## A task to get reflexivity started...

This activity comes from Chapter One of *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. The cross-references refer to book content. Any articles cited can be found in the reference list of the book.

Consider, and write[[1]](#footnote-1) about where you belong in relation to the following dimensions. Exactly *how* you write this is not important, writing is the tool to push you deeper in your thinking around these.

***Getting into personal reflexivity***

First up, consider what might relate to more personal aspects of yourself – which Wilkinson (1988) referred to as *personal* reflexivity. This relates to your intersecting *social positionings* – for example, your sex/gender, sexuality, social class/socioeconomics, race and ethnicity, ability, age, belief, immigration status. In particular:

* Consider where you occupy positions of social *privilege*. In high consumption westernized countries this is typically male, non-trans/cisgendered, straight/heterosexual, middle class, rich, white, culturally Christian, non-disabled, younger, non-migrant.
* Also consider where you occupy positions of social *marginality*. In the same contexts, this would typically be female, transgendered/nonbinary, asexual/pansexual/queer/gay/lesbian/bisexual, working class, poor, Indigenous, Black or person of colour, disabled/neurodivergent, elderly, culturally or religiously Jewish, Muslim or Atheist, migrant

How do these social positions shape how you see the world, and how you view others, and how they might view you? Do these social positions relate to any political, ideological or theoretical commitments you have (e.g. Black feminism, queer theory, disability studies, decolonising academia and Indigenous knowledge frameworks[[2]](#footnote-2))?

Also consider your *personal background and life experiences*, as these shape how we engage in research and with data. In particular:

* Think about how these shape your *worldview*. To use us as examples – we are shaped by: growing up poor but Pākehā (white) and middle class in a geographically and socially isolated hippie commune in the culturally-mixed and economically-deprived far North of Āotearoa New Zealand versus growing up in a predominantly working class and racially diverse suburb in outer London; being in a relationship versus being single; choosing to be childfree versus being circumstantially childless; being chronically ill but fully mobile versus being disabled with limited mobility…).

Our political and ideological commitments (both overt and implicit) are another important aspect of personal reflexivity:

* If you are struggling with this one, think about how you have voted or would vote in elections, and what news sources you’d follow or trust. Are you religious, or an atheist/humanist? What is your position on subjects often deemed controversial or matters of conscience such as animal welfare, abortion, the right to die (euthanasia), and the sex industry? What organisations are you a member of? What charities do or would you support? Are you engaged in *activism* of any kind? Reflecting on these questions will help you to map your political and ideological commitments. This is important for all forms of qualitative research, but particularly important for research deemed ‘critical’, as it is strongly tied to ‘leftish’ political orientations such as socialism, feminism, humanism, and queer theory (see Crotty, 1998), and often has an overt political agenda (see Box 1.2). Such research is often criticised because of this, or because its politics are *overt*. But ideology and politics are inseparable from research, embedded in all areas of research, whether we reflexively acknowledge this, or not. Consider, for instance, criticism of the way dominant social values, including gender biases and racism, are in built into AI development (Buolamwini, 2019) or the area of so-called “race science” which sounds neutral, but is imbued with ideas of racial superiority and white supremacy (Evans, 2018; Saini, 2019).

***Getting into functional and disciplinary reflexivity***

We then encourage you to think about yourself specifically in relation to knowledge, scholarship, and research practice – these cover ‘functional’ and ‘disciplinary’ reflexivity (Wilkinson 1988):

* Your research training and experiences: What practical experiences of research do you have? What have you learned makes ‘good quality’ research? What methods are associated with that? What research values can you identify? How are the questions you are interested in subtly and not so subtly shaped by your disciplinary context and training – It can be tricky to recognise the ways you ‘see the research world’ as, for instance, a psychologist, or a geographer, or a socialist (friends and collaborators from, and attending events in, other disciplines can help us with this).
* If you’re not a student, your affiliation, status and context as a scholar. What type of institution do you work for? Are you a new or established scholar? What internal and external pressures do you face – such as to publish, to publish in particular ‘high ranking’ journals, to seek external research funding, to seek promotion?
* The methods or approaches you are drawn to, and how the methods you use might shape the research process and the knowledge produced. For example, the data for our worked example are online comments about people choosing to be childfree (see section *Introducing and Contextualising our Worked Example Dataset* in Chapter Two), but we could have run a focus group and asked people to discuss the topic. How might these different data collection methods shape the resulting data?
* Any philosophical and theoretical assumptions or commitments related to research. Do you think qualitative research captures the truth of people’s lives and experiences? Do you prioritise Indigenous knowledge and research practices? Do you want to interrogate meaning-practices? How do these shape the research questions that interest you?
* Your fears, anxieties, hopes and expectations about your research. Both about your research in general, and then connected to the specifics of the topic for a particular project.

Depending where you are on a research trajectory, some of these might be quite challenging – so don’t expect to have answers for them all. In practicing disciplinary and functional reflexivity, you want to consider how these might shape your design choices, and your use of TA?

***Reflexivity around your specific topic***

Once you have a specific *topic* for research, it is vital to come back to reflexivity related to your identities, and life experiences, and consider these in relation to your topic, and to your participants (if your research design includes data from participants):

* How are your positionings and/or life experiences related to your topic?
* What assumptions do you hold about your topic?
* How might your participants perceive you?
* Where and how do you occupy positions of privilege and marginality *in relation to* your topic and your participants?
* And are you an **insider researcher** (a member of the group you are studying) or outsider (not a member)? Or are you both? How might this shape your research, and your relationship with your participants? What advantages and risks do you see to being an insider and/or outsider researcher? Aspects to reflect on include: access and recruitment; developing trust and rapport with participants; devising and asking questions, including what we latch on to as important in participant’s accounts, and what we might miss in participant responses; participants withholding information; and representing participants’ accounts (R. Berger, 2015; Hellawell, 2006).

1. We use ‘write’ here and elsewhere in this book, but it’s intended as a shorthand for a more inclusive range of ways of recording thoughts– which includes making voice memos or using voice recognition software, handwriting, or typing, or some combination of these. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more discussion of how political, ideological or other theory can inform reflexive TA, see Box 6.7 in Chapter Six, and the sections *Working with Existing Theory* and *Locating Data Within the Wider Context* in Chapter Seven. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)