

Bias and Positionality in Educational Research: A Quick Guide

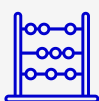


Common types of bias in educational research



Recruitment bias

This occurs when certain groups are systematically included or excluded during participant selection. This can be intentional (based on the research question) or unintentional. For example, sampling only Y1 students in a study about undergraduates is appropriate if your focus is about first years. However, it would be limiting if your aim is to generalise findings across all year groups. Note that individuals or groups can also introduce self-selection bias through their choice of whether or not to participate. Although this may limit generalisability, it can also enable issues pertinent to particular groups to be uncovered.



Measurement bias

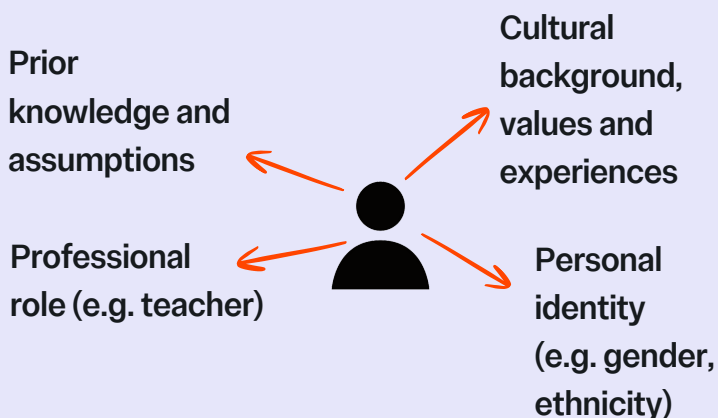
This occurs when certain variables are considered easier to measure than others, which can lead to over-reliance on those measures. The type(s) of data you collect should be guided by your research question. Depending on the question, focusing only on what's easily measured (e.g. observable behaviour) may lead to incomplete or skewed findings.



Reporting bias

This occurs when only 'positive', significant, or expected outcomes are reported, while 'non-favourable' or non-significant findings are omitted. Depending on the research aims, this can misrepresent the overall findings.

What makes up a researcher's positionality?



Common misconceptions



Positionality = Bias

→ Bias is often assumed to be something to eliminate, but in research it cannot be fully removed. Like positionality, bias should be acknowledged, made transparent, and critically reflected on, which can make it constructive.



Reflexivity = Subjectivity

→ Reflexivity is about awareness, being transparent and acknowledging your standpoint. It's not about striving for neutrality.

Practical steps for researchers



To address bias:

1. Identify potential biases that may arise during recruitment, data collection, measurement, or interpretation.



2. Adapt your design to reduce bias, where appropriate (e.g. diverse sampling, validated tools, consistent procedures). Some bias may be intentional for the aims of a project, but where unavoidable it can be managed.



3. Be transparent about potential limitations. Report identified biases and reflect on how they might have influenced your findings.



To engage with positionality:

- Include a considered positionality statement in your ethics application and methodology.
- Practice reflexivity (ongoing self-awareness and reflection) throughout the research process.
- Work with others to gain multiple, and potentially broader, perspectives.

