

## Interpretation of Researcher Positionality in a Transnational COIL Project

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### ABSTRACT

*In this paper, two authors have explored and demonstrated their own multi-dimensional positionality' in the manner of reflectively interpreting four meaningful scenarios relating to their encountered methodological challenges in a cross-border COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) project. Throughout the construction of multi-dimensional positionality, the recognition of the subtle insider-outsider binarism encouraged these two authors to revisit the role of national cultures in the formation of researcher positionality and then to incorporate the idea of 'simplicity' into their understanding of the on-going positionality, which has resulted in the proposition of 'simplex multi-dimensional positionality.' Alluding to this concept, the two authors acknowledge the possible intervention of national cultures as their researcher positionality evolves and contend that it is the degree to which researchers tend to (not) make use of national cultures as resources that keep their positionality oscillating rather than the national cultures per se.*

**KEYWORDS:** multi-dimensional positionality, simplicity approach, fluidity and relatedness.

While the threat of COVID-19 has enormously jeopardized the physical global connections, concomitantly, this unwanted pandemic demonstrates how important and inevitable it is for individuals to still keep in touch and communicate around the world for varying purposes (e.g., academic discussions, business negotiations, knowledge learning, customer relationship management). In higher education, COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) has, thus, turned out to be one of the popular approaches to retaining communication among students from diverse societies and cultural backgrounds (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020; Munoz-Escalona et al., 2022; Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021).

As academics based in China and Austria, we conducted a cross-border COIL project to understand how young generations from the East and the West (re-)constructed their views on the social impacts of COVID-19 (cf. the mass media). Interestingly, it was during this process (in particular, participant recruitment and data generation stages) that we researchers encountered some methodological challenges meriting exploration and discussion, for these challenges constantly urged us to be reflexive and critically (re-)consider our own positionality in order to be aware of the possible trap of a binary positionality view precipitated by methodological nationalism. This idea, on the one hand, tends to presuppose the nation-state as the natural form of social organization that fully controls all the individuals (Schäfer, 2023),

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and it, on the other hand, assumes nation-state as the sole unit of analysis for explaining individuals' activities (Amelina & Faist, 2012; Holliday, 2022).

For this reason, throughout this paper, we have centered our understanding of researcher positionality and embraced the definition of researcher positionality as a researcher's worldview and the position s/he adopts while conducting a research task in specific social and political contexts (Rowe, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). Some aspects of this positionality are culturally ascribed, for example, language, nationality, gender, race, and skin color. Others can be relatively subjective and contextual, for instance, personal experiences (Chiseri-Strater, 1996).

Considering researcher positionality from this angle, in this paper, we first review the current scholarship in relation to the conceptualization of positionality, which foregrounds the fluid nature. Upholding the relational construction of researcher positionality, we then draw on some data to interpret our own fluid positionality. The data are comprised of four salient scenarios we experienced while we were engaged in researcher-participant dynamics (i.e., connections and interactions constructed by both researchers and the researched) within the COIL project. By implementing interpretive reflexivity (Lichterman, 2017) into these scenarios, we are able to illustrate how our multi-dimensional positionality has eventually been carved out.

Nevertheless, following the construction of multi-dimensional positionality, we still sense the implied binarism of insider-outsider categorization within that idea. This recognition encourages us to revisit the role of national cultures (Holliday, 2022) in our positionality formation with reference to concepts deliberated in the field of intercultural communication, e.g., simplexity (Dervin, 2016). Such a revisit enables us to nuance and develop the multi-dimensional positionality idea into a notion called simplex multi-dimensional positionality which firstly manifests that it is not the essentialized categorization per se (e.g., national/ethnic/linguistic differences) that divides researchers into either the insider or outsider camp. The process of our positionality construction can always be of multiple orientations. More importantly, proposing this nuanced researcher positionality notion, we acknowledge the intervention of national cultures (if any) in its formation and contend that it is the degree to which researchers tend to (not) draw on national cultures as resources that make their own positionality sway.

### **Critiques of Dual Researcher Positionality**

The super diversity of human contact (i.e., contact with multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated, and legally stratified individuals) in contemporary society (Foner et al., 2019; Vertovec, 2019) makes it very ubiquitous and ordinary to conduct socially responsible research with culturally different scholars and participants (Lee & Dovchin, 2019) across local, national or transnational borders. In such cases, it is impossible for researchers not to consider the researcher-researched dynamics, the specific social and political contexts, etc., as a researcher's positionality always comes to the fore (Lu & Hodge, 2019).

An archetypal insider-outsider divide simply interprets that a researcher who shares national, ethnic, and/or linguistic characteristics with the participants (Bishop, 2011; Irvine et al., 2008) can be categorized into the group of insiders. Otherwise, the researcher is regarded as an outsider to the researched. This conventional duality status assigned to researcher positionality seems to be a cliché in the current (methodological) literature debate where particular challenges and/or benefits associated with either side accrue (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Chawla-Duggan, 2007; Kelly, 2014; Victoria, 2011).

In summary, an insider is believed to be more privileged to access the researched by sharing affinity (e.g., cultural/ethnic/linguistic background) with them (Greene, 2014). In contrast, an outsider is assumed to be more objective and less biased to generate research outcomes (e.g., quantifiable data analysis) (Chavez, 2008).

This immutable categorization is critiqued by an increasing number of scholars who call it a false dichotomy (Barnes, 2021). On the one hand, methodologically speaking, neither insider nor outsider can be absolutely liberated from “sense of self” or “the situated wisdom” (Greene, 2014). On the other hand, the boundary between them is difficult to be delineated due to the complexities intrinsic to each side (Merriam et al., 2001).

### **The Relational Construction of Researcher Positionality**

To claim an intrinsic meaning for the dynamic, transient, and unbounded positionality, scholars suggest that it is vital to understand researcher positionality needs for contextual, dynamic, and processual analysis (Kelly, 2014; Kerstetter, 2012; Mercer, 2007; Tikly, 1999). In other words, a researcher’s positionality is subject to negotiation, depending on the research design, research topic, and research context (e.g., when, where, and to whom) (Faist, 2012).

In literature, this relational perception tends to replace the insider-outsider polarization with concepts such as “the space in between” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Serrant-Green, 2002), “degrees of insiderness/outsiderness” (Hellawell, 2006, p.490), “third positions” (Carling et al., 2014, p.49). Although these concepts vary in detailed meanings, they uphold an argument that a researcher could slide between the two extreme facets (i.e., a complete insider or outsider) because of the complexities intrinsic to researchers, participants and the associated socio-spatial environment. In this respect, these concepts are all concerned with the relatedness of positionality and its processual nature, fluidity and malleability (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Precisely speaking, the researcher-participant dynamics is undoubtedly processual in nature. As Carling et al. (2014) concluded, both the researcher and the researched co-constitute a particular socio-spatial context where, from time to time, the researcher-participant dynamics, at least, can be explored from the following five types.

- a) ‘An explicit third party’: A researcher has no attachment to either the majority population where the researched is based or the researched community itself.
- b) ‘An honorary insider’: A researcher gains (not a member coming from the researched) somewhat acceptance by the researched as s/he has developed relationships with members of the researched community.
- c) ‘An insider by proxy’: A researcher shares a similar experience with the researched community (e.g., a similar professional experience or trajectory of personal growth).
- d) ‘A hybrid insider-outsider’: a researcher shares elements with both the majority population where the researched based and the researched community itself.
- e) ‘An apparent insider’: a researcher comes from a member of the researched community, but without having undergone similar experiences.

Meanwhile, in the process of interacting with participants who are associated with culture-specific beliefs and practices, a researcher’s experience or orientation is, at the same time, possibly affected or even defined by specific (social) markers (Carling et al., 2014), which further complicates the fluidity of researcher positionality. Some salient (social) markers relating to the interpretation of researcher positionality are discussed as follows:

- a) Occupation and title can generate an impact on the hierarchical dimension within the researcher-participant dynamics. In some socio-spatial contexts, a researcher with a doctorate or professor title could gain more respect. Additionally, a lecturer researcher can emphasize or downplay his/her ‘lectureship’ in the encounter with participants from the universities.
- b) Gender and age can provide additional information for either researchers or the researched, which may affect the dynamics. In the case of gender, for example, in the language-related departments, there seems to be more female students than male ones, which then makes males more welcomed. As for age, under particular contexts, it can be interpreted as an advantage (e.g., seniority, authority) or disadvantage (e.g., a marginalized group) for researcher-participant relationship building.
- c) Language proficiency, more accurately, the common language for both sides to communicate can affect the power dynamics of the setting where both researchers and participants are involved.
- d) Cultural competence, the (non-)shared understanding of codes and context-specific behavioral norms can draw closer or distance researchers and the researched.

Besides, the socio-spatial context with which researchers interact (Berger, 2015), also exerts an influence on a researcher’s positionality development. For instance, how do researchers interpret regional/national policies? How do researchers (inter-)culturally respond to the specific situation in which they are engaged? To what extent are researchers familiar with and react timely to the local practices?

Apart from that, the evolvement of research per se after researchers make choices (Carling et al., 2014; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) also contributes to the fluctuation of a researcher’s positionality. Different research designs will give rise to different outcomes, for example, based on what criteria should the researchers be selected? From what backgrounds will participants of the project be recruited? Which facets of identity will be analyzed or ‘evaluated’ in a research project?

Given the justification of the relational construction of researcher positionality, researchers’ sense-making processes then become significant in understanding their own positionality. Therefore, within this paper, we researchers have adopted the first-person narration<sup>2</sup> in order to honor the role of experiences and values attached to the research process through our interpretations and reflections (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in exploring our own positionality.

### **Exploration of Our Own Positionality through Interpretive Reflexivity**

The recap on researcher positionality from the existing literature (see previous two sections) is by no means an “exhaustive inventory” but offers us some directions to explore our own positionality. Specifically speaking, we intended to understand and elaborate upon how our own positionality evolved during the operation of the COIL project when we were methodologically facing challenges. In order to guide the exploration of our own positionality, we broke this research aim down to the following three research questions (RQs):

**RQ1:** What types of researcher positionality can be interpreted from our participation in the COIL project?

**RQ2:** If more than one type can be interpreted from our own positionality, in what way are these types of researcher positionality related to each other?

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<sup>2</sup> For clarity, throughout this paper, we merely adopt the third person, namely Frank or Leena, to narrate when distinctive views or approaches between the two of us need to be presented, compared or discussed. Otherwise, a first-person plural pronoun, ‘we’ or ‘us’, is adopted to present our collective voice.

**RQ3:** What can we learn from the relatedness of these types of our own positionality?

Moreover, in light of the preceding discussion on the researcher positionality, we attach its fluidity to the processual nature alongside the researcher-participant dynamics and research context. In this sense, it is indispensable to present the essential information regarding the research team (i.e., we two researchers) and the participants of the COIL project<sup>3</sup> at that time, both of which could facilitate readers to understand better how our fluid positionality has developed when we interpret the four scenarios later on within this paper.

### **Profiles of the Research Team**

Our research team is made up of two academics, Frank and Leena. Frank was born and raised in mainland China. Mandarin is his native language and English is the communicative language he adopts to research with non-Mandarin speaking academics. In his early twenties, he came to the UK to do a doctorate in intercultural communication. From then on, he has been engaged in Western academia. After having worked at a British University as a lecturer for two years, he started to work for a university in China around mid-2020. Currently, he is working remotely from the UK since the outbreak of Covid-19. At the same time, he continues engaging with British/European academics.

Leena was born in India, and she has been living in Austria for 32 years. She grew up in a trilingual environment with two Indian languages (Konkani, Hindi) and English. Her flair and avid interest in languages led her to study European languages i.e., German and French, followed by her doctorate in intercultural communication. She has also been actively involved in academia for more than 25 years. We both teach language and modules related to intercultural communication, management, and competence to students at our respective universities and share commonalities in varying degrees with the participants of the COIL project.

### **Profiles of the Participants of the COIL Project**

This COIL projects involved students from China and Austria. Speaking of participants in China, they were full-time undergraduate students (year-2 or year-3) at the school of foreign languages in the university. They had directly joined the university after having finished their secondary schooling. Frank is their lecturer for two compulsory modules, and Frank speaks the same native language (Mandarin) with the participants in China while communicating in English with them during online classes. However, Frank has not met his students in person yet. Communication has been carried out online through lecturing and email exchanges.

Regarding the participants in Austria, they were post-graduate students studying social science-related subjects. For most of these students, German is their primary language, and English is their course language. None of them speaks Mandarin. These students have work experiences and are mature students in view of age, when compared to the students from the university in China.

### **Interpretive Reflexivity for Understanding Researcher Positionality**

As discussed before, the definition of researcher positionality we purport highlights that its meaning is negotiable and subject to specific political, cultural, and social contexts. In other words, positionality yields partiality, not universality. Hence, if we intend to elaborate on how our own positionality has evolved to the readers, we unavoidably need to holistically interpret the researcher-participant dynamics under different socio-spatial contexts in that COIL project.

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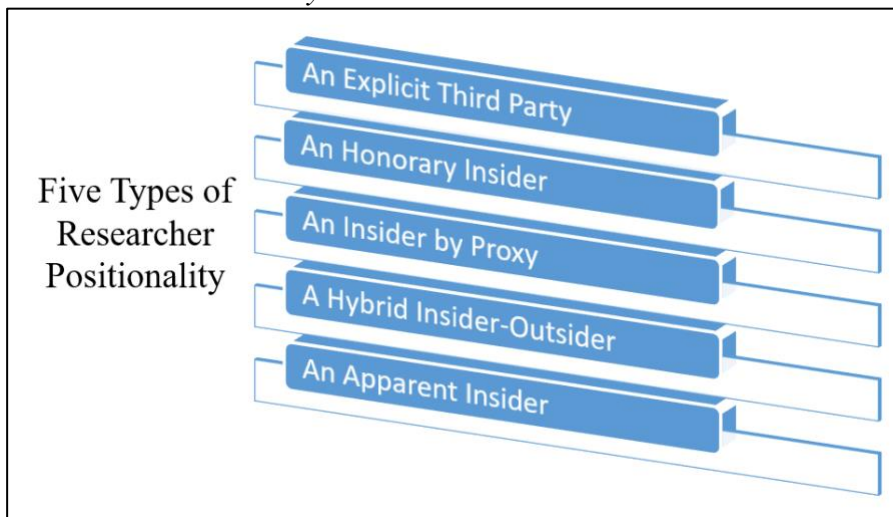
<sup>3</sup> Participants here refer to those students who participated in the COIL project. They are not the sources of data to answer the research aim of this paper discussed in the beginning of this section.

For instance, what we think of our own actions and possible mistakes when communicating with the participants, how we interpret the meanings given by those participants. That is to say, what we learn becomes part of the understanding of our own positionality, and the unfolding of our positionality depends on our interpretive acumen (Lichterman & Reed, 2015).

In this regard, we adopted interpretive reflexivity as the research method, which helped us to reveal cultural miscues and convergences (Lichterman, 2017). This method also encouraged us to focus on hard-won insights and other intercultural encounters whose outcomes may or may not correlate predictably with social position (Lichterman, 2017).

Bearing the aforementioned research aim in our minds, we two researchers reviewed the recorded COIL sessions as well as the field notes to recall the methodologically challenging moments across different stages (e.g., participant recruitment, data generation). As a consequence, four salient scenarios were selected as data. Then, under the guidance of Carling et al.’s (2014) model discussed in the literature and illustrated below (Figure 1), we analyzed and interpreted our own positionality in these four scenarios recursively and critically in order to demonstrate how it evolved.

**Figure 1**  
*Researcher Positionality Model*



*Note.* This model was produced by the authors, summarizing five types of researcher positionality that were categorized by Carling, J., Erdal, M. B., & Ezzati, R., 2014. Beyond the insider–outsider divide in migration research. *Migration Studies*, 2(1), 36–54.

**Demonstration of Our Own Fluid Positionality**

We implemented the interpretive reflexivity (Lichterman, 2017) into four scenarios involving methodological challenges, which enabled us to unfold our own positionality with reference to Carling et al. (2014)’s model. This unfolding process responds to the RQ1 and tells what types of researcher positionality we were performing.

**Scenario One: Finding a “Cultural Broker” in China**

When we attempted to approach students for participant recruitment, we learned that students (in Austria and China, respectively) joining this COIL project as participants were different in terms of their motivation and willingness. Students in Austria took part in this project with great motivation and willingness. On the one hand, their participation was part of the compulsory learning activity in the module designed and taught by Leena, which meant that their participation was assessed and certainly linked to their academic performance. In addition,

students were very curious to know more about the post-pandemic situation in China as the pandemic had struck there first.

We, in particular Leena, secured the participants in Austria relatively easy because of our academic knowledge (of the designed course content), familiarity with European academic policies and practices, as well as our lecturer identities. In this regard, we took on “hybrid insider-outsider” roles in communicating with participants in Austria.

In contrast, the local context in China was more complex. Frank was required to take over two modules whose descriptors had been approved. Frank then could not add extra learning activities to these modules due to the university’s policies. Instead, he could only suggest that students voluntarily participate in this project. In addition, given his online working environment and new staff member identity (less than eight months as a lecturer there), he did not have comprehensive knowledge of the university (e.g., institutional policies, students’ regulations) as students or other local colleagues did. The trust-building with his students (if any) was not robust yet.

With these concerns in mind, Frank still advocated the project to his students twice. However, not many students responded to his message concerning participant recruitment. Frank shared this challenge with Leena, who then suggested finding a “culture broker” there in order to build connections, reduce misunderstandings as well as respond to situations within the targeted student groups (Liamputtong, 2008; Sin, 2005; Sixsmith et al., 2003). Frank approached the head of the English department (Branda) as a “cultural broker” for three reasons, namely:

1. She knows Frank well after collaborations for several research projects in the same department.
2. She knows the targeted students well after having taught them for more than two years.
3. Her senior position in the department is well respected by the students.

Branda spread the positive recommendations of the COIL project to students in a manner that catered to the local students. Her help indeed effectively expanded the pool of participants (Adamson & Donovan, 2002; Crist & Escandón-Dominguez, 2003; Eide & Allen, 2005; Lu et al., 2005; Miles et al., 2018).

Upon reflection, we, in particular Frank, seemed to automatically assign “honorary insider” roles at the very beginning because of shared language and ethnic background as well as student-lecturer relationship in the same institution, which unfavorably led to the initial unsuccessful trust-building with students in China. Facing this challenge, Leena’s “explicit third party” role stood out and then provided us with an insight to find a “culture broker” (Branda). Inspired by this suggestion, Frank’s role of “hybrid insider-outsider” functioned to liaise with Branda. Before the support and initiation offered by our “culture broker”, we researchers were both considered more as “an explicit third party” than “an honorary insider” by the participants, albeit Frank shared linguistic and ethnic backgrounds with those participants in China.

Moreover, the involvement of a ‘culture broker’ shows that specific social markers (e.g., senior position) and socio-spatial context (e.g., knowing the habitual behaviors of the researched) sometimes play a significant role and influence a researcher’s positionality (Berger, 2015; Carling et al., 2014).

## Scenario Two: Seeking the Consent from Participants

For the participants in China, when we asked them if they would agree to participate and provide their data, the participants were slightly surprised, and all trivialized the consent-seeking process and provided verbal consent (Barata et al., 2006; Molyneux et al., 2005). For the sake of honesty, one participant told us privately:

*You do not need to ask us, it is a waste of your time, we do not mind at all as you are our teachers. In addition, the head of English department [Branda] has asked us to do so. As long as she thinks it is fine, we are fine with it too.* (W. Zhang, personal communication, October 12, 2021)

Having experienced this, we feel that participant consent in that university seems to rest more on the words of a significant or senior member of the group (Macklin, 2004) or on collective consent (Smith, 2005). In this case, participants took their head of English department's consent as their collective consent. More interestingly, in this scenario (Cf. the previous participant recruitment context), we were considered as their "in-group members" after the support and initiation offered by the "culture broker" (Branda). In other words, our positionality evolved into "an honorary insider". Additionally, once we were recognized as 'honorary insiders', our lecturer roles spontaneously strengthened the trust-building with participants, for the culture in that Chinese university, as we sensed, somehow respects the lecturer-student hierarchical relationship.

In contrast, the participants in Austria were informed on the first day of the course that the COIL project had been planned. They required explicit details and transparency on the entire COIL project from us. Consent was in writing via online chat. Regardless of how well Leena knew her participants, when it came to the ethical issues, we seemed to be always treated as "explicit third party" ones and needed to follow certain procedures, for research integrity and the prevalent data protection rights are vital in the EU. Ethical regulations are well stipulated by the Austrian university.

Differently, research ethics are not highlighted or well-regulated by the university in China. Instead of relying on ethical regulations, personal trust or "in-group" recognition is emphasized to develop the researcher-participant relationship therein. Within that university in China, other factors, such as the gender issue, can be prior to ethical regulations. For instance, after being recognized as "honorary insiders", a few female participants in China teased Frank during a small talk. One female participant joked about her consent by saying the following:

*I am happy to participate in your project as a sort of support for a not-often-seen young male teacher in our English department, you know. By the way, on the discussion day, will we see some handsome guys from the EU? I won't withdraw, otherwise, I cannot see any [She laughed then].* (F. Liang, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

Here, gender difference seems to play a part in strengthening the researcher-participant relationship. The imbalanced gender situation (either among students or lecturers) within the language departments is still observable across many universities in China. This phenomenon seems to make male participants somehow 'more welcomed' in the research field, in our case, in gaining participants' trust and consent.

Our positionality swayed between "an honorary insider" and "an explicit third party", which can be greatly attributed to the intricacy of ethical issues across different socio-spatial circumstances (e.g., help from the "culture broker") and/or certain social markers (e.g., our lecturer roles, gender) (Barata et al., 2006; Macklin, 2004; Smith, 2021). In this respect, the



way of tailoring our ethical conception (i.e., how ethics is locally interpreted) (Marshall & Batten, 2004; Piquemal, 2001) reflects flexible positionality across various occasions.

### **Scenario Three: Grappling with Certain “Restrictions”**

The online discussion (as the first part of data generation) for the COIL project needed to take place on a virtual platform that was accessible to both sides. During the research team meeting before data generation, the “cultural broker” (Branda) reminded us, in particular Leena, of being careful about the suggested topics as the Chinese university discourages any politically provocative content, criticism, or comments. Being well-informed about China’s social context owing to frequent collaborations with researchers bearing Chinese cultural background, in response to Branda’s kind reminder, Leena told us that she had already briefed her students in Austria on this issue beforehand and also suggested some neutral topics that could be announced to the participants. To a certain extent, for that moment, Leena worked as “a hybrid insider-outsider”, although she shared no conventional insider features (e.g., ethnicity, linguistic competence) with the researched.

Assuming that all the topics suggested by Leena would be fine (e.g., how does it affect your campus life?), Frank was not entirely sure about their suitability due to his limited engagement with the sociocultural environment in China and thus, he recommended Branda to double check before formally announcing them to the participants. In a sense, the assumed “hybrid insider-outsider” role could not be subscribed to Frank. He was, at best, “an honorary insider” at that moment.

Once the topics were confirmed, the choice of platform for online discussion challenged our positionality again. ZOOM was instantaneously suggested by Leena, as she thought this platform would be accepted by most countries, including China. More vigilant about Chinese socio-political culture and its Internet censorship policies, Frank took the initiative to test ZOOM’s accessibility with a participant in China, which then confirmed his concern. Frank had to find another platform that could be suitable for both ends. Eventually, he suggested VOOV to Leena. Obviously, in terms of finding a substitute for ZOOM, Frank demonstrated the role of “a hybrid insider-outsider” based on his broad knowledge of the socio-cultural-political environment within the researched community.

The ‘hybrid insider-outsider’ role Frank took made him overlook the possible challenges for the research team to use VOOV, a virtual meeting application launched by China’s technological giant Tencent, whose software is familiar to Frank. It was Leena who strongly suggested that we, including all the participants, should be given instructions and that a trial session should also be organized to familiarize everyone with this online platform.

Now, we believe that Leena’s “explicit third party” persuaded her to do so, which proved to be extremely helpful. After the trial session, we noticed a deficiency in that platform and had to redesign the COIL online discussion. In our initial research design, we expected all the groups to discuss simultaneously in their breakout rooms for two hours. In the meantime, we researchers would play the role of observers and facilitators by joining in and leaving each breakout room. However, the feature of breakout rooms was not supported in VOOV. As a compromise, we had to assign back-to-back 30-minute meetings to each group. As researchers, we stayed in that room all the time. This redesign extended the entire COIL (from two hours to three hours) but shortened the discussion time for each group to 30 minutes. Arguably, we were both ‘explicit third parties’ in relation to the operation of VOOV in our COIL project. In view of our research redesign experience, we believe that, sometimes, geopolitical-related restrictions distinctly outweigh the traditionally presumed, long-existing differences (e.g., cultural or ethnical differences) to fluctuate our positionality (Jackson & Niblo, 2003).

### Scenario Four: Using English as the Communicative Language

In the COIL project, English is the only common language used by we researchers and all the participants. Using English to communicate is hardly any issue for participants in Austria. They all have a good command of the English language due to their life experience across EU countries or overseas traveling/working experiences.

As for the English skills of participants in China, concerns were raised by Frank at the beginning of the research design. He was worried that these participants might not be able to articulate their ideas in English as accurately and fluently as participants in Austria did. Frank forged this impression after having personally communicated in class with participants in China and virtually with participants in Austria. Participants' English level (in China) was not of much concern to Leena. On the other hand, she emphasized that it would be a part of the participants' experience if any issue relating to English proficiency arose. Thanks to Leena's reference to research per se, Frank's concern did not turn out to be a criterion for participant recruitment.

We both were convinced that the ultimate purpose of the COIL project is to understand participants' ideas and thoughts after exchanging experiences with culturally different counterparts. English skills should not be a reason to exclude any potential participant from doing so. Apparently, here we both prioritized the research purpose over the "apparent insider" role we could play (i.e., we are from the lecturer-student community, and Frank knows the English-speaking levels and patterns of participants in China). Leena stayed alert about her "explicit third party" role when the English issue came into discussion.

Frank was reminded by Leena and tried to play "an explicit third party" regarding the language issue. Nevertheless, from time to time, Frank returned to "an apparent insider" on some occasions by drawing on his linguistic sharedness with the researched (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Hall & Kulig, 2004; Smith, 2021). When we gave participants instructions regarding the online discussion, apart from the English document jointly drafted by us, Frank offered a translated version (Mandarin) and thus, participants in China received bilingual instructions. On another occasion, when participants from both sides were taking part in the online discussion, at times, participants in China were struggling to understand or answer the questions raised by their counterparts in Austria. The online discussion seemed to be dominated by the participants in Austria. Frank intervened in their dialogues for a quick explanation, basic translation, clarification or clearing misunderstandings and attempted to balance the one-side dominant situation.

Unlike Frank, Leena always maintained "an explicit third party" role and did not interfere at all during the entire online discussion process even at times when she thought it may be good, for she sensed German language interference in the manner some questions were formulated in English by the participants in Austria. For this scenario, while reconsidering the online discussion from the linguistic perspective now, we contend that researchers sometimes could not help assigning themselves to the "apparent insider" role when the researchers perform a certain identity in the researched community (e.g., lecturer, in our case). More often than not, the "apparent insider" role is likely to bring a priori assumptions to the researcher-participant relationship and may lead to problematic claims.

Besides, we consider the possible existence of non-linguistic reasons for the imbalanced power of online discussion. For instance, participants in Austria tried to elicit and note as much information as possible because subsequently, they had to complete the coursework (grade-related) based on the information gained from the online discussion. Participants in China had no such worries as they participated as volunteers only. The passive or reactive responses given by participants in China may not be linked to their English skills and, thus, Frank's previous concern could sound unjustifiable or biased.

Being aware of our own positionality after this reflection, more inclined to “an explicit third party”, we redesigned the research in relation to the reflective journals (as the second part of data generation). Putting the research aim of the COIL project at the center, we offered participants in China two options (Mandarin or English) to record their reflections on this participation. Using the language in which participants feel confident can facilitate the necessary exchanges between the researcher and the researched and then produce more genuine and better accounts from the participants (Adamson & Donovan, 2002; Birman, 2006). Unfortunately, this option was not offered to participants in Austria because their reflective journals were part of the coursework. Following the regulations, they had to submit coursework in English. Apparently, socio-spatial context again plays a role in our positionality building.

### **Discussion on the Construction of Multi-dimensional Positionality**

Based on the interpretations of our own positionality illustrated in the aforementioned scenarios, we feel safe to argue that our positionality did take on different types and that our positionality swayed while constructing meanings with the researched, drawing upon relevant (social) markers, and/or negotiating with both socio-spatial context and the research (re-)design (Berger, 2015; Carling et al., 2014). In this sense, our own positionality resonates with the discussion in the literature about the fluidity of researcher positionality (e.g., Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Serrant-Green, 2002). Then, if our positionality is not simply somewhere between two ends of the continuum (i.e., a complete insider or outsider) like many scholars have argued (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Holmes, 2016; Sonkar, 2019), how do we understand the swaying feature of our own positionality sensed in these scenarios, which responds to the RQ2.

We are inclined to explain our fluid and swaying positionality by describing it as multi-dimensional. Using this term, we tend to accentuate that our positionality simultaneously presents multiple dimensions across different situations, which shows that the development of researcher positionality is constantly on the go. For instance, in Scenario Two, with regard to seeking participants’ consent, both of us played the role of “explicit third party” in front of participants in Austria, where we followed the research ethical policies. Concurrently, we also played the role of “honorary insider” when facing the participants in China as they accepted us as “in-group members”. Similarly, as discussed in Scenario Three, we were both playing two roles of “hybrid insider-outsider” and “explicit third party” to manage research-related issues in the Chinese context, e.g., to avoid sensitive discussion topics, and use of the VOOV software for online conversations.

Understanding researcher positionality, as multi-dimensional positionality is conducive for distancing, we researchers from the fixed insider-outsider categorization precipitated by methodological nationalism (Holliday, 2022), whereas each dimension of positionality we performed, e.g., “hybrid insider-outsider”, still indicates the indelible

(inter-)cultural lines between insiders (“us”) and outsiders (“them”), where the essentialist blocks, most commonly in the form of national cultures (e.g., national/ethnic/linguistic differences), are retained or reiterated (Baker, 2021; Holliday, 2022).

Arguably, we researchers are capable of orientating to multiple cultural scales simultaneously (Baker, 2015; Holliday, 2010) to liberate ourselves from national cultures and jump out of the insider-outsider divide. However, Dervin (2015) has pointed out that in some situations, the noble objectives of non-essentialism and non-culturalism (cf. the essentialist blocks) cannot be achieved even if one tries hard, as individuals interact with one another in a complex reality where national cultures have an impact e.g., language, policies, regulations, collectivism, etc. In this sense, when we perceive researcher positionality, somehow, it sounds unrealistic and unreachable to ignore the intervention brought by national cultures even if we

researchers optimize the chances to spotlight its fluidity through the sense-making process among/between individuals and socio-spatial contexts.

Having learned this point, we further delved into the possible intervention of national cultures (Holliday, 2022) while recognizing our own multi-dimensional positionality. In doing so, we have answered the third RQ and discussed our understanding by developing the multi-dimensional positionality into simplex multi-dimensional positionality in the following section.

### **Discussion on the Conceptualization of Simplex Multi-dimensional Positionality**

We first resort to the intercultural communication studies, in particular, the theory of simplicity approach (Dervin, 2016), and discuss what role national cultures play in our sense-making process vis-à-vis researcher positionality, which then enables us to conceptualize our own simplex multi-dimensional positionality.

#### **The Role of National Cultures in Understanding Our Own Positionality**

Nation, religion, ethnicity, and language, as the commonly discussed national cultures, comprise a significant part of social and political structures, which in many ways form us and make us different from each other (Holliday, 2018). To a great extent, we were born and brought up in the surroundings of particular national cultures (Holliday, 2010, 2022). Under some circumstances, we even have to compromise and address the impacts exerted by those national cultures and their ramifications. Like the given scenarios within the COIL project, due to the national-level ban on certain non-Chinese-designed software, we had to find a compromise by taking VOOV as a substitute online platform, which was a learning curve for all of us. Moreover, thanks to the institution's policies, on the Chinese side, Frank could not alter the learning activities while, on the Austrian side, the choice of writing their reflective journals in other languages was ruled out. From this perspective, researcher positionality, dealing with the researcher's position in specific social and political contexts, is unlikely to be explored without addressing the intervention of national cultures.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the idea of perceiving national cultures as the prime category of distinguishing insider-outsider role in social science research (Beck & Sznajder, 2006) or self-other construction in methodological nationalism (Chernilo, 2011), national cultures are suggested to be understood as cultural resources, which do not define who we are or confine everything we do and think. If necessary, we can draw upon them (Holliday, 2018) when we are in interaction with individuals (e.g., participants) or engaged with institutions (e.g., universities). In this regard, national cultures cannot define or confine who we are (not) in relation to positionality.

Back to the COIL project, for instance, we took advantage of close connections with our respective universities, and the familiarity of Chinese/Austria cultural practices to secure participants as well as the 'culture broker'. We, thus, made use of national cultures to facilitate the participant recruitment process. In another situation, Frank was concerned about participants' English skills in China based on his (partly) subjective evaluation and then he reconsidered the validity of his concern upon Leena's suggestion. It indicates how we drew on and then resisted certain national cultures in the process of researcher positionality construction. In a different case, we tailored our perceptions of research ethics in accordance with local contexts in Austria and China, respectively rather than using general assumptions or standards. This, in turn, shows how we resisted the impact of national cultures. In doing so, we neither turned blind eyes to national cultures nor fell into the critiqued insider-outsider polarization when making sense of our own positionality.

### **Simplexity Approach to Refining Our Own Multi-dimensional Positionality**

This treatment of national cultures discussed above is theorized as the simplexity approach by Dervin (2016), who coined this portmanteau – *simplexity* (composed of *simple* and *complexity*) – to argue that we researchers navigate between *simple* and *complex* sense-making processes when we interact with both the researched and relevant socio-spatial contexts. Thus, we bring this concept to refine the interpretation regarding our own positionality.

Learning from Dervin’s simplexity approach, on the one hand, bearing the noble objectives of non-essentialism all the time in our minds, we would like to elucidate the complexity within researcher positionality formation. As a result, we likely resist national cultures for the sake of unpacking their fluidity through exploring what has been co-constituted alongside researcher-participant dynamics. However, for all sorts of reasons (e.g., national restrictions, institutional policies), we researchers sometimes have to dive back into the simple end by making use of national cultures in one way or another.

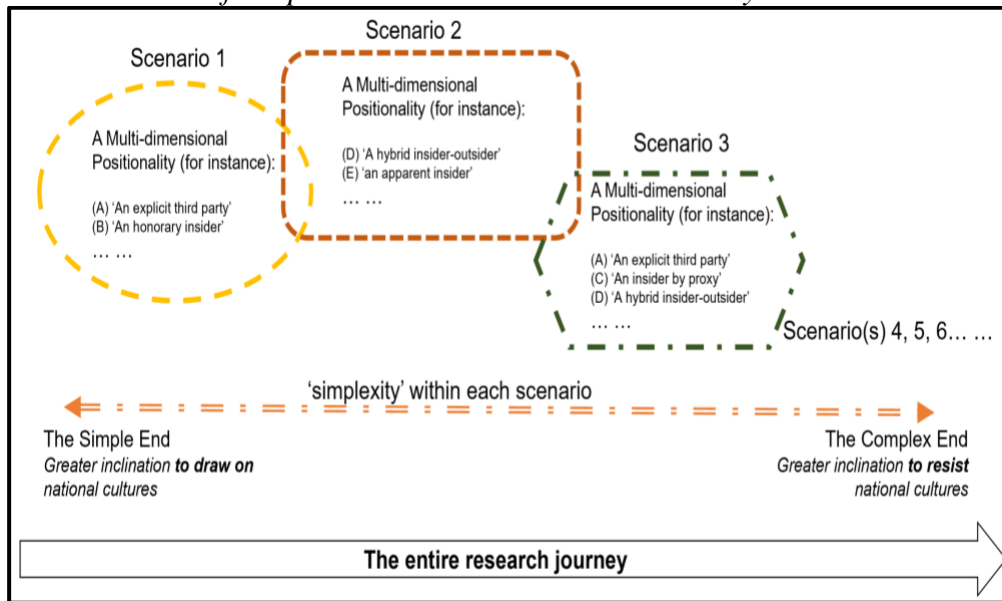
In reality, we decided to have Branda as our ‘culture broker’, for we know that a local teacher with a senior position can function well in recruiting participants in China (a sort of simplification). We realized that males (either participants or lecturers) could be more favored in language-related departments within many universities in China (a sort of stereotyping). Also, Leena had already reminded participants in Austria not to raise “politically sensitive topics” during the online discussion based on her previous experience and knowledge of China (a sort of generalization). It tells that researchers sometimes rely on national cultures to facilitate the research process, to ensure the progress of a research project, or to make it ultimately feasible. Alternatively, researchers passively simplify the research process owing to the enforcement of given social and political structures (e.g., Which language is allowed? What platform can be used? What content can be discussed? etc.)

Having recognized the simplex nature within the process of researcher positionality construction, we nuanced our multi-dimensional positionality into simplex multi-dimensional positionality to emphasize that researchers can decide the extent to which they intend to draw on or resist national cultures (i.e., swinging between *simple* and *complex* ends) when they make sense of positionality. We researchers cannot fully reach the complexity, nor will we allow ourselves to the full simplicity end with stereotypes, oversimplification, or overgeneralization. Whether it is the *simple* or *complex* end that researchers intend to slide, it merely indicates the tendency or willingness of (not) drawing on national cultures to construct our positionality, for positionality can always be multi-dimensional in any research context. To sum up, our conceptualization of simplex multi-dimensional positionality is visualized in the following Figure 2.

As Figure 2 shows, throughout the entire research journey, we researchers interact and communicate with the researched all the time and many scenarios (i.e., particular researcher-participant engagements) could occur. For each scenario, we do not simply play the so-called unidimensional positionality, i.e., an outsider or insider. In fact, based on our reflexive interpretations, researcher positionality could be multiple directions and sometimes, these directions are even overlapping. From this perspective, we present multi-dimensional positionality within each scenario as displayed in the above figure.

At the same time, when we researchers enact our multi-dimensional positionality, we may also draw on the simplexity approach, which then helps us to decide the extent to which we are willing to embrace the national cultures and recognise the sequential impacts imposed by these national cultural elements. This process is indicated by the two-sided-arrow line at the bottom of Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
*The Formation of Simplex Multi-dimensional Positionality*



*Note.* Based on the theoretical discussion within the paper, this model was created by the authors to present their conceptualization of the researcher positionality.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we explored and demonstrated how our own positionality evolved by reflexively interpreting four salient scenarios contextualized in the cross-border COIL project we conducted. Through our reflections, we are able to unfold its fluid and dynamic nature, which echoes the current scholarship discussion on researcher positionality. More meaningfully, we further the understanding of fluid researcher positionality by arguing that researcher positionality is also possibly constructed in a multi-dimensional way. This occurs because the researcher-participant dynamics can have multiple orientations when we researchers respond to culturally different participants or specific socio-spatial contexts. In addition, our researchers' (social) markers or actions for research (re-)design also contribute to that multi-dimensional positionality.

Moreover, further interrogation of the implied insider-outsider binarism within the constructed multi-dimensional positionality has led us to refine and develop it into a concept called simplex multi-dimensional positionality. In a sense, interpreting and suggesting researcher positionality as simplex multi-dimensional positionality, we not only refute the conventionally polarized view on positionality (as many existing scholars have done) but also underscore two features in terms of researcher positionality formation, namely:

1. Researcher positionality can always be multi-dimensional in the research context rather than an “in-betweener” sliding between insider and outsider.
2. Researchers may draw on or resist national cultures to form such multi-dimensional positionality on a specific occasion. Thus, it is not the essentialized categorization (i.e., insider-outsider divide) that makes researchers sway but the inclination or willingness of (not) drawing on national cultures (i.e., *simple* or *complex*) that keeps researchers swinging.

Therefore, for constructing fuller multi-dimensional positionality, we researchers should always spare no effort to reach the noble objectives of non-essentialism by exploring the researcher-participant dynamics through processual and contextual analysis. In the

meantime, throughout the entire research journey, we also need to acknowledge the intervention of national cultures (if any) and reflect on our own willingness or motive for doing so, as well as possible impacts on the formation of our simplex multi-dimensional positionality in each specific context.

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