owes nothing to hegemonic belief, and is not subject to challenge from the viewpoints of different cultures, philosophies, or values, is hard to find. Even a recitation of 'facts' is open to challenge: bias often lies in the choice of 'facts', which added together can add up to an implicit argument. The 2020 debates over national responses to the pandemic (whether New Zealand's economy should have been closed down sooner, or whether it should have been closed down at all) illustrate this point. The facts are disputed on the fringes, but among mainstream participants in the argument it is not so much the facts, but how those facts are assembled, and the arguments drawn from them, is very much open to dispute. So, when we write from the unspoken position of neutral expert, the unspoken denial of the vagaries of personality and experience, which colour our own truth, open the writer to the charge of trying to pass off perceptions as incontrovertible certainties.

Another more significant issue lies in the cultural nature of truth itself. While many religions and political faiths—from Fascism to Liberalism, Christianity to Falun Gong—claim a particular, possessive form of truth, the more insidious form

of this grand narrative lies in the hegemonic nature of colonising, invading concepts, often, though certainly not always, the 'European', 'British', or 'American' thought, which has formed the basis for colonisation of the Americas, Africa, the Pacific, and other regions, for over 400 years. The assumptions seep into the very language we use: the association, for instance, of 'light' and 'white' with virtue; the metaphoric use of 'dark' and 'black' for ignorance, horror, or distaste. These things are very hard to identify, and almost impossible to scrub from the lexicon. Terms like 'the individual' are irretrievably associated with a particular political viewpoint, yet are used as if they are neutral terms with regard to the subject; truisms about the nature of the individual are frequently passed off as truth. But a large percentage of the world's population does not support the idea of the sovereignty of the individual, in the way that is assumed in 'western' thought. The family, the country, the tribe or the village may be the unit of political and ethical consideration, rather than the individual person. Because the debatable nature of the idea of the individual seldom occurs to people in a particular (and globally dominant) ethical/political tradition, the need to acknowledge the speaker's standpoint does not occur to them either.

Scientific Style vs. Standpoint Positioning

The traditional 'scholarly' paper has been written as if by an automaton: no hint of person or personality is allowed to emerge. This style is at its most obvious in the worlds of science and medicine, and, oddly enough, history. It is at its best an attempt to be 'objective'—that is, unbiased. At its worst it is an attempt to conceal subjectivity and bias. In the disciplines which Education uses and is part of, it is regarded as more honest to acknowledge one's self and one's perspectives. Not only does this mean that, having made no claim to objectivity, the author cannot be accused of not having achieved that aim, but it also enables the reader to sympathise with the author's perspective, and, if necessary, make allowances for it, and engage in a straightforward critical fashion with the question of whether or not those biases make the argument inadmissible, or more attractive. So the acknowledgement of the personhood of the author is at heart an ethical position, which puts more responsibility onto the reader to read critically, but also pushes the author towards a kind of self-awareness that is easily avoided by 'objective' writing. Dorothy Smith (2005) is the source for this view.

However, if we are to 'position' ourselves within the writing, we open up some other major possibilities. One is the misunderstanding that anecdotal stories and personal experience are adequate substitutes for research. They are not. A case study of one is just a case study of one. If the author is writing a memoir or auto-biography, that is fine, but if they are seeking wider applicability, then the positioning story may form a great introduction, and explain the author's biases and interests, but is not in itself the research project. This is, in my opinion, true even for auto-ethnography. Norman Denzin (2014) explicitly refers to C. Wright Mills, who says, "Neither the life

of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (Mills 1959, p. 3).

The interpretive act is to bring the individual story to shed light on the historical/sociological/economic story that is the larger focus. Or you can take the reverse position: that the larger context explains the actions and beliefs of the individual. But it is still the integration of the personal and the social which makes the argument significant.

Taking a Stand

Standpoint positioning is a little different. It says 'this is who I am: remember this, don't take what I am saying as gospel truth, but exercise some critical awareness of where I come from and therefore of how I see the world, and what is likely to appeal to me. Konai Helu Thaman does this with every paper: she always starts with some variation on: 'I am a Tongan woman of commoner status' (Ka'ili 2020). And, consequently, we know that she is not going to be presenting a masculinist view, nor the view from the ruling classes, nor, indeed, a view that has pretensions to universality. She carefully defines, delimits her view, and by doing so, she enhances what she has to say as being grounded in a particular experience of life. And the rest of her writing flows with the consciousness that she knows who she is, and that now the reader also knows who she is.

The problem with starting in this way is that we have to know who we are. And that is not as easy as it sounds. You have to do some genealogical work on yourself—an intellectual genealogy as well as a social and physical one. There are a whole lot of things that a person *is* which may not be suitable information with which to locate oneself in an academic paper. For instance, I have seven grandchildren, but I seldom refer to them. They would constitute a kind of claim to knowledge that I don't think has much validity, for the kind of work I write. And I shift my positioning depending on what I am talking about—as a migrant, as part of the Irish diaspora, as a New Zealand woman, as an 'ally' of Māori or a supporter of Pacific cultures. My reader doesn't need to know all about me, just what is relevant to them understanding what I have to say, and developing a critical view with regard to my right to say it and the biases that may creep in because of who I am.

But, clearly, this selection of information is itself a matter of judgement—and potential bias. If I choose to tell my reader that I am a woman from Aotearoa New Zealand, but not that I am a Pākehā New Zealander, then am I perhaps misleading, or being selective? On the other hand, does the statement that I am a Pākehā New Zealander imply that my views are characteristic only of Pākehā? I think the answer to this is that we do the best we can, and we must leave the judgement, ultimately, to the reader. But we can try to present information that is relevant and honest, all the while acknowledging that we don't see what we don't see, and that someone else may be able to point out something about our biases that will take us aback.

The word ‘author’ is historically bound up with the word ‘authority’, and perhaps cannot ever completely escape that origin. But a consciousness of intellectual genealogy allows a writer to see themselves less as the romantic figure of autonomous individuation (Foucault 2010, p. 101), and more as the representative of a specific history, a perspective, or tradition. Such a position is potentially much more comfortable, even liberating, for those who, whether on ethical or cultural grounds, eschew individualism in favour of a collective sensibility. If the writer embodies—literally—an inheritance, whether physical, social, or intellectual—then the responsibility of writing is at the same time greater and lesser. Greater, because the writer represents those pasts, and will feel the necessity to represent them honestly; and lesser, because there is less personal ego involved. In a sense the writer is then a mouthpiece for those who have gone before, or those who through familial, ethnic, economic, social or political connections, share a viewpoint, or those who have influenced you, made their mark on your being, and hence upon your writing.

Feminist standpoint theory ultimately derives from the work of Marx and Engels, even from Hegel, and directly supports the view that the position of someone who does not have or share hegemonic power is substantively different from that of those who do, and that a powerless position can therefore speak a ‘truth to power’ that is not available from a hegemonic position (Bowell 2020). That would presuppose that the purpose of writing is to be transgressive, which, given the requirement that our writing and research should be ‘original’ and ‘make a contribution to knowledge’ seems almost unavoidable: there isn’t much point in writing which confirms the status quo. Tracey Bowell points to a certain privileging of the viewpoint of the oppressed, not because they are oppressed per se, but because this position may afford them a clearer, certainly different, view of the way the world works, and, critically, one that has at least as much value as the more conventional view from the top. If ‘all attempts to know are socially situated’ (Bowell, p. 4) then the attempts of those who do not share in hegemonic advantages are (at least) equally to be valued.

Kristina Rolin (2009) regards standpoint theory as inherently a call to arms; “it urges feminists to reflect on relations of power as a distinctive kind of obstacle to the production of scientific knowledge [and] outlines a method for producing scientific knowledge under social circumstances that, given all other conditions, undermine attempts to generate evidence” (p. 219). Clearly, this kind of call to operationalise disadvantage can be generalised back again towards its Marxist/Hegelian roots, to include others who are disadvantaged in the power-games of academia—Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled, poor, immigrant communities.

Tone

> Of prime necessity is life: a style should live. (Nietzsche 1882, cited in Open Culture 2016, unpaginated)

To a large extent tone is related to what we want to do. I have found by bitter experience with sociological journals that it is necessary to lay out yards of methodological process before they will consider the work. Philosophy of education journals are more interested in the argument and the theory behind that argument. But more interesting is to find the right question. According to Roger Dale, if you ask a good question, the methodology will follow (pers. comm). This means, asking a question that matters to you, the writer, not one that you think will matter to an editor. The question itself is part of a discourse, and by locating yourself in that discourse, an appropriate method of pursuing that question should appear from within the discourse itself. Conducting interviews, or creating statistical tables are not essential to a good paper: they are not the only way of finding things out. But whether you do empirical work or theoretical work, it will always be influenced by the discourses that influence you, and stating your 'standpoint'; positioning yourself, is both an acknowledgement of those discourses, and a claim to a valid point of view.

So we have positioned you, the writer, as a person and researcher; we have found a question that matters in your life, and figured out how to find answers—perhaps only tentative and partial, but important nonetheless—to that question. Now, how do you answer it, without slipping back into that 'scientific' tone that seems to evoke variables and validity and reliability and triangulation and all sorts of other stuff that is irrelevant to qualitative research? You have to find your own voice. There is only one way, and that is to write yourself. You have to write yourself into existence. You have to find the nuance and tone of your own thinking.

Thinking, Style, and Self

It is important to remember here that writing is thinking. So, the more you write the more you think, and the better you get at expressing your thoughts. You can take a Vygotskyan view and regard writing/thinking as the talking/thinking you do when your audience is distant, in time or in place. Or a Foucaultian view, that you are in fact taking care of the self through curating your own thinking (Foucault 1983). Or Deleuzian, that you are becoming through writing (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). It doesn't matter. Just do it.

As you go you will find that you develop your own irritation with the trite, with the colloquial, with infelicities of style and incongruities of logic. You become your own critic. Let that critical element do its work, but don't let it interfere with the practice of writing. It is, unfortunately, likely that this self-critique reflects the hegemonic doctrines in which we have become embedded—the 'governmentality' which seeps into our own minds as a stultifying feeling of inadequacy according to norms which we would often reject if they declared themselves.

You may want to develop a style which transgresses the boundaries of conventional academic writing. There is a kind of reaction to the scientific tone which Helene Cixous calls 'écriture feminine'—women's writing (Cixous et al. 1976). It is worth exploring if you are not happy with the usual sociological/historical/economics tone

of most social science writing. But be warned, it is extremely difficult to get past reviewers. On the other hand, taking such risks may lead you into the kind of fascinating depths that are usually reserved for poets and novelists. Why should we not bring a poetic sensibility to social science? If that is how we can explore a topic best, or nail an idea most accurately, then blurring the edges between art and social science seems a very useful thing to do. Helu Thaman uses her poetry to good effect in her educational writings, and novels like Sia Figiel's *Where we once belonged* (Figiel 1996) can outshine the academic, sociological writings on a particular time, place and way of being.

Like Polonius, I think I have simply told you 'to your own self be true', but I hope that I have also suggested that 'own self' is not entirely our own: the debt we owe to scholars and users of our language before us is immense, and we can only claim our own-ness with modesty. Nonetheless there is an ethical reason for laying claim to some distinctions of own-ness, if only in the implication that there may be others who have different ways of thinking that may be equally worthy of consideration.

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