

**IDENTITY POSITIONING OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS IN  
NETWORKED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

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This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for  
any other degree or diploma.

Signature .....

## **Abstract**

As the highest degree awarded, successful completion of a doctorate demands that learners work at a conceptual level. The demands of independent, original research intended to extend knowledge in a field can lead to oscillating feelings of confidence, acceptance, and belonging—intellectually and socially. Exposure to new ideas, norms, and ethics can cause learners to question their position within their various social contexts. The descriptions of doctoral experiences of identity positioning in networked learning environments is the focus of this thesis. I set out to examine to what extent doctoral students in two NL programs experience identity positioning; how they describe this process; and whether or not positioning might be described differently by students in different fields.

This investigation took place at a distance university in Canada in which the learners used networking technologies to exchange information and discuss ideas. Participants were solicited from doctoral courses offered via networked learning in education and business. The main method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed and coded through qualitative open coding in which I sought themes indicative of social positioning. Discourse analysis was also used to aid in the analysis of interview transcripts, allowing deeper interrogation of the meanings of and relationships between specific utterances appearing within the transcripts.

The results indicate that doctoral students experience identity positioning across multiple aspects of their lives including, but not limited to their social, intimate, professional, and academic contexts.

The importance of this work is partially directed towards the concerns of governments and funding agencies that may pass over the intangible benefits of doctoral studies in search of direct and measureable economic and social outcomes. More importantly, this work is intended to draw attention to the variety of social contexts that may impact doctoral students' experiences, and how these influences might influence learners' persistence, completion, and enjoyment of doctoral studies.

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Souleles, N., Bonzo, J., Costello, J., & Koole, M. (April, 2012). A social constructionist approach to phenomenographic analysis of identity positioning in networked learning. In M. Koole & J. Costello (Symposium organizers), *Variations in the Experience of Phenomenographic Research* at the 8th International Conference on Networked Learning. Maastricht, NL.



## List of abbreviations and Canadian terms

### Abbreviations

|     |                              |
|-----|------------------------------|
| DA  | Discourse analysis           |
| NL  | Networked learning           |
| SPC | Social positioning cycle     |
| TEL | Technology-enhanced learning |

### Canadian Term

### British Term

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| Candidacy                | Confirmation  |
| Course                   | Module  |
| Program                  | Course  |
| Professor (general term) | Full-professor, assistant professor, associate professor, lecturer, and tutor |

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*They don't understand what a doctorate is. And, in fact, when I first went into the program, I mentioned to my teacher-aid that I was going to take a doctorate. And, she said, "Why are you going to become a doctor for? You're already a teacher. Medicine's yucky."*

– Study participant

### 1.1 Introduction

The above quote highlights the experience of some learners in discussing their decision to start a doctoral degree: friends, family, co-workers, and community members may react in unexpected ways. Post-graduate degrees offered through online communications and learning technologies permit interaction between learners from different geographic, social, cultural, political, economic, and occupational backgrounds. While studying, these learners remain not only connected to, but often immersed in these environments. Consider the possible answers to the question: "Who are you?" Responses may elicit information about relational positions, skills, values, and experiences. These answers may differentiate or link the speaker and other participants in a shared discourse. For example, the statement, "I am a doctoral student", positions the speaker amongst others who have attained their own levels of education. A key aim of this thesis is to explore how networked learners in doctoral programs reposition themselves when confronted with discourses that challenge or conflict with their perceived identities, relationships, norms, and values. What kinds of discourses lead graduate-level learners to reconsider their understanding of their communities and their place within them?

Identity is a complex phenomenon that is neither purely individual nor purely social in its construction; rather, it is co-constructed through dialogue embedded within a context of relationships. As will be argued, one's self conception(s) is a significant factor in learning and the formation of social knowledge. And, the impact of these processes in networked environments can impact personal, professional, and local boundaries.

It is challenging to theorize and define identity. It is an aspect of the human existence that can be experienced, constructed, negotiated, enacted, and deciphered, yet remains elusive because of its ephemeral nature. Identity

positioning occurs within a context of discourses. Within these discourses, individuals are exposed to opinions, behaviours, and perspectives that may be incongruent or conflicting with already held views. These conflicts may lead individuals to evaluate and shift their position relative to a given discourse(s). In their 2011 literature review of professional identity development, Trede, Macklin and Bridges noted that few of the articles they found provided in-depth definitions of identity. They noted that Lawler (2008) described identity as involving the recognition of similarity and difference. I would add that *discernment* of identity is made possible through recognition of unique patterns of similarity and difference of individuals' characteristics.

The descriptions of doctoral experiences of identity positioning in networked learning environments is the focus of this thesis. This investigation took place at a distance university in Canada in which the learners use networking technologies to exchange information and discuss ideas. Participants were solicited from doctoral courses offered through networked learning in education and business. The learners were invited to complete a brief survey allowing purposeful sampling. Selected participants were then invited to semi-structured interviews. The resulting transcripts were subjected to analysis through open coding. Discourse analysis was also used to gain insights regarding the underlying nuances within the participants' interview comments. In writing this thesis, I offer my interpretation of the participants' social positioning experiences in networked learning contexts. At the end of each chapter, I will offer reflections on my research journey: what led to this research project, positions that guided my work, and my relationship with this project.

In the first section of this chapter, I describe the context of doctoral education, technology-enhanced learning (TEL) and networked learning (NL), and the social constructionist nature of this investigation. The second section will provide a brief overview of the study design. The final section will provide definitions for the key terms used in the following chapters.

### 1.1.1 The nature of doctoral-level studies

The doctoral degree can be traced back to the University of Paris in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Bourner, Bowden, & Laing, 2001). The attainment of such a qualification entitled an individual to participate in a guild (Chiteng Kot &

Hendel, 2011). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Doctor of Philosophy degree (PhD) as a research degree was created at Berlin University. The PhD degree later appeared at Yale in the USA in 1861, Toronto in Canada in 1897, and Oxford in the UK in 1917 (Chiteng Kot & Hendel, 2011). There now exists a variety of doctoral degrees such as professional, applied, practitioner, and clinical doctorates (Chiteng Kot & Hendel, 2011) with a variety of routes to completion including module-based, research-based, publication-based, portfolio-based, work-based and, in the case of fine and performing arts, exhibition/theatre-based (Costly & Lester, 2011; Paltridge, Starfield, Ravelli, & Nicholson, 2011). To this list of variations, we can add changes in modality. Online technologies mean that doctoral programs can be delivered primarily or partially at a distance.

Attempts have been made to differentiate between the traditional PhD and professional doctorates. However, because of the variations in characteristics of both types of doctorates, they can be viewed on a continuum of more to less traditional (Bourner, Bowden, & Laing, 2001; Chiteng Kot & Hendel, 2011; Neumann, 2005). Notwithstanding efforts to modify traditional PhD courses to accommodate the demands of knowledge production and social accountability in the current economy (Kuang-Hsu, 2003), the newer professional doctorates are seen to offer greater flexibility to accommodate the needs of professionals and practitioners as well as offering cohort experiences that are less solitary and more supportive than traditional PhDs (Loxley & Seery, 2011; Neumann, 2005; Wellington & Sikes, 2006). In the social sciences, numbers of professional doctorates have been increasing in the areas of education, business, management and administration, social work, and law (Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2005).

Compared to science students (in traditional programs), education students (in professional programs) are often middle-aged, mid-career professionals with significant experience, may have some level of authority and seniority, and hold a master's degree or professional designation (Costly & Lester, 2011; Kamler, 2008). Learners in professional fields may wish to pursue opportunities in academia, but may also have various other aspirations such as attaining senior positions in their institutions, becoming involved in policy development, or working freelance (Leonard, et. al., 2005). In addition, to motivational factors, the doctoral experience may be complicated by familial and financial issues.

The *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (Barber, 2004) defines *doctorate* as “the highest university degree in any faculty”. This is echoed in a definition offered by Park (2007): “The doctorate is the highest academic degree that a university can award to a student who has successfully completed a defined programme of work in a particular field of study” (p. 4). Although doctoral degrees may be completed through a variety of different routes, doctoral degrees require learners to work at a conceptual level (Trafford, 2008). The literature suggests that doctoral students are expected to

- work independently (particularly in the social sciences);
- have a solid background in their field of study, including both seminal works and current developments;
- evaluate historic and new contributions to the field;
- examine the field critically, reflectively, creatively, and analytically;
- be able to identify gaps in knowledge enabling a unique contribution to the field;
- conceptualize an original research project that will extend knowledge in their field;
- participate in peer dialogue through publications and conferences; and
- be able to communicate and defend their understanding of their field.

(Chiteng Kot & Hendel, 2011; Hockey, 1994; Kamler, 2008; Lovitts, 2005; Phillips & Pugh, 2008; Wellington & Sikes, 2006)

Alongside this list, doctoral students need to familiarize themselves with the norms, ethics, and techniques of their field. They are expected to forge links between concepts, synthesize ideas, critique the work of others, and accept critique of their own work (Trafford, 2008). As Barnacle (2007) acknowledges, it is not so much a question of acquiring or producing knowledge, but “being able to engage with the problematical status of knowledge” (p. 186).

Traditionally, the research degree was viewed as a rite of passage (Hockey, 1994) in which the student becomes independent and autonomous in the research endeavour (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000). The Western European cartesianist view is that science is objective and requires the separation of reason from emotion with abstract thought autonomous from that of

everyday life (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000). To an extent this view still underlies expectations creating a separation between a novice embedded in the world and an objective researcher legitimized as a steward of knowledge overseeing a given field (Lee & Williams, 1999). A more social constructionist lens would view knowledge as co-constructed with multiple perspectives possible and contingent upon personal, social historical, and cultural contexts (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2007).

As learners work within the boundaries of the academic context, their identities take shape. "When people enter what is for them a new social context such as higher education, they are likely to find that its discourses and practices support identities which differ from those they bring with them" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 33). At the doctoral level, learners need to adjust to expectations of a community viewed as the upper echelon of academia and, sometimes, society.

### 1.1.2 Issues associated with doctoral studies

Kuang-Hsu (2003) noted that the 1980s saw heightened concern with poor completion rates in the social sciences. The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (2004) conducted a 10-year cohort study of 66% of graduate students admitted in 1992. They found that rates of completion for doctoral students across universities range between 34% and 71% with life sciences graduating the largest number of students over the 10-year period. Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat, & Farley (2004) examined the statistics from two data sets involving 1796 doctoral students in Australia. They found that "the most reliable estimates of completing and withdrawing candidates from the yearly cohorts of students enrolling in a PhD was 70 and 30 per cent (respectively) after up to six years of full-time equivalent enrolment, called 'candidacy' time" (p. 13). A study done by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (2007) found that "of the students who started a full-time PhD programme in 1996-97, 76 per cent completed their PhD within 10 years" and that "those starting a part-time PhD programme in 1996-97, 48 per cent completed their PhD within 10 years" (p.2). And, according to the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, only 57% of students who begin their doctoral degree complete within 10 years (2008). Even at the highest completion levels, this suggests that nearly 24% to 30% of students do not complete their PhDs within 10 years. And, this is possibly higher for part-time

students. "Attrition from doctoral programs can be a serious issue in terms of human and national investment and research capacity building in contemporary economies" (Kiley & Wisker, 2009).

Doctorate degree holders may be recognized as the "primary originators of new research and key instruments in the transmission of knowledge to future generations" (King, Eisl-Culkin, & Desjardins, 2008). Yet, the discourses surrounding doctoral degrees are problematic. Governments and funding agencies are challenged to rationalize support of higher level degrees without adequate evidence of contribution to national economic and social progress. In the UK, researchers are encouraged to "convert their research outcomes into genuine improvements for UK society and the economy, and thus produce 'economic impact'" (Research Councils UK, 2012, p. 3). The value of doctoral education is questioned because of: "high attrition rates, prolonged time-to-completion, the relevance of doctoral study to the real world, and the extent to which doctoral graduates contribute to the workplace, knowledge economies, and the social, cultural and economic development of nation states" (Halse & Mowbray, 2011, p. 519).

Increases in doctoral enrolments around the world, accompanied by an increasingly diverse doctoral student demographic with wider age ranges, more part-time enrolments, different purposes, and a variety of employment choices following graduation contribute to the difficulty to measure the complex ways in which doctoral research affects society (Halse & Mowbray, 2011). Nevertheless, doctoral studies may have significant impacts on society as learners emerge with increased "resilience, creativity, determination and problem-solving abilities that shape the subjectivities and identities of individuals and make a longer term contribution to the public and social good" (Halse & Mowbray, 2011, p. 521). Wellington and Sikes (2006) also note "it is more a case that the doctorate has had influence and impact (sometimes obliquely) on professional attitude, disposition and confidence rather than directly affecting 'performance'" (p.724). Currently, there is little research on either how TEL and NL will impact completion rates nor on the impact success, or challenges of NL-trained academics in their professional, personal, or academic worlds.



### 1.1.3 Networked learning

When the first research degree was established at Berlin University, knowledge was transmitted from master to apprentice (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). Information was contained in books, and students manually transcribed lessons to paper. Today's electronic technologies, in contrast, have enabled new ways of communicating with people and accessing resources. Ylijoki (2011) discusses a process of acceleration in academic research accompanied by decreased government funding and increased market demands for research output. Academics are expected to produce more with less. Increases in speed of dissemination and technological advances are associated with increased pressure to reposition their research within the academic community and global markets.

While related, TEL and NL differ in focus. The phrase, "technology-enhanced learning" derives more so from funding agencies than from the academic world (Parchoma, 2011). The term places an emphasis upon the role of *technology* and the ability to provide cost-effective access to education to a large number of people. NL, however, emphasizes the relationships between learners, tutors, and resources without privileging any particular relationships or technology (Parchoma, 2011; Jones, Ferreday, & Hodgson, 2008). In a NL environment, learners can access a large variety of resources, experts, and learners with less face-to-face interaction; technology mediates these relationships (Hodgson, McConnell, & Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2012). Values associated with humanistic and radical pedagogy were also drawn upon in the evolution of NL (McConnell, Hodgson, & Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2012). This led to an emphasis upon collaborative environments characterized by openness, self-directed learning, authenticity of purpose, supportiveness, collaborative assessment, and continuous assessment during the learning process (McConnell, Hodgson, & Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2012).

Through current technologies, information can be disseminated rapidly and, as new information becomes available, meaning shifts in relation to the field and the individuals working within the field. In other words, as learners collaborate in NL environments how they perceive, interpret, and understand the world affects how they act upon the world and how they create artefacts, reify knowledge, and externalize experiences (Hopwood, 2010). With this

view, I take a relational, social constructionist approach to identity development in NL environments.

#### 1.1.4 A social constructionist approach

The social constructionist nature of this thesis merits some explanation. Social constructionism was popularized, primarily in Sociology by Berger and Luckmann's publication of *The Social Construction of Reality* in 1966. It has since spread through many different fields such as History, Anthropology, Political Science, Communications Studies, Literature, and to some extent in Psychology (Best, 2008). As Weinberg (2008) writes, the origins of social constructionism can be traced through the work of great philosophers such as Hegel and Marx who explored the interactions of social and individual processes. Some philosophers began to ponder the degree to which knowledge was socially embedded and constructed, leading critical theorists, in particular, to theorize about the emancipatory power of recognizing previously unquestioned, taken-for-granted assumptions (Hacking, 1999; Freire, 1993; Mezirow, 1978). Language as a structural force, source of consciousness, and a means of action in the world grew in philosophical importance in the structuralist view. Post-modernists, however, react negatively towards the concept of universal and linguistic laws of behaviour.

Social constructionists today may or may not support the views of either modernists or post-modernists. They may fit on a continuum of views in which one extreme sees an underlying, independently-existing reality versus a view of multiple realities on the other extreme. Their position on this continuum may reflect their opinions of whether or not two people can have the same perspective on reality (Burr, 2003; Edwards, 1997; Harris, 2008). More importantly is the ability to judge the *distortion* of one's understanding of the world (Weinberg, 2008). Social constructionists do not necessarily reject historical influences that have affected the emergence of cultural practices and concepts, but expose patterns of thought and behaviour.

Social constructionists are generally anti-foundational; that is, there is no underlying objective state or universal pattern of reality. Instead, they would suggest, many social realities exist (Burr, 2003; Foster & Bochner, 2008). Language plays a critical role in the shaping of the social world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2009; Burr, 2003). Ideas and concepts are linguistically and socially embedded. People share meanings and coordinate

activity through communication (Gergen, 2009). Ideas and concepts are constructed within lived experience in a socio-historic context which, in a dialectic sense, both “enables and constrains meaning and actions” (Foster & Bochner, 2009, p. 92). Yet, constructionists do not necessarily align with social determinists. They would contend that people are self-aware and have the capacity to examine themselves, those around them, and their circumstances—and, importantly, can act upon these observations (Hacking, 1999). Finally, constructionism is non-dualistic: the mind and the body, the body and the environment, the individual and society shape and reshape each other. “Identity is not socially *determined* but socially *constructed*” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 12).

## **1.2 Overview of this investigation**

### **1.2.1 Purpose**

For NL students, the boundaries between professional, social, and academic contexts can become blurred. As the learner’s cultures collide, their underlying values, narratives, experiences, and pedagogical expectations become salient. The main goal of this thesis is to explore how doctoral students in NL graduate programs experience challenges to their current identities, norms, and relationships across the various boundaries of their social worlds.

The main research questions:

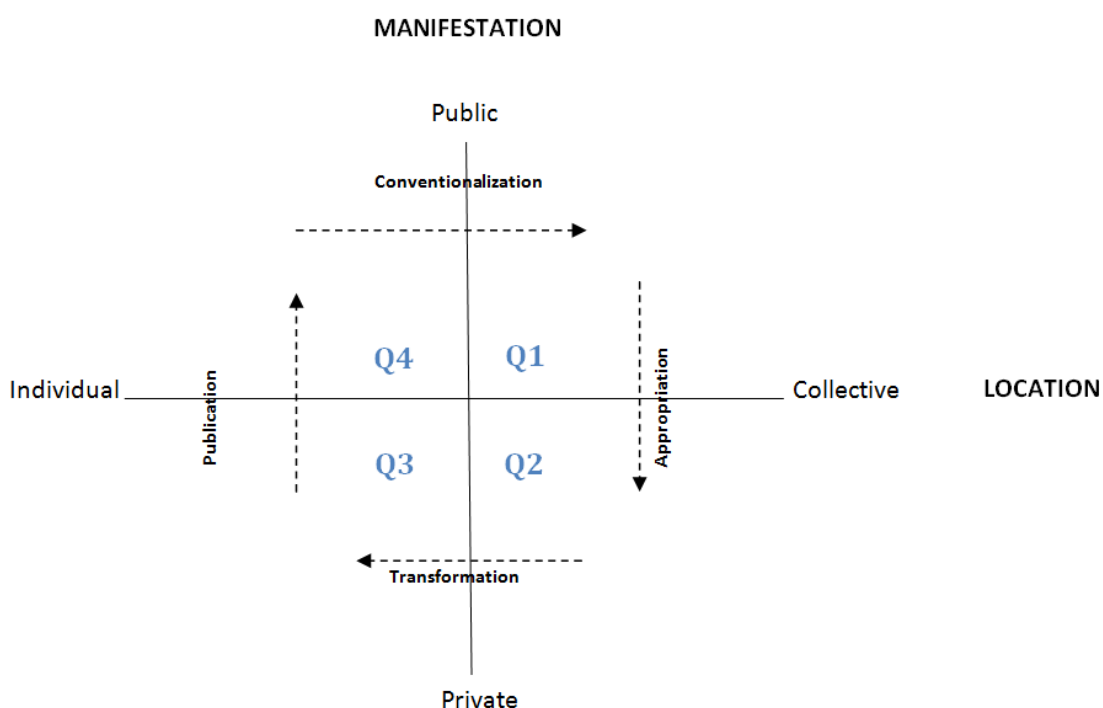
1. How do doctoral learners in NL programs describe identity positioning?
2. How do doctoral students in NL programs experience identity positioning in relation to their field of study (Education or Business)?

### **1.2.2 Theoretical framework in brief**

Positioning refers to how individuals interact, co-create, and perceive themselves in relation to one another (Harré, 2010). Within the boundaries of the academic context, learners’ identities take shape as they react to discourses that may at times support their self-conceptions and at other times may cause reflection upon, discomfort with, and/or rejection of these conceptions. Their

efforts to make sense of incongruent discourses may lead to relative repositioning of oneself.

To explore identity positioning, I draw upon Harré's (2010) social positioning cycle (Figure 1.1) as a framework for exploring personal and social processes of identity formation (quadrants: Q2 and Q3) as well as conventionalized processes and observable expression (quadrants: Q1 and Q4).



**Figure 1.1. The social positioning cycle.**

The transformation from Q2, appropriated / observed discourses, to Q3, liminal space, may be triggered by a critical event (variation) leading to awareness and evaluation. Emergence from Q3 can be detected in Q4 through publication; that is, in Q4, a learner narrates or enacts the new or retrenched identity. This framework will be explained in detail in Chapter 2, the literature review.

### 1.2.3 Methodological approach

I decided to conduct a qualitative study in order to explore and describe the range of learners' perceptions of experiences as they may approximate or

differ from those of other learners. Using a preliminary questionnaire, nineteen participants were solicited from online (networked) doctoral programs in education and business from a distance university in Canada. During semi-structured interviews, they were asked to describe their experiences as doctoral students according to a list of questions (Appendix C). I used open coding which allowed me to create coding-categories as I noted possible and salient social positioning descriptions in the transcripts. I also applied codes derived from discourse analysis (Potter, 1996; Gee, 2011) to more deeply interrogate the meaning and structure of specific utterances within the participants' transcribed comments. As themes emerged, I examined them for patterns and co-occurrences. These procedures are described in detail in Chapter 3 (methodological approach).

#### 1.2.4 Scope

I had originally envisioned studying both master-level students and doctoral-level students with the intent of comparing social positioning between the two groups. The scope of this study was, however, intentionally limited to doctoral students from education and business to control the range of variability encountered. Doctoral studies are intense experiences because of length of time to completion, financial considerations, and criticality of thought. These factors suggested to me that positioning experiences would likely be greater at the doctoral-level than those experienced at the master-level. I noted during the interviews, that some of the participants felt their master's work was more formative for them. Nevertheless, this investigation has yielded rich insights about the experiences of doctoral learners as they pass through the challenges of their learning journeys.

### 1.3 Key terms

The terms listed here are used throughout this thesis and are integral to understanding this work. The terms are not in alphabetical order; rather, they are presented so as to build upon one another.

#### 1.3.1 Discourse

As Potter (1998) suggests discourse concerns "talk and texts as parts of social practices" (p. 105). Discourse implies both the process and product of

interaction; it mediates between individuals and culturally-shaped perceptions of reality (Ivanič, 1998). I use the term in the sense that Gee (2011) offers: “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (p. 201). The ways in which someone uses discourses may change depending upon context and the others present within that context. These shifts can occur as the individual moves through new, unique environments garnering more and different experiences.

### 1.3.2 Learning

There is a close tie between learning and identity. Learning involves a transformation in the ways in which an individual conceptualizes (constructs) his/her world (Edwards & D’Arcy, 2004). Through this process, how individuals view their relative positions to their environment and others within it also transforms.

### 1.3.3 Identity(-ies) / self(-ves)

In this thesis, I often use the terms identity and self in the plural (except in phrases such as *identity positioning thresholds* in which *identity* is used as an adjectival modifier). This is done in order to avoid suggesting that an individual has one identity. I take a social constructionist view of identity in which, as per Ivanič (1998), the self(-ves) undergoes a double construction firstly by drawing upon the constraints and opportunities available within the social milieu and secondly through the social shaping of one’s interpretation of his/her self(-ves). Social contexts offer possibilities for enactment and interpretations from which individuals may choose.

### 1.3.4 Social position

An individual’s position is relative to others within a given social context. Harré (2010) refers to positioning as a “discursive process” in which speakers negotiate their identities (p. 48). “A subject position is a possibility in known forms of talk [discourse]; position is what is created in and through talk as the speakers and hearers take themselves up as persons” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 62). Ivanič also uses the term “positioned” because it captures “the tension between the freedom people have to identify with particular subject positions

through their selection among discursal resources, and the socially determined restrictions on those choices” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 11).

### 1.3.6 Identity positioning

Identity positioning occurs within the context of discourses. Whilst learners engage in discourse with each other in a given context, they may be exposed to conflicting opinions, behaviours, and perspectives. These conflicting experiences may lead them to re-evaluate their own opinion, behaviours, and perspectives. If discourses are sufficiently critical, individuals may explore how to change these facets of their identity(-ies). Changes in these elements may affect how the social interactions are ordered—that is, an individual’s relational position(s) within the social discourse(s) can shift.

Identity positioning may occur when a learner detects variations that challenge his/her understanding of his/her own social position within a given discourse to such a degree that s/he must consider changing his/her outward narrative, observable behaviour, and/or his/her understanding of the discursive experience. In recounting an identity positioning experience, the learner can describe how s/he felt or behaved before a given experience and if (or how) it was different after the experience. The learner may also describe experiencing a state of unknowing or indecision at some point in the process. This state of unknowing may indicate a liminal space in which he/she was unable to decide how to describe him/herself or how to engage within a given discourse.

## 1.5 Personal reflections

This investigation was inspired through my own experiences as a distance graduate student. I completed both my master’s and doctoral degrees online with a minimum of physical, face-to-face contact with my fellow learners and professors. During both programs, I worked nearly full-time with the exception of the last two years of my doctoral degree. I enjoyed the flexibility of the programs and the lack of observable department politics. I could focus on reading and writing. As I progressed, I remained immersed in my own family, friends, and professional life.

But, my experiences in my master’s program were somewhat different from those of my doctoral program. My master’s program was not cohort-based,

and I did not really feel I “knew” the other learners. And, I was little concerned about this. There were times when I would start a new course and commit myself to getting to know my classmates, but within the first few weeks, I began to focus on my own studies, relinquishing any motivation to communicate with peers other than within the seemingly perfunctory and mandatory online text-based discussions. Getting to know the other learners simply did not seem relevant.

As I began my doctoral degree, I saw that I would be studying lock-step with my cohort through various modules during the first few years. It seemed that I would have to find a way to work with my fellow students during group projects and peer editing. In the first few text-based forums, it seemed to me that various members of my cohort were expounding upon their academic and professional experience, their level of knowledge, and their ability to criticize (rather than “critique”) ideas. It seemed like a bit of chest-beating to me. Although, I participated in this show, I became interested in these interactions. How were we presenting ourselves and to what end? Who were these people, really? And, how did I fit in with them? Participating in the forums became relevant as I saw my own interactions relative to theirs. And, through on-going interaction, I could observe our interactions over time—to the extent that a participant could self-observe. As I drew closer to some of my cohort-mates, we would discuss the defensiveness and frustration we sensed. As some cohort-mates dropped out or intercalated with later cohorts, we would ponder why.

My own fascination with our relative positioning amongst my cohort led me to consider studying identity formation and positioning in more depth. And, working with doctoral students in a professional role at another university, I came to view this project as having significance in its potential to illuminate areas of difficulty that might challenge doctoral students’ progression through their studies. Through this study, I have come to believe that doctoral study is much more than learning to work at a conceptual level or learning to deal with the problematic nature of knowledge or contributing to the body of knowledge in one’s discipline. It transforms the relational position of the learner to society, her/his family, co-workers, and the academic world.



## 1.4 Thesis outline

In addition to this introductory chapter, this thesis contains five additional chapters:

- Literature review: This chapter discusses literature pertaining to TEL and NL. It outlines how I have taken a social constructionist approach to identity and offers a discussion of theories of identity generally and in NL environments. The chapter then moves to a discussion of the theoretical framework: the social positioning cycle (adapted from Harré, 2010). The chapter ends with key literature regarding doctoral study as an identity positioning experience.
- Methodological approach: This chapter opens with a brief description of open coding and discourse analysis. Subsequently, it outlines the procedures used in data collection, and analysis. The chapter closes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and acknowledgement of the research ethics procedures.
- Research findings: This chapter opens with an overview of the data collected. The chapter briefly reviews Harré's social positioning cycle and outlines the discursive techniques used in the analysis. The majority of the chapter is devoted to representing the participants' descriptions of their social positioning experiences.
- Discussion: This chapter ties the results to the literature review. Firstly, it opens with a discussion of the demographics of the participants and the technological setting in which they studied as well as the setting in which the study took place. The chapter discusses the participants' experiences of positioning in light of current literature. The chapter closes with a discussion of the differences found between education and business students.
- Conclusions and implications.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

*Thoughts are not parts of the mind, but moments in a narrative, the author of which is myself. The episodes of the story each person tells of—and to—himself or herself are unified by virtue of the fact that each person deploys a concept of self and indulges in the socially inculcated practice of self-predication.*

-- Harre, 2010, p. 131

### 2.1 Introduction

Communications technologies open possibilities for communications with people outside local boundaries. Increasingly able to reach beyond the local, the “burden of identity is shifting towards the person” (2011, recording time 98:15). Wenger suggests that this is one of the characteristics of modernity and that “the 21st Century will be the century of identity” (2011, slide 14). One of the underlying purposes of this thesis research is to explore how doctoral learners in NL environments see themselves and their relationships with others, how and when these perceptions are repositioned, and what leads to these shifts. In this chapter, I will provide a background for the technology-enhanced learning landscape in which this research was conducted. In the second section, I will outline the social constructionist approach that I take towards identity positioning, alluding to some of the key theorists upon which I have drawn. In this section, I will also discuss identity as it pertains to both face-to-face and networked environments. The third section introduces social positioning. The fourth section introduces the social positioning cycle (SPC) as a framework for understanding social interaction. In the fifth section, I use the SPC as a framework for discussing online identity, the doctoral experience, and related literature. In the last section, I examine the literature for evidence of research on doctoral students’ experiences within different contexts.

### 2.2 The technology-enhanced learning landscape

The use of computers and communications networks in education has influenced a variety of learning approaches of which TEL is but one. TEL is a broad term encompassing a large array of technical and pedagogical options. This thesis focuses specifically on NL and, as such, places an emphasis on relational aspects of online learning. In NL, learning and identity are seen to

emerge from interaction within networks of people and resources (Parchoma, 2011; Ferreday, Hodgson, & Jones, 2006). Exposure to networks is both enhanced and limited by the learning environments. To elaborate, the media of the learning environment influence positioning by aiding and/or restricting certain manners of expression. At the same time, participants actively struggle to manipulate the medium and available symbols with which to position themselves (Savin-Baden & Sinclair, 2007).

Trede, Macklin, and Bridges (2011) conducted a literature review on professional identity development in higher education resulting in the location of 20 relevant journal articles. My own search through the literature has revealed that there are even fewer studies on the formation and maintenance of learner identity in NL, perhaps due to the relative youth of the field (Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson, & McConnell, 2012). The first NL conference was held in 1998 at Lancaster University (McConnell, Hodgson, & Dirckinck-Holmfeld 2012), and has become an emerging area of interest.

In NL, how an individual understands her/his relational position influences emotional processes connected to learning and social development. Hypothetically, awareness of the learning-self can enable individuals to better evaluate troublesome experiences (Land, Cousin & Meyer, 2005; Meyer & Land, 2005). The ability to harness opportunities and choices arising from such struggles could, perhaps, allow a greater sense of agency to emerge (Davies & Harré, 1990). One's awareness of self-as-learner—along with the potential for an increased sense of security and agency in learning activities—may transfer across learning situations and influence the formation of the learner's other identities be they personal, professional, or academic (Coll & Falsafi, 2010).

Epistemologically, this relational approach complements a social constructionist view in which discursive experience with people and resources influences an individual's self-conception, goals, and future social behaviour. Identities are constructed through discourse, reciprocity, and reflectivity; they are in continuous flux, construed differently from different relational positions.

## 2.3 A social constructionist approach to identity

This thesis takes up identity from a social constructionist view of learning in relation to identity and doctoral-level study. Through the use of communications technologies, doctoral students in NL programs are able to interact across physical, socio-linguistic, and political boundaries. Doctoral students can continue to work and live within local contexts yet interact with others who may be located on different continents.

### 2.3.1 Social constructionism

Philosophers have pondered issues concerning personal identity and its relation to ethics from the time of the ancient Greeks. They have taken perspectives from the psychological, biological, and narrative in an effort to answer questions pertaining to ethics, illness, and existence itself (Olson, 2010; Schechtman, 1996; Shoemaker, 2009). Fitzmaurice (2011) outlines four key stages in leading to current conceptions of identity. She notes that in the mid-seventeenth century, identity was acquired through shared practice and the acceptance of given truths as transmitted through authority. The work of Descartes opened the door to the questioning of authority permitting individual thought and reflection. The 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century led to an interest in individual freedom and ability of individuals to shape their own identities. Finally, in Fitzmaurice's fourth stage, the post-modernist movement, identity became conceptualized as continually changing, subject to influences of individual and context in a process of co-construction.

I do not take an *extreme* view of social constructionism in which the world and all our conceptions of it are purely socially constructed (Hacking, 1999). Nor do I take an *individual constructivist* view in which identity is shaped within the individual mind (Gergen & Gergen, 2008; Gergen, 2009). The constructionist position that I take is that a learner's conceptions of identity are continuously co-constructed, shaped, and reshaped by his/her ability to discern variation in behaviour and narrative within unfolding contexts of interaction. Within this view, identity is "fluid, particularistic, and sociohistorically embedded" (Weinberg, 2008, p. 14). Identity, like other human products is not inevitable, but contingent. Learners can actively direct their own future by constructing who they are in relation to their context.

Philosophically, social constructionists see individuals' conceptions as constantly changing through dialogue. Although unable to access others' subjective perceptions directly, constructionists recognize that people may perceive their conceptions to make up an already existing, objective reality. Berger & Luckmann (1966) grapple with this in their description of the processes of *externalization, objectivation, and internalization* (p. 104).

In my research, I try to consider descriptions from the perspective of the research participants and the original context of the described experience. I try to avoid reaching beyond their descriptions of their experience in order to presume an underlying reality or essence. This philosophical orientation is different from that of critical realists who support, to varying degrees, the dualistic, Cartesian separation of mind and world. Instead, I take the position that the mind and the world work together as a whole. What this suggests about identity research for me is that as individuals interact with each other and the world they perceive around them, they constantly create and re-create their sense of self(-ves) and their conceptions of their world. As identities and social positions mutate, individuals might even be said to be shifting discourses.

### 2.3.2 Relational dialogue, learning, and identity

A quick search of the internet on the topic of student identity will return a number of different approaches and theories. Some of the most common concern roles—that is, the student role, the teacher role, and in the case of doctoral studies, the role of the supervisor. The word, *role*, is somewhat troublesome within a social constructionist perspective. It suggests a fixed set of duties or social behaviours that are defined *a priori* to actual social interaction. The *Differentiated Model of Role Identity Acquisition* is used to examine the alignment of behaviour to roles within a social group (Collier, 2001). But, like *Identity Theory* and *Social Identity Theory*, it takes pre-existing roles as a starting point (Desrochers, Andreassi, & Thompson, 2002). By contrast, social constructionists would more favourably view identity as ephemeral, and under constant construction and deconstruction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003). It is contingent upon contextual factors including the constantly changing identities of the participants themselves alongside their social, cultural, economic, and technological resources. Individuals can choose, adapt, and reject social behaviours that they observe.

Language is significant in the shaping of one's identity and perceptions of the surrounding world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 2009; Burr, 2003). Words, ideas, and how they are applied are dependent upon social context. But, this is not to suggest that ideas are completely socially determined. As socially aware beings, people are capable of examining their experiences and conceptualizations as they interact with others in the world (Hacking, 1999). This ability to examine and self-reflect enables them to become agents in their own evolution. The question for social constructionists is not whether there is an underlying reality or true identity, whether the mind and body are separate—nor for that matter whether the person is separate from the world. Rather, they are more likely to be interested in processes of co-construction as the individual evolves alongside society.

Relational dialogue is a process through which individuals “construct meaning about who [they] are, as well as creating norms and values that determine what is seen as accepted knowledge within a given social and cultural context” (Ferreday, Hodgson & Jones, 2006). Whilst discourse may temporarily reify concepts, it also helps influence understanding of self and the world through a continuous cycle of reconstruction (Hutton, 1988; Merchant, 2006). As Wenger (1998) suggests, identity is what connects the individual and the social. In a learning context, the “situated construction of oneself as a learner is a fundamental part of the educational experience” (Coll & Falsafi, 2010, p. 219). Lave and Packer (2008) further emphasize that academic work is made possible through human relations:

*Learning is construed as the reconstruction of the way a subject is engaged in the world, so that the subject herself or himself is reconfigured, and at the same time there is a reconfiguration of the production and reproduction of objects, whether they be texts, other persons, social events, or institutions. (Lave & Packer, 2008, p. 43).*

### 2.3.3 Key theorists

The significance of dialogue in identity and learning is seen in the seminal works of Cooley (1922), Mead (1934), Vygotsky (1978), and Goffman (1959). Already in the 1920s, Charles Cooley (2009) went so far as to say that the mind and society “are aspects of the same whole” (p. 42) that the individual with all

his/her attributes are all social, “part of the collective development” (p. 19). He used the metaphor of the looking-glass to describe how an individual develops his/her concept of self as it is reflected back at him/her by others. This metaphor persists in the literature as seen in the more recent work of Chayko (2008) who suggests people take on behaviours and roles that they observe of others, and they adapt their own performances and behaviours depending on how they perceive others view them—others become mirrors to the individual.

Writing in 1934, Mead contended that social processes generate the mind and the self. He suggested that language, even when used internally in thought, is essentially social—although it is arguable whether or not it is an “objective phenomenon of social interaction” (Morris, 1934, p. xvi). Mead suggested that understandings emerge through social activity. He began considering private and public experience as opposites, but relative to one another. The notion of self and the ability to self-reflect could arise if an individual could view him/herself as an object (*me*). Similar to Vygotsky’s work later, he also envisaged a process of internalization in which individuals use their experiences with conversation and gestures as symbols for thinking. The *me*, he suggested emerged through social process whilst the *I* is the agent of activity, change, and agency. Mead argued that the meanings individuals attribute to symbols might be similar, but are unlikely to be identical, necessitating the need for cooperation. An individual acts whilst others react or readjust creating a relationship between acts. “Meaning is a content of an object which is dependent upon the relation of an organism or group of organisms to it” (p. 80). Through interaction, individuals learn to adjust their relationship towards objects and each other. Internalization allows them to discern patterns and relationships in their social environment, something Mead refers to as the *generalized other* (p. 90).

According to Wiley (2011), Mead distanced himself from Cooley, yet they shared some similarities such as the ideas of role-taking, inner-speech, the social-self, and the *I* and the *me*. For Mead, reflexivity had two meanings: 1) reflexivity between people, and 2) self-reflectivity. Building on the work of both Cooley and Mead, Wiley suggests that Cooley’s mirror is really two mirrors:

*It is first a mirror reflecting the world in all its aspects, including the physical, social and cultural. This mirror gives us phenomenological consciousness. But*

*the self is also a second mirror, reflecting everything in the first mirror. This second mirror captures the way the self is self-conscious, or, in Mead's terms, has reflexivity. The self is turned onto itself. (p. 184)*

Vygotsky (1978) also noted that memory and the formation of concepts occurred twice: firstly, among people (socially, publicly) and secondly, inside the individual (internally, privately). With regard to identity, Vygotsky (1978) noted a connection between the development of speech and the learner's ability to view oneself as both "subjects and objects of their own behaviour" (p. 26). He also hypothesizes about how "socialized speech" becomes a tool for thinking as it is internalized (p. 27, 57).

Goffman (1959) took a turn towards the dramaturgical. But, similar to Cooley, Mead, and Vygotsky, he also recognized the significance of shared awareness (Scheff, 2003). He viewed social interaction as an interweaving of performances, interpretations of performances, and reactions to performances. Learning to interact socially involves the ability to manage impressions through technical, political, structural, cultural, and dramaturgical techniques used within a given social establishment. Through impressions management, individuals can project their own identities and interpret those of others. Ivanič (1998) notes that Goffman's dramaturgical approach is criticized because it suggests that people are completely free to perform as they please and that performances are seemingly problem free when enacted. However, Koole and Parchoma (2012) suggest through the Web of Identity model that there are tensions inherent in such performances and that performances are adapted from socially available possibilities. Goffman (1959) also acknowledged that interaction is not without difficulties. Discontinuities can be detected between appearance and manner: "the dilemma of expression versus action" (p. 33). He also noted that status, position, and social places are not material, but patterns of behaviour recognized within members of a given context. This, too hints at a relationship between the individual and the socio-cultural context.

#### 2.3.4 Authenticity, fragmentation and embodiment of identity

One may argue that status and social position are kinds of identities—whether identities of individuals, groups of individuals, or establishments. Identities are relational and affected through dialogue and patterns of interaction. One



may additionally argue that individuals are active agents who choose patterns of behaviour in response to the reactions and expectations of others. This suggests that a given individual may choose from a variety of behaviours at different times and contexts (Hyland, 2002). That is, an individual may have multiple and shifting identities. This raises troublesome questions regarding authenticity, fragmentation, and embodiment as the individual moves into doctoral studies and into online, networked environments. The question of authenticity is further exacerbated in the world of online communications. Whilst text is often viewed as “stable, graspable, and knowable”, digital text “belongs to the realm of the inauthentic” (Bayne, 2006, p. 7). And, in the academic world, printed and published texts are still used to measure worthiness (Bayne, 2006). As learners engage in less traditional doctoral programs particularly via NL, their interactions might feel less tangible and their outputs less legitimate; their relational positions might be perceived as less authentic.

Cranton and Carusetta (2004) define authenticity as “the expression of the genuine self in the community” (p. 7). Presuming that individuals have one, true identity is a somewhat realist view of identity. Lee and Williams (1999) suggest that a sense of a single, coherent identity may be possible through an ability to forget, ignore, or disclaim evidence that contradicts one’s current or desired self-conception(s). Yet, individuals can choose to take on different appearances and manners. As active agents, they can choose to break rules. Doctoral students, for example, may shift between identities as students, undergraduate tutors, peers, and experts depending on the context. I would suggest that context, though it plays a role, does not completely determine an individual’s behaviour or development (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Billet, 2006). In the case of online, networked doctoral students, what appearances and manners should they adopt?

Frequent contact amongst individuals can reveal patterns which can aid in shaping a general sense of someone’s identity(-ies) as well as detecting anomalies and inconsistencies. Chayko (2008) has noted that, over time, it becomes increasingly difficult to obfuscate certain elements of one’s online identity, especially gender (Chayko, 2008). Breaking rules, inconsistent behaviours, or obfuscation of identity may cause confusion between what one says and what one does, and can lead to social repercussions such as marginalization or punishment if infractions are considered sufficiently

bothersome to others. Infrequent contact amongst individuals can lead to lack of trust or a sense of identity fragmentation (Goffman, 1959, Giddens, 1991).

In face-to-face settings, learners can draw upon a variety of gestures and facial expressions, clothing, posture, accents, and other physiological factors in order to both present an identity and to interpret others' identities. In-person interactions are seen to emanate directly from the speaker, and by extension, are assumed to be more authentic. Technology-mediated texts (communications) seem to be separated from the speaker or writer and may be regarded as somehow less authentic (Land & Bayne, 1999). Face-to-face speech is sometimes assumed to be un-mediated, but this assumption is questionable: "face-to-face . . . appears deceptively to approximate the ideal speech situation. It is of course no such thing and is as mediated, though by no means as self-evidently, through linguistic signs and signifiers that are as independent of the self and *as dependent on a linguistic system and interpretation as any written text*" (Land & Bayne, 1999, p. 739).

Matheson and Zanna (1988) suggested that fewer cues in online environments, by contrast, could reduce access to others' private feelings, values, and beliefs. Sproull and Kiesler's (1986) research has led them to suggest that lack of cues in online learning environments had an equalizing effect on communication because characteristics such as nationality, occupation and social position are more difficult to detect. However, networked learners may choose different cues upon which to base their assumptions of others. For example, in my experience as a doctoral student, orthography, eloquence, quality of argument, and speed of response may be taken as indicators of erudition, class, or cleverness. And, in limited-cue environments, participants may take more time to compose themselves—that is, they may take more care in shaping how they present themselves (Walther, Gay, & Hancock, 2005). In online environments, individuals may form impressions of each other that are as deep as in face to face environments—sometimes even more intimate (Walther, 1996). Land and Bayne (1999) argue that online writing can give an individual more freedom in the expression and variety of identities. They add that the seemingly unified appearance of the in-person identity may appear to fragment or shift. I would argue that rather than simply reducing cues, mediated environments *alter* the means of expression; that is, the individual's personal characteristics (such as autonomy, motivation, and skill), and environmental characteristics (such as

tools, social hierarchies, and permitted behaviours) affect dialogue and vice-versa.

In *transactional distance theory*, these factors are said to affect interaction between learners and instructors, learners and learners, and learners and content (Moore, 1991, 1997). A fourth form of interaction was later added to this list: learner-interface interaction (Hillman, Willis, & Gunnawardena, 1994). The medium may enable or prevent learners from accessing content, their instructors, or each other. The interface, then, can affect confidence, emotions (such as fear) or sense of empowerment (Koole, 2006).

Online, it may seem that individuals can create an unlimited number of identities and withhold fragments of themselves causing a sense of de-contextualization (Giddens, 1991) and disembodiment. Hughes and Oliver (2010) refer to the disembodiment argument as the *incorporeal fallacy* which suggests that “learners are somehow disembodied when learning online, subjected to an inauthentic experience that is risk-free and therefore meaningless” (p. 2). One might respond to the issues of fragmentation and disembodiment by arguing that in any social setting, it is impossible to have complete knowledge of another individual (Sarup, 1996). Yet, identity(-ies) may show continuity across situations. For example, Christensen (2003) found that the Inuit shared aspects of their day-to-day lives online. This had the effect of strengthening their sense of belonging to their own communities. The medium of the Internet merely changed how they expressed their views of themselves and the world. Austin (1975), in his work on speech acts, also recognized that “the divorce between the ‘physical’ actions and acts of saying something is not in all ways complete—there is some connection” (p. 114). Bayne (2005) supports this idea by suggesting that researchers may “under-recognize the significance of embodiment” (p. 30). She adds that who we are online is affected by our embodied experiences. Furthermore, I would suggest that interaction via computers requires individuals to physically manipulate their devices to produce an effect that can be observed by others. It can also be argued that online interaction may be equally “real” as, or at least, informed by embodied interaction (Chayko, 2008).

Hopwood and Paulson (2011) contend that the social constructionist perspective on embodiment is that of “a fleshless body of discursive production” (p. 3). This does not seem to do justice to the constructionist

perspective. I would suggest that what is more important from the constructionist perspective, rather, is not embodiment itself, but how bodies are discursively constructed and how the body is perceived to affect experience and interaction and vice-versa. For example, stress, fatigue, and exhilaration may be perceived in the body, but the identification and effects of such feelings are defined and labelled socially.

### 2.3.5 Belonging and alienation

Awareness of oneself involves discernment of one's own identities in contrast to those of others. This idea is reflected in Ricoeur's (1992) concepts of *idem* and *ipse*, temporal continuity of self and differentiation of self from others, respectively. However, Ricoeur recognized that *idem* and *ipse* evolve together. A social constructionist position would suggest that *idem* and *ipse* mutually influence one another as they co-evolve. The relationship between belonging and differentiation can be somewhat counter-intuitive. One might assume that belonging to a community will be associated with feelings of acceptance and comfort. Group interaction, in theory, can allow learners to find others who may become "role models, mirrors, and sounding boards" (Chayko, 2008, p. 160).

In learning environments, belonging to a community may require a certain degree of adherence to norms of behaviour, limiting creativity and alternative views (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008). Individuality can threaten group standards resulting in efforts to stymie individual expression and agency (Bonnett, 2009). To an extent, the tension between individual expression and group conformity can be viewed as necessary for learning and performance as it can stimulate reflection and acquisition of strategies by leading a learner into a state of liminality. In a phenomenological study of belonging at the workplace, McClure and Brown (2008) observed that successful performance of duties was related to the individual's ability to negotiate "issues of inclusion and participation, levels of influence, dealing with problem members, dysfunctional behaviour, and dominance and risk-taking norms" (p. 6). But, one's sense of *belonging* is affected by other factors: 1) frequent and positive interaction, and 2) the perception that there is a stable bond that is likely to continue into the future (McClure & Brown, 2008). Walther (1996) also notes that the anticipation of future interaction is likely to encourage cooperation.

Discomfort may arise from conflicting discourses, the resolution of which may result in alienation or a strengthened sense of belonging. "It would seem to me that every person's identity is a site of struggle between conflicting discourses . . . and in the struggle of discourses, not only words change their meanings, but identities also" (Sarup, 1996, p. 73). Sorting through conflicting discourses can stimulate critical reflection and, potentially, a greater understanding of one's own identity relative to other individuals within various contexts.

## **2.4 Social positioning and the social positioning cycle (SPC)**

Harré's work on social positioning can enable a deeper examination of how and why individuals vary in their experiences and tacit understanding of themselves and their place amongst others. The individual's transformed or retrenched perspective may manifest in different ways thereby co-constructing, de-constructing and re-constructing those involved.

### **2.4.1 Social positioning**

Social positioning is an approach to the study and understanding of human interaction (Harré, 2000, 2005, 2010; Harré & Slocum, 2003). From a social constructionist view of identity, individuals may be seen to co-create social reality through discursive practices. Howie and Peters (1996) trace the roots of Harré's social positioning back to the work of Austin, Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and Wittgenstein. Harré (2000) contrasts Vygotsky's focus on the significance of interaction between the individual and others with Stein's idea of *personalization* in which the individual simply exists "as a given" (p. 734). He concludes that regardless of which is taken to exist a priori, the individual or society, they co-create each other's identities: "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" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46).

Language is an important element in positioning theory. As per Wittgenstein (1986), there is a connection between language and one's perceptions of the world. Wittgenstein's idea of *language games* is complex but draws attention to the importance of language as a meaning creating activity: "The meaning of a

word is its use in language” (§43). He refers to language games as “objects of comparison” (§130) and “a measuring-rod; not as a preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond” (§131). Vygotsky (1962) examined language development in children. He posited that there is a close relationship between thought and language; between inner thought and outwardly manifested expression:

*All our observations indicate that inner speech is an autonomous speech function. We can confidently regard it as a distinct plane of verbal thought. It is evident that the transition from inner to external speech is not a simple translation from one language into another. It cannot be achieved by merely vocalizing silent speech. It is a complex, dynamic process involving the transformation of the predicative, idiomatic structure of inner speech into syntactically articulated speech intelligible to others.*

(p. 148)

Harré also draws upon the work of Austin (1975) in the recognition of language as a force of social action. According to Austin, actions become acts under certain conditions such as appropriateness of context, participants, procedures, words, and gestures. Acts must be experienced by others; otherwise, they remain actions. The key terms to which Harré refers include the utterance, the speech act, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary effect. An *utterance* becomes a *speech act* when it is received or recognized by another individual. A sentence with a “sense and reference” is an example of a *locutionary act* (Austin, 1975, p. 109). The *illocutionary* force refers to the social power that the speech act carries with it. For example, is a given sentence intended to warn, convince, or surprise? To have social force, illocutions follow social conventions. The *perlocutionary* effect refers to what is actually accomplished by the speech act. For example, was someone convinced by the speech act? Perlocutions do not have to follow social conventions.

Although drawing upon Austin, Harré did not follow Searle’s (1975) focus on individuals’ intentions in which speakers choose either words that reflect the world (assertions) or words that shape the world (commands). Such a focus places emphasis on the speaker’s intentions rather than co-creation. Instead, Harré retains a strong focus on intersubjectivity—the emergence of meaning as utterances are exchanged and interpreted (Mühlhäusler & Harré, 2010). In Harré’s view, speech acts are not deterministic; one speech act does not cause

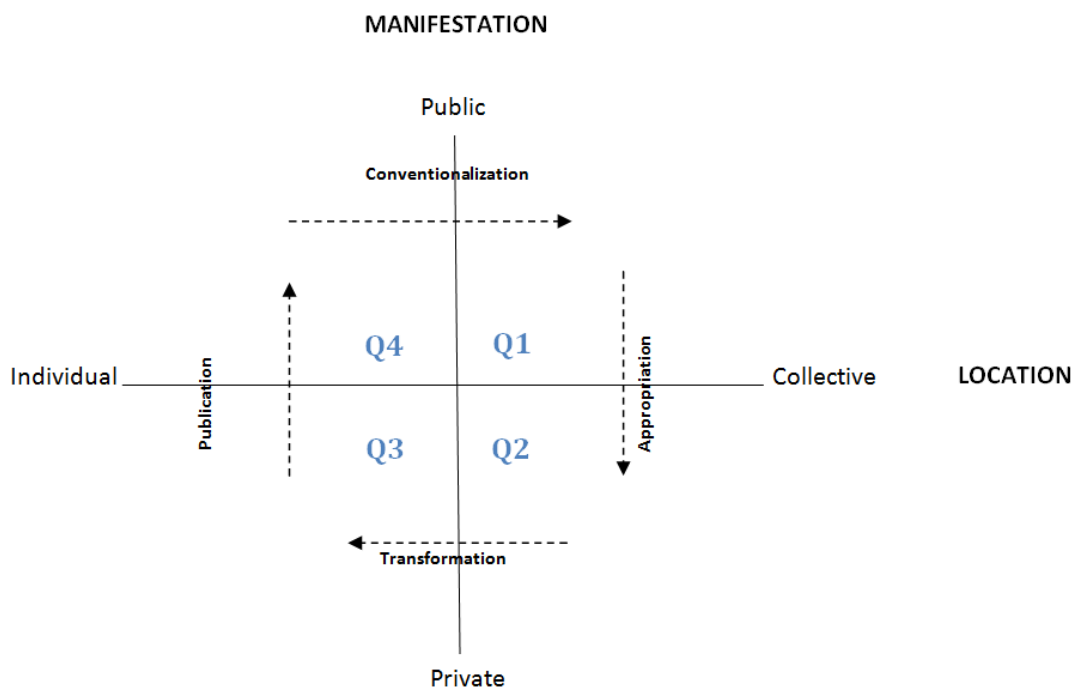
another one. Rather, a given speech act creates a social space in which other speech acts may be possible at different levels of appropriateness (Harré & Gillet, 2010a). Furthermore, individuals have the choice of which speech act to use and whether or not to break rules whilst negotiating the social space. This supports the view of individuals as agents capable of some degree of self-determination, yet acting within a social context (Davies & Harré, 1990).

In social positioning theory, speech acts are objects (actions, tools) in the social world whilst people are subjects (spaces, locations for speech acts). Language is significant in that it enables and shapes both public discourse and private thought. Speech acts serve to bridge distances between subjects (Mühlhäusler & Harré, 2010). Because each individual is unique, s/he may interpret speech acts in unique ways and s/he may develop unique competencies in interpreting and reacting to perceived speech acts, allowing discernment of identities: "Each human individual stands at a unique intersection point of human discourses and relationships" (Harré & Gillet, 2010b, p. 185). The uniqueness of conversational participants offers both richness in terms of the sharing and shaping of information, as well as tension because of the underlying challenge of whether or not full sharing is possible due to the limitations of language in accurately representing one's understanding. In this view, meaning and identity are relational.

Intersection points are comprised of social locations for speech acts (i.e., points at which subjects meet, positions). Positions may be thought of as relational configurations allowing individuals to co-occupy locations. Positions are ephemeral and shifting sets of possible behaviours or obligations relative to a given social situation. Harré refers to these as *moral orders* (Harré, 2010). Individuals are not entirely free to enact any identity, rather society provides possible discourses that individuals can choose, modify, or combine (Hyland, 2002). Participants in a conversation will develop an understanding of themselves and others based on behaviour and biographical information of people and situations (including moral orders) to which they might have access (Davies & Harré, 1990). Biographical information may be developed through experience over time or the explicit sharing of information and stories. The SPC (figure 2.2) provides a model for understanding how individuals negotiate interaction and align themselves relative to others.

## 2.5.2 The social positioning cycle as a framework

The SPC has been referred to by Harré (2010) as “Vygotskian space” (p. 144), and by Cheville (2010) as the “Vygotsky cycle” (¶3). Drawing upon the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978), Harré (2010) recognized that social interaction is the foundation of much of an individual’s behaviour and learning, supporting the view of identity formation as a cyclical learning process within a social context. The social positioning cycle (SPC) depicted in figure 2.2 has two axes: manifestation (public versus private expression) and location (relational space, people as locations for speech acts).



**Figure 2.2. The social positioning cycle.**

The quadrants of the framework aid in the conceptualization of how social and individual interactions may shape identity repositioning activity. Movement through the cycle highlights on-going influence between social and individual processes—processes which cannot be separated in a social view of learning. Quadrant 1 (Q1) represents the greater social context. As the learner appropriates tacit and explicit information from others, s/he moves into Quadrant 2 (Q2), a location that is still somewhat collective, but with a private manifestation. In the private half (bottom) of the diagram, the learner transforms Q2 information into Quadrant 3 (Q3), a private, individual location where the learner accumulates, evaluates, and integrates the transformed



knowledge. Quadrant 4 (Q4) is the location where the individual publicly expresses or enacts the transformed knowledge. Re-entering the cycle by moving from Q4 to Q1, other individuals may or may not adopt or conventionalize the information that the individual has expressed publicly. An individual appropriates and moulds that which s/he appropriates from society and others potentially conventionalize information into practices and beliefs of the collective.

Overlaying other theories and perspectives of the learning process upon the SPC can aid in understanding the positioning process. For example, the following section compares the SPC to the community of practice.

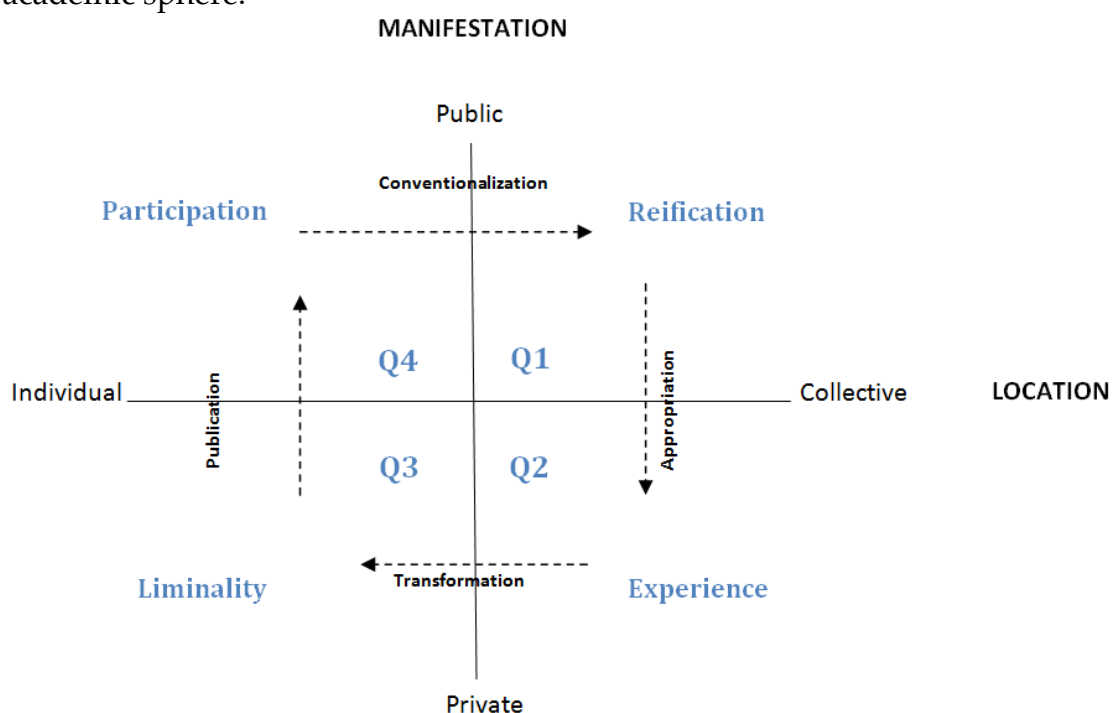
### 2.5.3 The social positioning cycle and community of practice (CoP)

Although some might disagree with the use of the phrase CoP within the context of formal learning and student identity with regard to whether or not students form communities of practice (Reynolds, 2009). There are, nevertheless, some interesting overlaps between the SPC and CoPs (Figure 2.3). Like Harré, Wenger (1998) views learning as emerging from social interactions. A community of practice is a collection of people engaged in a mutual enterprise. As members share experience and understanding, they develop a repertoire of “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts” (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). They exist and evolve within a larger historical, technological, socio-cultural context, and may work across community boundaries. A CoP is not necessarily the same as a formally structured educational group; rather, it is often informal in its structure and enactment. Nonetheless, the product of the community may become reified and bounded by practices.

The CoP metaphor works well with the SPC concepts of location and manifestation. Wenger (1998) sees CoPs as functioning within a “geography” of activity with its own “relations of locality, proximity, and distance” (p. 130). He refers to the local and the global which may correspond to the individual and the collective, respectively. The academic world is one that defines boundaries and marks them through practices, ceremonies, and the issuing of credentials that legitimize a learner’s entry into a profession or practice. These markers may be viewed as reification. For Wenger, reification and participation work together. These two processes both require interaction

between the group and the individual. *Participation* involves engagement in activities with other people. *Reification* refers to an artefact of activities or practices of groups of people and may be important in conventionalization of expressed behaviours.

In Figure 2.3, both participation and reification are mapped onto the public quadrants of the diagram (Q1 and Q4). Conventionalization and reification of doctoral work in the form of publication and presentation marks one's entry into an academic CoP as the knowledge reaches beyond the student-supervisor or student-institution relationship permeating the greater academic sphere.



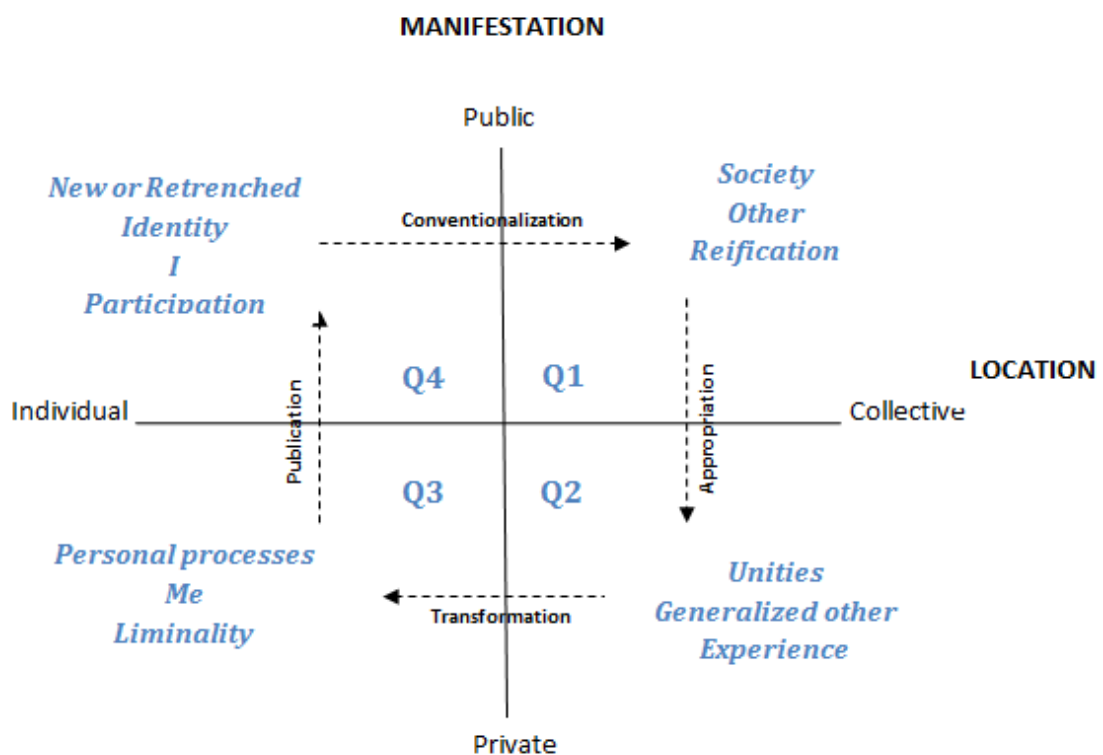
**Figure 2.3. The social positioning cycle and community of practice.**

Wenger also views the learner as participating in multiple CoPs, brokering and coordinating perspectives. The learner, therefore, develops a trousseau of experiences which s/he appropriates through experience with and observation of the collectives (communities of practice to which s/he belongs). As the various discourses from of the communities are encountered, they may conflict with one another perhaps destabilizing the learner's position. Such experience may lead to decisions of integration or alienation—that is, the individual can choose between aligning with beliefs and practices of the collective or changing his/her position relative to them. It is as the individual brings together “participative experience” and “reificative

projections” with which s/he negotiates his/her identity (Wenger, 1998, p. 151). Whilst there appears to be a focus on social processes, individual experience and liminality also appears in the CoP literature. In Figure 2.6, *experience* and *liminality* are both located in the bottom quadrants as more private processes to resolve experience-dilemmas. Human learning involves interaction between both the social and the individual.

#### 2.5.4 The social positioning cycle in detail

I interpret the SPC through Harré’s description complemented by concepts derived from Mead (1934), Wenger (1998), and Sfard and Prusak (2005). Figure 2.5 depicts these viewpoints.



**Figure 2.4. The social positioning cycle (detailed view).**

#### **Quadrant 1 (Q1): Primary Structures / Society / Other / Reification**

The “other” in Q1 represents the individual’s social context. Q1 represents the social/collective pool of psychological conceptions, processes, values, and

states. In the academic world of the doctoral learner, Q1 also encompasses reified entities and artefacts such as credentials, ceremonies, and sanctioned social and ethical behaviours (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). Published literature, studies, statistics, theory, and other forms of academic discourse are examples of reified entities in Q1.

### **Quadrant 2 (Q2): Unities / Variations / Generalized Other / Experience**

Appropriation reflects two important factors in learning: 1) ideas, practices, and resources available to the individual through the social, and 2) the role of agency in the individual's striving to fulfil needs according to his/her proclivities and values (Billet, 2006). The "generalized other" in Q2 represents the "attitudes of others . . . crystallizing all these particular attitudes into a single attitude or standpoint" (Mead, 1934, p. 90) which the individual appropriates or absorbs from the social context. Through the appropriation of primary structures, the individual creates "unities"—that is, systems of understanding (coherence) of one's identity in relation to the surrounding world (Mead, 1934). These unities make up the individual's current self-conception and relational position (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). In this quadrant, the individual internalizes socio-cultural ideals and values, which are sometimes integrated as taken-for-granted objectifications (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, Hacking, 2000). For example, a new doctoral student may defer to his/her supervisor, a perceived academic norm appropriated from graduate-school-narratives (Q1). Similarly, Loxley and Seery (2011) speculate that doctoral students enter their studies with folkloric conceptions of the PhD, for example, as a solitary endeavour or the academy as an ivory tower (p. 10).

### **Quadrant 3 (Q3): Personal Processes / Liminal Space / Me**

The "me" (Q3) is focused on memory and imagination, self-consciousness, contemplation, and thoughts evaluating the self(-ves) using the viewpoints and skills appropriated into his/her perception of the generalized other. Whilst deeply shaped by society, individuals are still capable of independent and unique thought and reactions. The individual can draw upon both social knowledge and individual proclivity. Although an individual exercises agency in selective appropriation of primary structures and the creation of unique unities, critical incidents may trigger disruption and transformation. A

critical story is one in which “core elements that, if changed, would make one feel as if one’s whole identity had changed” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 18). A critical incident may result in the perception that one’s identity or internalized values are not in harmony with those newly experienced. This creates a kind of *conceptual space* that opens up new ways of thinking or acting as well as new constraints (Dahlin, 2007). If the disharmony is sufficiently critical, the individual may seek to re-establish unity through an examination of his/her current self-conception, the critical event, and/or appropriated values. Hypothetically, during re-examination, the individual conceptualizes a desired identity based on a variety of needs. A new trajectory can be based upon timeless, idealistic, and/or intrinsic values such as completing one’s doctorate in order to manage an organization more effectively or increasing knowledge for the benefit of society, or for personal learning and achievement (Becker, & Coate, 2005; Harland & Plangger, 2004; Leonard, Loxley & Seery, 2011; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Wellington & Sikes, 2006). Alternatively, motivations can be more fluid, context-dependent, and instrumental such as completing one’s doctorate for higher pay, greater status, to remain employed, to change jobs or careers, and/or for promotion (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

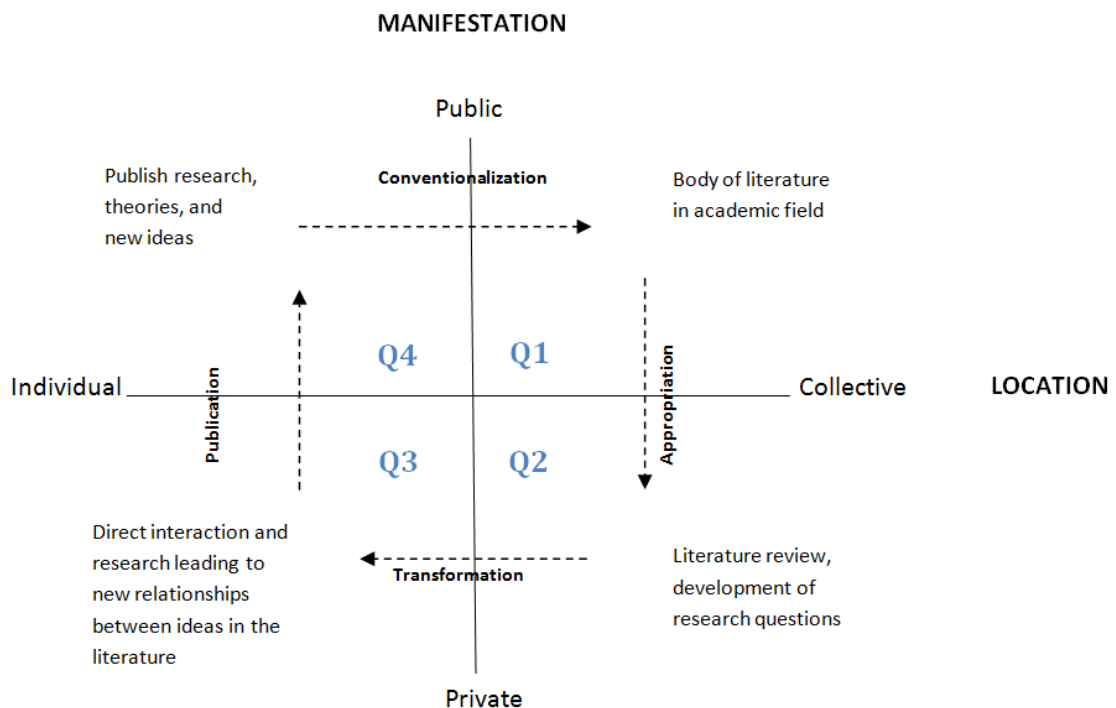
#### **Quadrant 4 (Q4): Repositioning of Identity / New or Retrenched Identity / I / Participation**

Individuals can publish their identity(-ies) (Q4). The “I” (Q4) is the part of one’s identity that is focused on public expression. It is the enactment and the narration of the “I” whom others from Q1 observe or experience. Indeed, the “Other” (Q1, society) may, in turn, be shaped by the “I”. Readjustment of the desired identity can be enacted or expressed, allowing the new story to be endorsed by self or others. For example, through observation of behaviours and dialogue over time, others can evaluate whether or not the individual’s behaviour supports his/her statement, “I understand theory X.” Enacted or expressed transformations present new opportunities and constraints. They may also act as a kind of *multiplier* (Bendixen & Rule, 2004, p. 76). As the adaptations are conventionalized partially or wholly, the effects can ripple through an individual’s social network(s) and beyond. On some occasions, one’s story can be adopted by the collective through conventionalization and become reintegrated into the primary structure (Q1). In the academic world,

this might mean the development of a theoretical model or conceptual breakthrough that becomes recognized throughout one's field.

## 2.5 Doctoral-level study as an identity positioning experience

This section will tie the theories (above) to the research on doctoral students, identity, and positioning. The discussion of the doctoral experience will be structured around the *processes* in the SPC: *appropriation, transformation, publication, and conventionalization*. The SPC operates at multiple levels: academic, personal, and professional. It accommodates academic processes in which individuals appropriate, examine, transform, and publish theories and ideas. At some point, some of the individuals' transformed ideas may ultimately be conventionalized back into the pool of literature in or beyond the field of study (Figure 2.8). As the learner moves through the cycle, his/her relationship with the academic knowledge and practices (such as the literature, methodologies, and argumentation) transforms (Bruce, 1994).



**Figure 2.8.** The social positioning cycle and the academic cycle.

Doctoral learners not only become experts in an area, but also become, themselves, transformed as they learn to embody knowledge differently (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Bansel, 2011). At the doctoral level, learners are

expected to move beyond a linear view of academic research and teaching as knowledge-production and knowledge-transfer to a much more fluid and iterative view of knowledge and their role in relation to it (Harland & Plangger, 2004; Ivanič, 1998). Learners may experience self-doubt, social and intellectual isolation as they struggle to understand their own intellectual and social positions as well as others' perceptions of them (Hockey, 1994; Hopwood, 2010; Morton & Thornley, 2001). This is corroborated by a study by Anderson & Swazey (1988), who found that nearly half of the doctoral students surveyed felt that their studies challenged their self-conceptions. Gardner (2010) notes that the transition into doctoral studies is also accompanied by "a great deal of ambiguity regarding the expectations . . . ambiguity then feeds into the need for self-direction" (p. 76).

### 2.5.1 Appropriation and individual proclivity

In his work on conceptual frameworks at the doctoral level, Trafford (2008) suggests that crossing through thresholds invites learners to acknowledge the challenge of conceptual work as well as the accepted ways of viewing and treating ideas within their discipline. This is not to say that the learner must adopt accepted practices, but s/he should be aware of them. Recognition of these accepted viewpoints can, to a certain extent, be acquired through reading. Indeed, a key aspect of the graduate and post-graduate experience is the acknowledgement of "deep indebtedness to the masters, to authorities in the field, through the literature review" (Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000, p. 143). But, doctoral learners also learn about academic conduct, research, writing, and teaching through observation and social interaction (Golde, 2000; Trafford, 2008; Wisker, Morris, Cheng, et. al., 2010).

Swietzer's (2009) research draws attention to the importance for doctoral students to develop relationships with fellow students and tutors as they enter their course of studies. The significance of social interaction is additionally reflected in the work of Trigwell and Dunbar-Goddet (2005) who observed that completion rates are generally higher in the sciences to which they attribute supervisory differences and greater opportunities for teamwork in the sciences. By comparison, they noted that students in the social sciences, particularly education, often work alone. Similarly, Morton, & Thornley (2001) describe social science and mathematics degrees as more isolating than science degrees as the former requires more individualized effort than that

required by the science “apprenticeship model” (p. 114). Kuang-Hsu’s (2003) research suggested that chemistry students rated the quality of supervision and research environment (in terms of collegiality and shared resources) higher than education students rated theirs—although the education students perceived their supervisors as more productive and available. In Kuang-Hsu’s study, education students were found to be less likely to feel like “full members” of the research community whereas chemistry students sometimes even regarded their supervisors as colleagues (p. 23). Further differences were noted by Wright and Cochrane (2000) that the younger science students completed their doctorate faster than older science students and that older social science students completed their degrees more quickly than younger students. They suggested that it is possible that the subjectivity of social science research may have a greater impact upon learners’ values and belief systems challenging their conceptions of personal identity. Older students, who have hypothetically crossed through more developmental stages than younger students, would possibly cope better with such challenges in the social sciences.

In his work on student attrition in higher education, Tinto (1987) noted that interaction may not “guarantee persistence”, but its absence “almost always enhances the likelihood of departure” (p. 117). Tinto further acknowledged external factors such as membership in non-academic communities, financial circumstances, poor employment prospects in the field of study may contribute to the decision to leave, but he maintained that a learner’s general experience within the academic institution has a greater impact on persistence. There is an important distinction between social interaction and academic interaction. Whilst the two are interrelated, academic interaction involves scholarly activities leading to induction into an academic community of practice (Golde, 2000; Tinto, 1987). “Inscription into that subject position [of scholar] demands submission to academic-disciplinary regimes and norms, a process of self-formation which produces identities and capacities specific to that regime” (Lee & Williams, 1999, p. 10). In a literature review, Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat, and Farley (2004) provide a long list of factors that affect doctoral student completion rates—particularly institutional guidelines and belonging, supervision relationships, cohort relationships, and student characteristics such as gender, age, motivation, and entry qualifications. Funding, employment while studying, and non-academic networks were also noted.



There are many resources available on the student-supervisor relationship (Delamont, Parry, & Atkinson, 2006; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000; Lee & Williams, 1999; Lindén, Ohlin, & Brodin, 2011; Phillips & Pugh, 2008). Although the supervisor may be seen as the overseeing eye and authorizing hand of doctoral study, the quality of the doctoral learner's experience may not solely depend upon supervisory practices and supervisory interaction. Within the academic environment, learners acquire a sense of the values, ethics, and conduct accepted within their field of research and research practices (Anderson & Swazey, 1988). Peers appear to play an important role into the academic induction process. This is supported by the findings of Fitzmaurice (2011) who noted that early-career academics judge their own performance against that of their peers. Switzer's (2009) study on doctoral student networks and professional identity development found that learners did not perceive their advisors as very important during the first year, in particular. Similarly, Trigwell and Dunbar-Goddet (2005) found that postgraduate students at Oxford did not view their relationship with their supervisor as important as the intellectual climate of their department. Keefer & Parchoma (2012), however, observe that the supervisor perspective on the significance of the supervisory relationship is different. In their study, supervisors note that "loose ties between supervisor-supervisee theoretical, methodological, or disciplinary interests" (¶5) can be the source of difficulties ranging from development of research questions, methodological expertise, theoretical frameworks, and researcher voice, for example. It would seem, then, that both peers and supervisors are significant for learners' growth as academics and researchers.

Gardner (2010) defines socialization as "the process through which an individual learns to adopt the values, skills, attitudes, norms, and knowledge needed for membership in a given society, group, or organization" (p. 63). Reactions of learners to forces of socialization may vary. Interested in determining the most important relationships for doctoral learners during the different stages of their studies, Swietzer (2009) asked learners about their roles of doctoral student, research assistant, teacher, and how their perceptions were related to attaining a career as a faculty member. Based on their responses, she was able to classify doctoral students into two general categories: *perceiving fit* and *assessing fit*. Perceiving fit students were strongly oriented to their professional identities and the attainment of tangible goals

whilst the *assessing fit* students were more focussed on the quality of their experience and their growth as human beings. Although faculty teaching these students had thought that age, experience, and relationship-identities (such as spouse, father, mother, and professional) were most likely to predict openness to socialization, Sweitzer (2009) found that the *perceiving fit* students were more susceptible to academic socialization because they wish to be perceived as fitting in with academic norms. *Assessing fit* students, on the other hand, were more concerned with finding a fit for their personal needs and growth. She concluded that “their self-descriptions were much more likely to contribute to how (un)willing they were to be socialized” (p. 16). This finding suggests that the learner has some degree of choice in what s/he appropriates from the academic environment.

### 2.5.2 Transformation and liminality

Entering into unknown academic territory can lead to uncertainty about one’s purpose, ability, and understanding of the academic world and his/her place in it. Loss of one’s previous identity may be accompanied by emotional reactions or even a sense of crisis (Lee & Williams, 1999). Hockey (1994) argues that the transition into doctoral student status can be problematic because expected behaviours, expectations and standards are ill-defined and vague (Hockey, 1994). He also suggests that the first year is the most precarious time for a doctoral student “as it is within that time that students initially encounter and experience intellectual and social processes at their point of maximum novelty, and in turn, difficulty” (p. 177). Acceptance into a doctoral program may be accompanied by privileges that symbolize initiation to a community. Boundaries between student and professor may become blurred allowing, for instance, less formal forms of address during social encounters. For some learners, this also represents a change in status which might also signal changes in social and professional position (Hockey, 1994). New ways of thinking may cause a learner to further reconsider his/her position relative to others who may or may not think similarly (Trafford, 2008). Discomfort resulting from these new ideas may stimulate self-reflection and creativity in problem-solving or may introduce feelings of insecurity and self-doubt.

Lovitts (2005) sees creativity in relation to the individual and the field of study. But, the concept of relational agency would suggest that creativity also

encompasses relationships with others. Bendixen and Rule (2004) propose that doctoral students resolve dilemmas through a combination of logic and analysis (internal, private processes), and dialogue, particularly argumentation (external, public presentation) (also see Wisker, Morris, Cheng, et. al., 2010). Further, they contend that peers are often the source of troublesome knowledge (introducing new perspectives and questions), are often sought out to assist with problem solving (prior to seeking the assistance of authority figures), and may be significant in resolving or reshaping “epistemic doubts” (p. 75). Social interaction with peers may aid learners in realizing that others share similar struggles intellectually, financially, and emotionally. Hockey (1994) discusses a “de-mythologization” (p. 185) process in which individuals shed their preconceptions of academia that may have been acquired through contact with non-academic subcultures. Doubts about intellectual adequacy may dissipate upon realizing that their peers are also struggling. Along with such realization, learners may become more comfortable in both sharing and accepting emotional support. Hadjielia-Drotarova’s (2010) research also highlighted the importance of sharing amongst peers not only with regard to resources, routines, and tools, but support with everyday life and personal issues.

In a longitudinal study of undergraduate learners, Baxter Magolda (2004) observed that the learners who she identified as having crossed into stages of independent knowing and/or contextual knowing often still sought external guidance in problem solving (p. 38). She concluded that intellectual development was not only cognitive, but was affected by the learners’ sense of identity and their relationships: “Interviewees who developed complex ways of knowing often could not live those ways of knowing until they had developed complex ways of seeing themselves and their relationships with others” (p. 38). She notes that learners with a strong sense of their identity(-ies) showed less concern for what others thought of them, were more open to explore different perspectives, and demonstrated a greater ability to choose and integrate ideas. In tracing the social and emotional development of a group of doctoral learners, Wisker, Morris, Cheng, et. al., (2010) have noted similar trends. Early in the degree process, doctoral learners experience anxiety as they start to acquire the academic language and learn the norms of the academic environment (also see Swietzer, 2009). This discomfort sometimes feels threatening as it challenges their confidence. After the first year, learners often note more conceptual development. In later stages,

learners become more open to criticism and are more willing to share feelings of confusion and apprehension. The reduction in defensiveness was seen as a sign that the learners had crossed through a threshold: “a kind of maturity and learning leap” (p. 37). They also noted that such growth was also accompanied by greater self-awareness and reflexivity.

As learners grapple with confusion and apprehension, they cross into processes of interpreting, evaluating, transforming, rejecting, and creating new information. In order to work at such a conceptual level, one needs to be able to discern aspects of a given concept in light of different perspectives. Whilst one’s skills may be influenced by socialization, the learners’ unique biographies will affect their ability to discern variation and make choices. “Human agency operates within and through social structures, but is not necessarily subjugated by them” (Billet, 2006, p. 63; also see Hopwood, 2010). Some of this is related to their history of experiences, the interweaving of personal, professional, and academic lives as well as individual physiological, mental, and emotional characteristics. Wellington & Sikes (2006) write: “what has happened to us in the past affects the things that happen to us in the present, both through the social, cultural, academic and economic capital we possess and are able to draw on, and through the identities we have developed and had attributed to us” (p. 732). The complexity of the learners’ biographies can shape motivations for entry to and completion of doctoral courses. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations may intertwine (Wellington & Sikes, 2006). In addition, one’s sense of agency is also affected by how one sees oneself relative to others and learns to adjust this self-conception (Hopwood, 2010). Edwards and D’Arcy (2004) offer an interesting extension to the concept of agency—that is, *relational agency*. They suggest that relational agency is not the same as collaboration, rather involves accessing others as resources. In a study of 45 doctoral students engaged in an academic writing class involving peer critique, Caffarella and Barnett (2000) noted that the students used their exposure to others’ writing and feedback to their own writing as means of comparison. They noted that emotions dissipated as the students gained more experience in giving and receiving critique, it never completely disappeared.

### 2.5.3 Publication and expression

In the context of doctoral education, the process of publication offers multiple meanings and enactment of one's identities whether as researcher, teacher, statistician, technician, father, mother, peer, etc., and expression of one's research, opinions, theories, or hypotheses in presentations, papers and the doctoral thesis. In addition to peer interaction, Harland and Plangger (2004) found that doctoral students with teaching assistantships found the classroom a safe environment for rehearsing arguments and sharing research prior to more formal presentations. Part-time and networked learners, however, may not have the classroom as a venue for sharing their work. Some may need to seek out presentation and publishing opportunities.

Written texts may be thought of as instantiations or "temporary identities" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 237) of previously appropriated and transformed ideas. They may be indicative of the author's position in relation to dominant social and academic discourses and patterns of behaviour—that is, through written text, an author may challenge and/or reaffirm practices and beliefs (Ivanič, 1998). Writing, in particular, is tightly interrelated with identity: "students find doctoral writing difficult because texts and identities are formed together, in and through writing" (Kamler, 2008, p.286). "It is primarily through writing that doctoral candidates learn how to position themselves as scholars by adopting disciplinarily appropriate ways of establishing and defending knowledge claims" (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010, p. 434). The ways in which an author chooses to express ideas can align him/her with particular positions (Hyland, 2002). Both the content and the author may be de-constructed and re-constructed in the production of an academic text (Ruth, 2008).

Voice, in the context of writing, is the author's public expression of identity reflecting the author's auto-biographical self, discursal-self, and authorial-self (Ivanič, 1998). It might be said that all text is *double voiced* (spoken, written, or otherwise communicated) in that the voice read or heard in a given instant also reflects other voices from the socio-cultural context (Ivanič, 1998; Bakhtin, 1986). (Note the similarity to Wiley's (2011) contention that Cooley's mirror is really two mirrors.) Drawing upon the identities available in the disciplinary or academic context(s), the writer forms a sense of his/her own positions and history of positions. The discursal self refers to "the impression—often multiple, sometimes contradictory—which they consciously or unconsciously

convey of themselves in a particular written text” (p. 25). In other words, it is a site of struggle, movement, and potential resolution. The view of self as author is connected to one’s conceptions of authority and voice. These views of self are interrelated and can have an impact upon performance. Castelló, Iñesta, and Monero (2009) found a relationship between graduate students’ awareness of voice, self-regulation, and quality of the texts they produced. Students showing a high awareness of voice appear to shift focus from “content or on the more formal requirements of the text to the consideration of the epistemic and social function of writing” (p. 1127). In other words, these students were more likely to reflect on their own position(s) in relation to the content and audience in a cycle of discursive co-construction of voice and text. The text, author, and socio-cultural context can become tightly interwoven.

#### 2.5.4 Conventionalization and influence

As a rite of passage, acceptance into the academic community can be marked by increased confidence in one’s understanding of the field as well as the ability to articulate it and defend one’s position within it (Morris, Cheng, Wisker, Warnes, Lilly, Robinson, & Trafford, 2009; Wisker, Morris, Cheng, et. al., 2010). A particularly poignant passage from a learner describing her own passage into academia was that she felt she was “taking part in a conversation” amongst peers (Wisker, Morris, Cheng, et. al., p. 30). In writing of his own passage into academia, Bansel (2011) observes that peer-review is a mechanism for recognition and regulation of academic performance. Acceptance of a text for publication in an academic journal may result in feelings of acceptance into the community. To an extent, it also connotes legitimization of one’s work and serves as a record of one’s identity as a scholar. Successful publication implies authorship, authenticity, and authority (Ruth, 2008).

A report by Jenkins (2004) for the Higher Education Academy in the UK notes that post-graduate students sometimes see themselves as “participants, albeit peripheral, in research communities of practice” (p. 28). In interviews by Wisker, Price, Moriarty and Marshall (2010), doctoral students indicated that as they acquired a greater sense of belonging in the academic community, they also began to take more responsibility for their work, felt more independent, and sensed less power inequalities with others in their academic environments. This may arise from increased confidence not only in

acquisition of knowledge in one's field, but also in one's ability to clearly articulate and defend positions (Wisker, Morris, et. al., 2010).

At the same time, a learner can begin to feel tensions between their academic, personal, and professional identities. It is possible that this occurs as learners transfer skills across social milieux. There is evidence that professionals who take up doctoral courses apply their academic skills to their professional work or other situations of practical application (Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

Publication and conventionalization can shift the position of the individual amongst his/her peers in the personal and professional environments. The next section will explore other context that may affect the learning experiences of doctoral students.

## **2.6 Contexts of identity positioning in doctoral-level study**

Graduate students experience varying degrees of stress during their studies; the literature documents stress due to isolation, role conflicts, professional demands, family responsibilities, and gender-related issues of acceptance within academic departments (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Ali & Kohun, 2006; Hockey, 1994; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Simon-Maeda, Churchill & Cornwell, 2006). Having conducted a review of the literature on the doctoral experience in the UK, Leonard and Becker (2009) conclude that the majority of the literature documents "reflective, conceptual or philosophical articles and reports, with occasional empirical studies and re-analysis of national statistics, written from the perspective of policy-makers, higher education managers and supervisors" (p. 71). In their literature review, they discuss literature on science versus non-science doctoral experiences, access to supervisors and department facilities, methodology courses, academic research cultures, peer interaction, and towards the end of the chapter, there is one small paragraph on external support such as that from employers, families, partners, and friends. I, too, found a dearth of information in the literature on the learners' personal and social context.

Whereas in distance program, physical movement of learners to access educational opportunities is reduced or, in some cases, unnecessary. Traditional, face-to-face programs, may necessitate learners moving to different cities or countries in order to access education (Altbach & Knight, 2011). Physical displacement can result in shifts in social and support

networks. In addition to social isolation, doctoral studies in the social sciences may require a high degree of autonomy and solitary time to work on highly individualized research. As a result, learners may struggle to locate sources of support within and outside academic contexts. In the world of NL, doctoral learners environments can remain embedded in their professional and personal environments whilst interacting with their fellow learners, professors, and others in the academic community. Synchronous and asynchronous technologies permit a variety of ways of interacting through audio, video, text-based communications tools. The question is whether or not this flexibility may introduce a greater complexity in the social positioning experiences of doctoral students. Or, would such students have greater access to support? What additional factors might be at play?

A doctoral dissertation by Myers (1999) investigated factors contributing to doctoral student attrition in an Educational Administration program. Eleven students responded to survey questions and subsequent semi-structured interviews. Myers found that the most significant contributing factors were: frustration and/or loss of interest (36%), financial difficulties (27%), and family factors (18%). Interestingly, all participants indicated that they had the full support of their families and significant others. Meyers also listed as contributing factors: paying job or professional responsibilities, change of job, and varying levels of support from employers.

Hopwood (2010) interviewed 19 doctoral students across various social science departments and interdisciplinary research centres in two UK universities. He concluded that “relationships made a difference (at times negative as well as positive) in three realms: the academic, the personal, and the professional” (p. 109). The academic realm included relationships surrounding the doctoral research and study environment. The personal realm included family and friendships. The professional included professional relationships often rooted in their “prior working lives” (p. 109). He notes that there is little in the literature concerning relationships external to and predating the learners’ doctoral studies.

The effects of family commitments were found to be highly significant in a study conducted by Brown and Watson (2010) on the experiences of female doctoral students. In their study, they interviewed eight women. All the participants had children, one an ill husband, another an ill mother. Two of



the eight were single parents. Childcare, in particular, affected the participants timing of their doctoral degrees as well as their ability to participate in academic activities such as conferences. Others discussed the tension in the family as they attempted to balance their roles (wife and mother) with their student roles.

Holley and Gardner (2012) conducted a study of the experiences of first-generation doctoral students. These students are defined as doctoral students of whom neither parent had obtained an undergraduate degree. In addition to institutional and disciplinary characteristics and financial issues, they had also noted that family and community had a significant influence on the students' experiences. As their participants progressed in their studies, the gap between their experiences and those of their family, friends, and peers also increased. Day-to-day academic experiences and home/community lifestyles were significantly different. Some participants noted that they continued to receive support from family even though there was little understanding of their studies. In other cases, the financial burden of doctoral studies created some tension as their degrees were not always considered to be economically worthwhile.

In 2007, Ivankova and Stick conducted a mixed-methods study in which they identified seven internal and external factors that they suggest contributed to student persistence in a doctoral program in a distributed doctoral program in educational leadership in higher education. They had surveyed 278 current and former doctoral student, then purposively selected four for qualitative case study analysis. In the interviews, the participants had indicated a variety of non-academic sources of support including employers, colleagues in the workplace, family members, and even pets. Academic sources of support included the academic advisors, classmates, and various university services. The authors concluded that the quantitative analysis indicated that family, significant others, and employers did not significantly affect persistence. But, they also indicated that two thirds of the participants commented on these relationships as affecting their distance studies in some supportive way.

Maher (2005) conducted a qualitative study involving thirteen students enrolled in a cohort-based master's degree in Education. Although this study involved master's-level learners, the learners' developing of their understanding of each other is illustrative of some of the experiences

described by participants in my investigation. She collected data over a ten-month period. At the outset, most of the interviewees held “modest” expectations of the contribution their fellow learners would offer their experience (p. 200). Some expected some degree of emotional and intellectual support; others were concerned about unequal commitment and participation amongst the cohort. As the program progressed, Maher noted that, for some learners, external stresses from teaching jobs led to dissatisfaction with the program. As the months passed, the learners described having a “shared sense of history” with their fellow students (p. 202). Some also commented on how the cohort members began to relax with participation-levels evening out, but also with a deeper engagement in discussions and keener critical thinking skills through sharing perspectives. Over half the interviewed learners commented on being part of a team and began to describe themselves in terms of role-responsibilities such as nurturing, peace-making, and “task-master” (p. 203). Some learners described the cohort in family terms and felt that they began to speak a shared language, building knowledge and understanding of each other. Problems in collaboration due to personality and intellectual differences remained for some learners. Cohort members gained a sense of empowerment as they banded together to voice concerns over their program to their instructors. Relationships with instructors appeared similar to relationships with other, non-cohort master’s programs. Through her investigation, Maher concludes that relationships amongst cohort-members continuously evolved.

Govender and Dhunpath (2011) describe a cohort-seminar model for a doctoral program at the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa (also see de Lang, Pillay & Chikoko, 2011). The development of this model was prompted by concerns about doctoral student attrition along with issues of isolation, lack of support, and inability to meet academic expectations. Within this model, learners would come together for six weekends a year during their program and engaged in various activities such as chairing sessions, exchanging feedback, and engaging in debate. The intent was to facilitate the development of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which learners could collaborate and cooperate. The researchers conducted qualitative interviews with eight cohort members in different phases of their doctoral programs and four who had already completed. Their analysis revealed that, in general, students shared emotional and academic support regardless of the overall cohesiveness of the given cohort. They suggest that

“an equally significant dimension of the cohort model is that the potential for conflict generates simultaneously a productive space, where students negotiate the multiple and sometimes contradictory voices of cohort supervisors, appointed supervisors and peers as students find and affirm their own voices” (p. 10). This suggests, like Maher’s study, that positioning is fluid and continuous. But, Govender and Dhunpath’s work also adds the dimension of conflict as a possible social space for growth.

Personal and professional factors also affect doctoral students. Simon-Maeda, Churchill, and Cornwell (2006) conducted an ethnographic case study of a group of cohort-members in a doctoral program in English as a Foreign Language in Japan. Their study describes constraints such as “a lack of institutional resources, the marginalization of qualitative research, full-time work responsibilities, and language and academic discourse barriers (p. 2). The cohort members created a community of practice consisting of peer-editing, online discussions, and workshops. The authors suggest that doctoral study is highly influenced by the learners’ positions as doctoral students, teachers, and family members. They indicate that their research elicited terms such as “identity transformation” and “apprenticeship to academic discourses” (p. 19). Their conclusion is similar to the hypothesis that has emerged in my own investigation in doctoral student identity in NL: “successful entry into challenging academic environments is dependent on strategic integration of personal histories and collective practices” (p. 19). Although limited, the literature on the doctoral study appears to support the idea that learners experience identity positioning across a variety of contexts. Within the general academic context, they might position themselves in relation to their department, the institution, the discipline (field of study), and/or research on a national-scale (Jenkins, 2004). Other significant contexts include the family and workplace. A search of the literature revealed little information of other possible contexts that influenced doctoral learners’ experiences.

## **2.7 Personal reflections**

I first became aware of Harré’s work in social positioning whilst attending a workshop series in qualitative research mid-way through my doctoral program. I felt as if his work and the SPC brought me back full-circle to my original academic interests in languages, linguistics, and social psychology.

As I explored social positioning as a possible framework for my research, I felt enthralled with how my prior doctoral papers on identity meshed with this theory. Furthermore, as a doctoral student studying by distance, I sensed the multiplicity of contexts pulling me away from my studies: family responsibilities, obligations at work, community events, and social interactions (or lack thereof). Harré's social positioning theory made sense as a lens through which to view these tensions and explore the discourses that might challenge or support learners through their doctoral trajectories. I began to wonder if an awareness of the possible influences might aid learners. Perhaps they could better prepare themselves and their families. Perhaps they could make helpful connections with supportive friends, co-workers, and mentors.

I began writing this literature review early in the research process. Naturally, it started at the proposal stage. Whilst awaiting research ethics approval, I continued the literature review. I returned to it again after writing a rough draft of the findings chapter as I saw issues emerge in the data. And, I returned to it again after roughing out the discussion chapter and during my final revisions. In this way, writing the literature review was very iterative. As I moved through different stages of the research and writing-up process, the literature review continued to evolve. This allowed me to continuously locate relevant research and concepts to inform and challenge my findings.

## **2.8 Summary**

Doctoral learners cross boundaries between academic, personal, and professional identities. In each environment, they interact differently and have varying feelings of self-efficacy and agency in accordance with their participation and competence. As they interact with others, they effectively negotiate their identities relative to others in their environments.

The SPC is neither individualist nor social-determinist. It shows how the location of human interaction (collective or individual) and the expression (public or private) interweave in such a way that the individual and society co-create each other. The relational nature of identity formation and the significance of language and interaction are commensurate with the underpinnings of NL: "a social constructionist view that assumes that learning emerges from relational dialogue with and/or through others in

learning communities” (Hodgson & Watland, 2004, p. 126). By examining learners’ descriptions of experience through the SPC lens, it is possible to explore how doctoral learners navigate through changing relative positions. And, we might better understand the array of challenges that might impinge upon the learning experience.

In the following chapter I will outline the methodological approaches I used to examine the kinds of experiences that lead to identity positioning amongst doctoral students in NL.

## Chapter 3: Methodological Approach

*I've begun to consider using methodologies that two or three years ago I may not have even considered because I would have been afraid to try it. And, now I realize that [doctoral] research is an opportunity to develop my skills. So, if you don't think you're a very good interviewer, you can learn how to be an interviewer. You can learn some interview skills.*

– Study participant

### 3.1 Introduction

The main goal of this thesis is to explore how doctoral students on networked learning courses experience challenges to their identities, norms, values, and relationships—that is, their sense of social positioning. I set out to explore the kinds of critical stories or troublesome experiences that lead to identity positioning experiences.

Studying identity is a challenge. The conceptions individuals hold of self(-ves), others, and the surrounding world cannot be observed directly by researchers. The situation is further complicated because people vary in their discernment of aspects of the phenomena that surround them; they differ in how they experience these phenomena and how they remember them. A researcher, nevertheless, can make use of empirical methods that allow some degree of access to the individuals' memory of their experiences. An important goal of this qualitative research is to provide rich descriptions reflecting multiple perspectives allowing the development of a snapshot view representing both individual and collective experience. Specifically, my aim was to elicit descriptions of ways in which doctoral students describe their experience social positioning in NL environments. As a social constructionist piece, this is a daunting challenge because these descriptions may be shaped through the interview experience itself.

The main method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed and coded through qualitative open coding in which I sought themes indicative of social positioning. Discourse analysis was also used to aid in the analysis of interview transcripts, allowing the researcher to more deeply interrogate the meaning and structure of specific utterances appearing within the transcripts. In the sections that follow, I will

discuss open coding, discourse analysis, and the procedures used in data collection and analysis.

### **3.2 Qualitative approach**

In this section, I will describe the open coding as a method for conducting typological qualitative research and discourse analysis as a complementary methodology.

#### **3.2.4 Qualitative coding**

Although I am approaching this project using Harre's (2010) social positioning cycle (SPC) as a framework for understanding social interaction, I used an open-coding approach to identify patterns pertaining to social positioning. Coding allows the organization of messy and complex data into a more comprehensible format. Saldaña (2008) describes coding as a "heuristic" (p.8); it is a tool for exploration. Coding involves multiple iterations in which each cycle "further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and / or building theory" (p. 8).

During the iterative coding process, codes can be sorted into themes representing patterns as they become apparent. In some processes this can lead, eventually, to theory generation (Ezzy, 2002). In my project, however, I am interested in exploring learners' descriptions of their experiences of identity positioning. I used an open coding method in which I created codes and sub-codes when I noted comments that might indicate positioning. I also used some pre-set codes based on discourse analysis techniques described in the following section.

#### **3.2.5 Discourse analysis**

Discourse analysis (DA) arose from sociology often with an emphasis on social constructionist perspectives. Discourse analysts are interested in how people use language to achieve desired ends and how they construct their worlds and their accounts of their worlds (Potter, 1998). Wetherell, Taylor and Yates (2001) define DA as "a theory of language and communication, a perspective on social interaction and an approach to knowledge construction across history, societies and cultures" (p.1). Another aim of DA is to uncover

the underlying meaning of utterances and social actions. In many cases, language is action. Gee (2011) argues that it is through a cyclical relationship between language and perceptions of reality that people constitute both who they are and the world within which they exist.

In studies of selfhood and identity, DA can inform researchers as to how people represent themselves through stories and linguistic acts (Wetherell, et. al. 2001). Säljö's (1997) concept of *accounting practices* refers to socio-culturally shaped linguistic practices (discursive techniques) used to achieve particular purposes. He offers an excellent example of a phrase that can easily lead researchers astray: "I don't know" (p. 182). In reading a transcript, a researcher might interpret this phrase at face value. However, the speaker may be indicating that s/he is not concerned about the issue at hand or that s/he is not interested in discussing it. In this way, a variety of intentions may underlie seemingly simple utterances.

Gee (2010) offers a list of 42 questions derived from a list of six *tools of inquiry* and seven *building tasks* (p. 121). To ask all 42 questions of each utterance in each transcript would be a mammoth task. The importance of Gee's list, however, is that it provides the researcher with a sample of the kinds of questions she may draw upon. Most relevant here, the tools of inquiry include questions about the situatedness of meanings (context), social languages and grammars (language used for particular social situations), figured worlds (models to mediate between institutions and sub-institutional levels), intertextuality (references to texts, written and verbal, outside the current text), discourses (linguistic and non-linguistic techniques that help create recognizable identities), and conversations (disputes among societal-level discourses). For each of these tools, he asks several questions: how is the speaker or writer trying to enact, depict, recruit, use, connect, disconnect, privilege, disprivilege, and/or give significance to things?

Elsewhere in the discourse analysis literature, one finds many possible discursive techniques. The following list of techniques was useful for this study.

- **Heirarchy of modalization** refers to the framing of a statement. A speaker can assert something as a fact to varying degrees of certainty. This technique can be used to create or reduce validity of an assertion (Potter, 1996). Compare,



these three examples: 1) *Phonics is a successful method for teaching reading.* 2) *I guess that phonics is a good method.* 3) *Phonics is possibly a good method.*

- **Counter knowledge** refers to the use of misinformation; assertions without any support (Thompson, 2008). For example, *Phonics is useless [no support].*
- **Stake inoculation** can be used to position oneself as close to or distanced from people, things, or events (Potter, 1996). Other ways can include statements that suggest the contrary to common belief is true such as *I'm not pro-phonics, but I have found it very helpful.*
- **Stake confession** involves a slight twist on stake inoculation in that the speaker confesses to have a bias and uses the confession to support an assertion (Potter, 1996). For example, *I learned that way myself and I learned how to read just fine.*
- **Category entitlement** refers to the positioning of an individual as a member or non-member of a category of people who have knowledge or experience of a given subject. Entitlement can be connected to members of professions, community leaders, relatives, friends, or even “urban myths” (Potter, 1996, p. 134). For example: *I believe that phonics is a better approach to teaching reading than whole language; thousands of teachers can't be wrong. Or, the younger, less experienced teachers now simply don't get it.*
- **Out-there-ness** involves making reference to external actors or sources that might be considered trustworthy (Freesmith, 2008; Potter, 1996). The empiricist repertoire, for example, suggests that a given observation can be made by anyone at a given scene. The speaker is impersonal and distanced from the assertion. Facts seemingly have their own agency and speak for themselves: *The statistics indicate that young readers taught by phonics are able readers.* Like out-there-ness, **consensus and corroboration** externalize arguments by referring to witnesses (Potter, 1996).
- **Active voicing** refers to the practice of taking the voice of another in an attempt to approximate what the other intends to say (Potter, 1996). For example, *I remember the young readers who I was teaching via the phonics method—and they would often say, “I can say the words and hear them in my*

head.” So, I think there is some value to the method.

- Goffman’s (1981) idea of **footing** refers to the positioning of people as *principal* (representation), *author* (source), or *animator* (speaker). Consider, for example, the phrase, “*Don’t shoot the messenger.*” In this utterance, it is suggested that the speaker is neither the author nor the representation and, therefore, cannot be held accountable for the content of the message. Potter (1996) notes that this is similar to the footing taken by news reporters who also separate themselves from who says what.
- In **detail and focalization** strategies, detailed descriptions are “full of definite characters . . . indexicals [pronouns] . . . and active voicing” (Potter, 1996, p. 163). The significance of details depends on the point of view (focus). In some cases, a narrator appears to have access to the emotions of the other characters: *My students benefited from increased happiness and confidence in their ability to sound-out the words.* In other cases, the narrator has a more general, global view external to the character’s feelings: *My students began to sound-out the words without asking me for assistance.* The opposite to detail is **vagueness**.
- **Nominalization** involves the transformation of a verb into a noun allowing the categorization of behaviours. It can be used to avoid attributing agency to a given action or providing a sense of neutrality (Billig, 2008; Potter, 1996). **Passive voice** is also commonly used to avoid the attribution of agency (Billig, 2008). This examples demonstrates the use of both techniques: *Damage has been done by whole-languagizing the reading curriculum.*
- In **extremization**, a speaker will exaggerate to stress her point (Potter, 1996; Freesmith, 2008): *The whole language approach to teaching reading has rendered a whole generation virtually illiterate.* Of course, in **minimization**, the opposite occurs.

Within the context of this study wherein I am drawing upon Harré’s (2010) social positioning cycle, the above discursive techniques helped me triangulate the data on how the participants position themselves. Whilst I took care great care not to read too much into the speaker’s utterances, these techniques allowed me to speculate speculation about the participant’s accounts of their relevant relative positions. For example, the level of certainty indicated in the hierarchy of modalization, nominalization, and/or passive

voice may suggest the speaker's confidence or her/his willingness to sound confident within the original context or the interview context. Stake entitlements (inoculation and confession) may indicate how a speaker positions him/herself relevant to other people, ideas, and circumstances. Active voicing and footing may suggest how the speaker understands how others view him/her. Extrematization, minimization, and X/Y format might suggest that the speaker is manipulating the facts. I found these clues helpful in questioning the transcripts further and look at them from different perspectives.

### **3.2 Data collection**

The research took place at a distance university in Canada in which the learners rely primarily upon networking technologies to interact with their instructors and peers, exchange information, and discuss ideas. The participants were solicited from doctoral courses in education and business. The data was collected in two phases: a pilot study (August 11, 2011) and semi-structured interviews with 18 participants (August 23 to September 30, 2011).

#### **3.3.1 Phase 1: Pilot study**

A potential issue with this study is the ability to accurately access the participants' experiences from a "second order" perspective—especially with regard to tacit knowledge or abstract ideas (Richardson, 1999). Success in this is influenced by my own capacity as a researcher to ask the questions in such a way so as not to lead the participants, but to open a space for dialogue in which the participants describe their experiences of the context or phenomena under investigation (in this case, identity positioning experiences). Therefore, a main goal of the analysis in the pilot study was to determine the trustworthiness of the survey and interview questions. I was interested in determining if the participants' social positioning experiences were accessible. One participant was selected from the list of volunteers.

##### **3.3.1.1 Procedures**

I sent the pilot participant an email-letter of invitation introducing me, the researcher, the nature and conditions of the study, consent information, and a

link to an online survey (Appendix A). The online survey served a dual purpose 1) recruitment and 2) the gathering of demographic data in order to identify a purposeful sample of potential participants (see Appendix B).

The procedures for the first phase were:

1. distribute the letter of consent to all potential participants;
2. select one participant from the online survey data;
3. invite the participant to an interview;
4. record the interview;
5. transcribe the interview;
6. analyse the interview procedures and responses;
7. adjust the procedures and interview schedule as needed.

I conducted the interview using Adobe Connect. During the semi-structured interview, the participant was asked first to reflect upon her experience as a doctoral student. Then, she was asked to describe how her experiences had affected her relationships within and outside her doctoral program. She was asked for her thoughts on any ways in which her conceptions of identity were challenged and how she resolved any issues.

I transcribed the interview recording. It included indicators such as hesitation, laughter, repeated words, word stress, and when a softer voice was used. To do this, I used a small subset of the Jeffersonian transcription notation system (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). I decided not to encode changes in tones and inflections so that the transcripts more readable. Less transcription detail also reduced distractions from the primary focus: the content. The transcription was typed using "f4" (free software from <http://www.audiotranskription.de>). F4's time-stamp encoding allowed the transcription to remain synchronized to the audio file as it was imported into the Atlas.ti software package for qualitative coding. This was useful later, during analysis, because I could click on any word in the transcript and listen to the recording for additional clues to meaning.

### **3.3.1.2 Analysis**

Because this pilot study involved only one doctoral student, I felt it was premature to begin sorting the quotes into categories or to start interpreting their meanings except, perhaps, as a means of testing the software. I felt that

attempts to enter into analysis too soon may bias analysis of subsequent interviews by reducing the trustworthiness of the final interpretations if they are to be considered representative of the collective experience of all the participants (Kelly, 2002). So, any attempt here to discover any categories was primarily an attempt to see if the interview questions allowed access to the participants' experiences of identity positioning of the participants.

Memoing directly after the interview was helpful in recalling the tone of the interview as well as some of the subtle impressions I detected during the conversation. In starting the analysis, my intention was to read the transcript through once or twice. However, I found myself wanting to take pen to paper immediately as I already noticed some discursive techniques and identity positioning experiences. I allowed myself to jot down words and thoughts in the margins of the transcript. And, I extended my initial memo as I reflected on what I was seeing.

I applied DA techniques such as those listed in the section above in order to examine specific utterances. To better manage the large number of discursive techniques, I decided to cluster the techniques as *possible* indicators of identity positioning processes (Table 3.1). With each pass, I focussed on one cluster. I found that this made the analysis more controlled and allowed my thoughts to focus on fewer ideas at once, yet allowed sufficient detail to provoke thought and reflection on the possible identity positioning activity.

| <b>Indicators (Potter, 1996)</b>       | <b>Discursive techniques</b>   |
|--|--|
| 1. Confidence (CO)                     | Portraying one's confidence or level of certainty.   |
| 2. Proximity (PX)                      | Stake management (confession, inoculation), consensus, corroboration, category entitlement.<br>Positioning oneself in relation to the issue discussed. |
| 3. Others' positions (OP)              | Footing, active voicing. Representing the voice of another and/or representing oneself as another.   |
| 4. Fact/event manipulation (FEM)       | Exaggerating, minimizing, highlighting only certain facts.   |
| 5. Detail (DE)                         | Detail, focalization, vagueness.   |
| <b>Indicators (Gee, 2010)</b>          | <b>Discursive techniques</b>   |
| 7. Situatedness (SI)                   | References to context. Shifts of perspective.  |
| 8. Social languages and grammars (SLG) | Language used for particular social situations.  |
| 9. Figured worlds (FW)                 | Models, taken-for-granted viewpoints, or simplified pictures of situations sometimes used to evaluate appropriateness of behaviours or performances.   |
| 10. Intertextuality (IN)               | References to texts, written and verbal, outside the current text.   |
| 11. Discourse and conversations (DC)   | Linguistic and non-linguistic techniques that indicate positions (recognizable identities, roles) in debates, arguments, issues, or themes.            |

**Table 3.1. Clusters of discursive techniques.**

### 3.3.1.3 Pilot Outcomes & Adjustments to Procedures

The process from sending the letter of information and consent (Appendix A) to retrieving and scheduling the interview flowed smoothly. The participant indicated that the instruments seemed clear and she appeared to be able to answer the questions without asking for much additional clarification or rephrasing.

The interview process, however, required additional reflection. Ideally, semi-structured interviews allow some flexibility for following different threads that might lead to new insights or increased depth of insights. This requires the researcher to listen attentively to what the participants says and how s/he says it. Taking notes during the interview was helpful, but was distracting at times. I decided that I would take less detailed notes and jot down only key words and phrases from the participant, as well as my own impressions and additional questions. This lighter note-taking allowed key terms as references for circling back to comments for additional exploration.

The discourse technique clusters (Table 3.1) was a more manageable way of applying the myriad of choices in the discourse analysis phase. Although overwhelming at times, I felt that DA stimulated greater depth of inquiry into the interview transcripts than open coding alone.

### 3.3.2 Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews

Having made adjustments in the interview questions, I proceeded to interview an additional 18 individuals from the pool of volunteers. I was able to schedule each volunteer for an interview according to their convenience. I targeted 30 minutes for each interview. However, the actual interviews took 45 minutes on average. Sixteen of the interviews were conducted and recorded using Adobe Connect and a Livescribe pen (for backup). One participant spoke to me on Skype while in a moving vehicle. I recorded it with a Livescribe pen. The background noise was a minor impediment during transcription. Another participant preferred a face-to-face interview which I also recorded with a Livescribe pen. The face-to-face interview provided an interesting contrast as I had to be aware of my own facial expressions and

gestures during the interview. It added different possibilities of co-construction.

I was cognizant of opening and closing each interview in a manner that provided a means of transitioning between the interview and the participants' immediate environments and activities (Olson, 2011). After welcoming the participant, I would ask him/her where s/he was located and what s/he was doing just prior to the interview. During the interviews, the semi-structured format permitted flexibility in how questions were asked; frequently an answer to one question naturally led to another question without the need for a contrived segue. I took notes on the computer during the interviews. This allowed me to quickly jot down key phrases and ideas to which I could return later in the interview. In all interviews, I asked all questions on my list. But, sometimes I gleaned additional information as the conversations deviated depending on how the participants wanted to address the topics being discussed. At the end, I thanked each volunteer for their participation and transitioned out of the interview format (closing) and into a lighter conversation. Finally, I wrote brief notes about the interviews about my reflections of the tone and most salient ideas that were discussed.

I began transcription within days of each interview, but fell behind as the interviews progressed. I used the same tools as during the pilot: f4 software and a foot pedal. I reduced the number of transcription notations to primarily indicators of pauses, hesitations, and emphasis. As indicated, I could easily return to the audio segments within Atlas.ti because the transcripts remained synchronized to the audio recordings.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Data analysis began after all interviews were completed. Analysis was a highly iterative process involving successively reading, coding, reviewing, and re-coding:

1. I read each transcript three times to absorb the gist of each interview. I made some preliminary memos.
2. I began coding for DA techniques along with memos about my decisions.



3. I re-read the coded transcripts and made adjustments, adding more memos indicating how the codes were changed and why.
4. I read the transcripts again and began creating codes to highlight the experiences that the participants described (open, inductive coding).
5. I re-read the coded transcripts and made adjustments. I began to expand and collapse codes. I created extensive memos explaining changes, uncertainty, and questions. At times, I listened to some of the transcripts again to remind myself of a given participant's tone of voice. This step re-occurred several times. I kept backups of each coding session in case I wanted to return to a previous coding hierarchy. I re-read the coded transcripts for each discursive technique, then each experience code. I made adjustments and noted my reasoning. The coding hierarchy that resulted included the codes listed in Table 3.2. (Note: The DA codes were simplified once more when writing up Chapter 4; these codes are indicated in parentheses in Table 3.2.)
6. I printed the transcripts with all the codes. I read through them and began writing general themes on sticky-notes and arranged them on my desk. Moving the sticky-notes into different groups, logical patterns began to emerge. As the patterns emerged, I ran different queries in Atlas.ti in which I conflated some of the codes and, with Boolean operators, located co-occurrences of discursive techniques and experience themes. I arranged the sticky notes again as I detected co-occurrences.
7. I combed through the transcripts once more to locate other possible quotes that may have escaped the computer generated lists.
8. The patterns that emerged is reported in Chapter 4, research findings.

| Discourse Analysis             | Experiences          |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| Gee_discourses (DC)            | ACADEMIA-HOME        |
| Gee_figured (FW)               | ACADEMIA-WORK        |
| Gee_intertext (IN)             | AH-HA                |
| Gee_situate (SI)               | COHORT               |
| Gee_style (SLG)                | ID: DOCTORAL STUDENT |
|                                | ID: RESEARCHER       |
| Potter_certain (CO)            | EMOTIONAL            |
| Potter_detail (DE)             | MASTER'S             |
| Potter_manip (FEM)             | METHODOLOGY          |
| Potter_proximity (PX)          | ONTOLOGY             |
| • Potter_proximity_cat_entitl  | EPISTEMOLOGY         |
| • Potter_proximity_cons-corr   | PUBLICATION          |
| • Potter_proximity_out_there   |                      |
| • Potter_proximity_stake_conf  |                      |
| • Potter_proximity_stake_innoc |                      |
| Potter_voice (OP)              |                      |

**Table 3.2. Coding hierarchy.**

### 3.5 Limitations and considerations

There are many issues associated with qualitative interviews, transcription procedures, and analysis associated with face-to-face interviews remained—that of bracketing, the ever-changing nature of experience, interviewer-effects, individual versus collective emergence of categories, de-contextualization-re-contextualization, linguistic limits to expression, and the reconstitution of utterances into abstract categories.

#### 3.5.1 Limitations in interview procedures and practice

Taking a constructionist perspective, I view interviews as a process in which meaning is co-constructed between the interviewer, the interviewee, the context, and the medium of communication. Some might contend that interviews conducted purely at a distance through technological mediation might affect the quality of the data collected. However, I would argue that there was a consistency between the methodology and the research context.

The participants in this project were studying primarily at a distance with the exception of one mandatory, week-long face-to-face meeting at the commencement of the program. They might meet up with their fellow

students at conferences or other events, but their asynchronous and synchronous course discussions, submission of assignments, and other course-related activities occur at a distance. The data for this study primarily came from semi-structured interviews conducted at a distance via telephone or online networking technologies permitting real-time conversations. Since the participants were online learners, use of such technologies for the interviews was congruent with how they were interacting with their professors and fellow learners on their doctoral courses. James and Busher (2009) suggest: "Whether research is conducted in sight or on site, the methodology has to be consistent with the integrity of the research topic and context" (p. 39). Adobe Connect was the same system that the participants used in their online seminars for their courses. Therefore, it appeared to be a natural choice for this study. The Livescribe pen was, with the exception of the face-to-face interview unnoticeable and unobtrusive.

Sometimes qualitative researchers, whilst attempting to bracket their own opinions and knowledge of experiences, use interview methods in order to elicit descriptions of the participants' experiences that are recorded and transcribed directly and as accurately as possible without interpretation (Dall'Alba, 2000). Bracketing the researcher's preconceptions and preventing the participant from pre-reflective work can be very difficult (Kelly, 2002, Kvale, 1995). As per constructionist tendencies, the viewpoints of a researcher or participant on a given topic at a given time is formed through interaction between the individual and surrounding phenomena, the individual and her/his prior-experience, the individual and his/her socio-cultural origins, and the individual and the language s/he uses to express her/his descriptions.

The interview itself is co-constructed with the participant (Mayam, 2009). The participant's description of her/his experiences may be a product of discourse within the interview as participants strive to provide accounts that are appropriate to the interview situation or that meet the desires of the interviewer (Fleming, 1986; Säljö, 1997). With this understanding of the constitutive nature of the research interview, it can be challenging to untangle the relationship between discursive practices and that being discussed in the interview.

Interviews can take place on two levels: the interpersonal contact between the interviewer and the participant and at a metacognitive level in which the participant recounts her/his awareness of an experience (also see Fleming, 1986; Richardson, 1999). In some cases, it might be helpful within the context of the co-constructed interaction, for the researcher to share her/his own experiences. However, “leading too much” can influence the participants’ responses (Bowden, 2000). As such, it is useful to record and transcribe anything researcher discloses during the interview as well as that of the participants. I attempted to balance the flow of conversation whilst covering all the questions I had planned to ask. And, I allowed the participants to digress during the interviews.

Although I had asked explicitly about the participants’ troublesome experiences during the interviews, I did not set out to illicit utterances specifically coinciding with the specific quadrants in the SPC. Rather, my intention at the interview stage was to hear the participants’ stories about their doctoral experiences pertaining to various aspects of their identities both inside and outside their academic contexts. So, I tried to guide the participants to recount their experiences in their doctoral journeys with troublesome experiences being just another aspect of their experiences. I sensed that the students were quite candid. But, I was careful not to push the participants into discussions of potentially sensitive issues that would pit them against each other, their professors, or the administration of the university. I asked the participants to withhold names and I assured them that, in the final report, I would use pseudonyms and attempt to obscure details that might allow them to be identified.

My being the administrator (non-faculty) for the Doctor of Education program may have affected the interviews by introducing some power issues; However, I also bore the identity of a fellow doctoral student. If anything, I felt very much *one of them*. I found myself struggling to withhold my engagement with their narratives, failing at times when as I admitted, “I have experienced that, too.” Once each interview was officially completed and I had shut off the recording devices, I would transition the participants back to their day’s activities. There were times when we would converse for an additional half hour. Some openly expressed having appreciated discussing their doctoral experiences.

### 3.5.2 Limitations of the technology used during the interview

In this study the interviews were conducted primarily at a distance using similar technologies to those that the participants were using in their doctoral programs. Seventeen of the interviews were conducted through Adobe Connect, one through a mobile telephone, and one face-to-face. Having two alternative-format interviews, face-to-face and mobile, allowed a comparison of the interview process via different media. (The mode, speech, remained unchanged.) The face-to-face interviewee, a Business student was physically present at one of the University's regional offices in order to attend her candidacy (confirmation) exam. As such, a face-to-face interview was appropriate. The face-to-face interview felt more intimate. It was more animated; however, the participant was, herself, lively and animated. So, it is difficult to determine whether the tone of the interview was related to the participant's personality or if it was an effect of the face-to-face medium. I was not able to study my own body language to ascertain how I may have influenced the face-to-face interview, but I was aware of my actions during the interview. In particular, I would nod and change facial expressions in order to encourage the participant to continue or to indicate whether I understood. Online, I would say "uh-huh" and "yes" to achieve similar effects. The mobile interview suffered from breaks in the cellular connection and distracting noises. So, I did not indulge in asking additional questions. This resulted in a shorter interview (approximately 30 minutes instead of 45 minutes) with fewer digressions from the interview schedule. It is unclear if my verbal prompts for continuation and understanding were effective. But, there were times when I had to ask the mobile participant to repeat some statements.

The resulting data did not appear substantially different. I did not detect obvious characteristics that would make the face-to-face transcript stand out as different from the others. The mobile interview was difficult to hear which resulted in a transcription with ellipses and parenthetical notes when the recording was unclear. Nonetheless, the interviews followed the same protocols and all the same questions on the schedule were asked. The participants, regardless of the medium, participated in a "live" conversation replete with hesitations, reflective moments, self-corrections (such as grammar and word choice).

### 3.5.3 Limitations in transcription procedures and practice

Analysis of interview transcripts is fraught with its own series of questions. The act of transcription is viewed by some as an act of translation and de-contextualization inevitably resulting in loss of meaning (Dortins, 2002; Kvale, 1996). Dortins (2002) argues that it is also a process of re-contextualization leaving the door open to different interpretations during analysis. The concepts of *transduction* and *remediation* may also be raised with regard to the transcription process (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011). Transduction involves the change from one type of interaction (mode) to another; remediation involves the change from one means of transmission (medium, channel) to another. For example, the act of recording a live interview would be an example of remediation because the medium has changed from live to electronic, but the mode (speech) remains the same. Transcribing the recording, however, is an example of transduction because the mode is shifting from auditory to print. Haythornthwaite & Andrews (2011) suggest that it is important to recognize these processes as they may affect how individuals interpret the content of the interaction. It is possible that individuals may associate different prior experiences and knowledge with different modes and media resulting in different understanding of the interviews. I am not able to comment on how remediation (via transcription) may have altered my interpretation of the interviews.

### 3.5.4 Limitations in analysis

As with the design of the research project and the co-constructed nature of the interview, the structure that emerges from the data is highly contingent upon the researcher's interaction with the data (Åkerlind, 2005; Richardson, 1999). Therefore, the faithfulness in representing the experiences of the participants is mediated through these interactions and limited by the researcher's ability to linguistically describe or otherwise depict the participants' stories.

Like phenomenographic researchers I focussed on exploring the variation of experience at the collective level (Booth, 2008; Trigwell, 2000) in order to create a snapshot of experiences of a group of individuals at a single point in time. Therefore, some critics would argue that the faithfulness of representation is also problematic because of de-contextualization and reductionism (Kelly, 2002). To a degree it is a reductionist process. Meanings

can be altered in the process of analysis by further removal of the participants' descriptions from the context of the interview as well as by the reduction of complex, unique expressions to abstract, generalized categories (Dortins, 2002; Kelly, 2002; Säljö, 1997). I attempted to mitigate this problem by working iteratively between the categories and the original transcripts (Åkerlind, 2005). Booth (2008) describes this as "an issue of working with wholes and parts of wholes, de-contextualising and re-contextualising parts to form new wholes that tell a different story from the original whole" (p. 453). As such, I tried to balance a focus on individual participants against a tendency to drown individual voices within the crowd. I, too, sought a balance between the collective snapshot and faithfulness to individual voices.

Additional limitations applied to the analysis. The resulting snapshot(s) of experience is a partial representation; they are comprised of parts of utterances from various individuals and reconstituted by the researcher into abstract constructs (Åkerlind, 2005; Booth, 2008). There is a variety of ways to represent the relationships between the variations in the ways of experiencing conceptions. The representations of the data might more accurately reflect the researcher's way of experiencing the data than the participants' ways of experiencing the described phenomenon. This raises questions as to the manner in which these relationships were discovered, described, and depicted. It also raises questions about the ability of the researcher to bracket his/her own preconceptions during the analysis phase (Kelly, 2002).

### 3.5.5 Trustworthiness and credibility

Reliance upon interviewing and resultant descriptions of the participants' experiences at the collective level present some interesting challenges with regard to trustworthiness and credibility. Issues of trustworthiness can arise at various levels of participation: the researcher's awareness, the collective categories of description, and the participants' level of awareness of their experiences (Collier-Reed, Ingerman, & Berglund, 2009). Within the qualitative research literature, authors variously discuss trustworthiness using the terms such as *validity* and *reliability* (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2006). I will, however, use the terms *trustworthiness*, *credibility* and *applicability of research outcomes*. In doing so, Kvale's (1999) classification of types of validity will be used to organise and discuss the main issues of

trustworthiness: in craftsmanship, as communicative practice, and as pragmatic application.

### 3.5.3.1 Trustworthiness in craftsmanship

Craftsmanship refers to the quality in which a research project is designed, the data collected and analyzed, and the results disseminated. This is sometimes referred to as *internal* trustworthiness (Collier-Reed et. al., 2009). Kvale (1999) adds that craftsmanship involves the processes of checking, questioning, and theorizing; that is, the soundness of the research design and process is dependent on a researcher's understanding of the topic and the methods. Ideally, a match between the goals, content, and methods can assist the researcher in assessing the appropriateness of sampling, interview settings, interview questions, level of detail in transcriptions, and analysis procedures. These decisions are related to dependability, accuracy, consistency, plausibility, fittingness, and corroboration (Cohen et. al., 2007; Creswell, 2009).

Issues of intersubjectivity, to an extent, can be addressed through reflexivity (Sin, 2010) and the bracketing of preconceptions. Sandbergh (1997) argues that trustworthiness can be approached through *interpretative awareness*.

Interpretative awareness requires that a researcher "demonstrate how s/he has dealt with his/her intentional relation to the individual's conceptions being investigated" (p. 209). To accomplish this, Sandbergh (1997, p. 210) suggests the use of the processes of phenomenological reduction in which the researcher:

- recognizes her/his orientation toward the research experience;
- describes the interview data collected rather than attempt to explain it;
- treats all data collected as equally significant;
- tests different interpretations of the data throughout analysis; and
- considers how the participant and the experience co-create each other and how the participant perceives and conceives of this process.

In my attempt to develop interpretive awareness in this research, I used memoing extensively. This aided me to revisit my thoughts and decision during the iterative process of coding and typological analysis.



### 3.5.3.2 Trustworthiness as communicative practice

Credibility in communicative practice is achieved through persuasive argument in which a researcher defends a position. In qualitative studies, this can be done at the level of the participants, the practitioners (consumers of research), the research team, and the research community (Kvale, 1999). Interpretive studies sometimes use *member checking* or *peer debriefing* in which the research participants are asked to review the research results and comment on the accuracy to which the results reflect their contributions and views (Åkerlind, 2005; Creswell, 2009). This can be problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, the participants' understandings of their experiences can change over time after interview (Åkerlind, 2005). Secondly, in a collective representation of experience, an individual may not be able to recognize her/his contributions (Collier-Reed, et. al., 2009). Further, as per a social constructionist viewpoint, language represents experience imperfectly. As such, Sin (2010), drawing upon the work of Anderberg (2000), recommends asking participants to clarify the meaning of their utterances. Clarification can be sought immediately within the context of an interview or in subsequent communications with the participants.

Some qualitative researchers recommend working with other researchers to verify the accuracy and comprehensiveness of their coding and categories. One method is through *inter-rater reliability* (IRR) (Collier-Reed, et. al, 2009; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, Koole & Kappelman, 2006; Sandbergh, 1997). In IRR, two or more coders independently code a transcript or collection of transcripts and compare the results. The degree of agreement is often calculated as a percentage and disagreements may either be negotiated or left and recorded as disagreements. Sandburgh (1997) critiques this method for two main reasons. Firstly, the independent coders are unlikely to be fully aware of the researcher's data collection, decision processes, and theoretical knowledge. Independent coders may not be aware of how the categories were constituted from the participants' utterances (also see Collier-Reed, et. al, 2009). In some cases, an utterance may have contributed to the formation of more than one category. In other cases, only portions of an utterance may have been drawn upon in the formation of a category(s). Secondly, use of statistics to validate agreement amongst raters is incommensurate with interpretivist epistemology in general (also see Mayam, 2009). In any case, IRR

was not an available method during this research project as I was working independently.

*Dialogic reliability* is another means of establishing trustworthiness (Bowden, 2000; Collier-Reed, et. al, 2009). It is most often used to discuss and critique data analysis. It can also be used to examine the underlying theory and procedures. Such procedures can alleviate concerns over bias in research conducted by a lone researcher in that it can enhance the possible ways of viewing the data. In contrast to IRR, dialogic reliability permits the researchers to explain and defend how the categories of description were constituted as well as their structural and referential relationships to each other. Because this research project is a doctoral thesis, I primarily rely upon my own judgement; however, I discuss my results with my supervisor and some of my fellow cohort-mates. Therefore, to a limited extent, I have used dialogic reliability to verify the logic of my classifications and procedures.

### **3.5.3.3 Trustworthiness as pragmatic application**

Kvale's (1996) interest in what he called *pragmatic validity* connects research to the ability to use or apply the outcomes of research. This type of trustworthiness may be seen as complementary to a social constructionist perspective in that it recognizes research as a potential means of social transformation through exposure of taken-for-granted assumptions (Hacking, 1999). For Collier-Reed et. al. (2009) trustworthiness is tied to the purpose of the research and may take the forms of *critical potential* and *performative potential*—that is, the potential to raise awareness of problems, and the potential to transform those involved in the research including the participants, researchers, and those who might use the research. For example, the conclusions that emerge from the data collected in this study may inform researchers, practitioners, and learners of how doctoral learners perceive who they are and who they are becoming. Using such work, practitioners can, potentially, assist doctoral students in adjusting both to doctoral-level studies and to membership in the academic community.

## **3.6 Research ethics**

Research ethics had been granted from both Lancaster University and Athabasca University. All participants were provided with letters of consent

(Appendix A) and were informed that they could withdraw at any time. I reiterated the research ethics statements at the start of each interview. I did not use deception techniques and answered the participants' questions about my research as honestly as I could.

After the interviews had been transcribed, I changed each participant's name to a pseudonym and worked with these names throughout analysis. The key to the identities of the participants was saved on a CD-rom and stored on my work computer along with all other thesis-related data. My work computer was protected with PGP encryption. After analysis was completed, the data was deleted from the hard-drive, the trash emptied, and the disk defragmented. The data was then housed on a secure server at my place of work. I also saved the original recordings on a CD-rom and stored it in a safety-deposit box at a bank.

## **1.7 Personal reflections**

I began this study with the intension of using phenomenography as the primary methodology. I wanted to explore how learners experienced identity positioning whilst engaged in doctoral studies. I rejected phenomenology because I felt it was too essentialist—that is, I do not fully support the idea that there is an essential way to experience doctoral studies. I liked phenomenography's focus on descriptions of a limited number of variations of experience (Marton, 2000, Marton & Booth, 1997). However, using the SPC as a theoretical framework and having conducted the majority of my literature review prior to data collection, it came to my attention that this was not commensurate with the "emergence" of categories of description in the phenomenographic tradition. As a result, I simplified the lenses within the study. I decided to loosen the reigns of methodology to permit the SPC to be the main methodological device supported through discourse analysis and open coding. The SPC did not guide my coding directly. Rather, I followed the steps outlined above and tried to let the salient experiences of the participants to emerge. However, it is likely that the SPC played a more subconscious role my recognition of which experiences were salient. Nonetheless, I owe a debt to phenomenography and variation theory in shaping my approach, particularly with regard to the focus on *descriptions* of experience from a second-order perspective.

The use of more than one methodological approach enhanced the research. In this study, I used both open coding and discourse analysis. In this way, I was able to view the interview transcripts from different perspectives. These different perspectives mutually informed each other. The discourse analysis permitted a micro-view of the participants' words and possibilities for what the words meant both within and beyond the context of the interview. The insights from the micro-view helped in understanding nuances in the participants' expressions and how they could indicate identity positioning.

Various authors have written about the co-constructed nature of interviews (Dall'Alba, 2000; Fleming, 1986, Olson, 2011, Säljö, 1997). Although the focus of the interviews in this study were on the participants' descriptions of their experiences, the research design, including the schedule, the timing, the questions, the way the questions were asked, and the context of the interviews, was conceptualized and conducted by me, the researcher. At times, it can be difficult to know when a participant is striving to fulfil the needs of the research and his/her project or when a statement is newly emergent during the interview itself (Fleming, 1986; Säljö, 1997). It is important, then, for me as a researcher to be aware of the possibility that my interviews may result in a description of experience that may have occurred in the past, but may have been re-shaped within the context of the interview. As such, Sandbergh's (1997) *interpretive awareness* became important in my own research experience.

As a novice researcher, I found great value in questioning my role as the researcher and how my professional and student positions affected the study. Transparency in communicating one's positions is important for the research participants as they determine whether or not they wish to participate in the study. Transparency is also important in communicating the results of a study for allowing the readers to ascertain possible bias as they construct their own insights from the results. The research ethics process, itself, asks researchers to question the potential for harm to the participants and reinforces a sense of respect for the participants during and after the investigation. To an extent, I was caught in my own learning threshold from which I emerged recognizing the value of transparency and the research ethics process.

### **3.8 Summary**

In this chapter, I have described the procedures, methods, and issues I considered in my planning, data collection, and analysis of the participants' descriptions of their experiences of social positioning in networked learning. I have shown how the pilot study led to a streamlining of the interview and data analysis procedures. I closed by outlining some reflections on the limitations of online interviewing (e-research) and addressing these potential sources of bias. Chapter four provides a description of the results from the application of these methodologies and their associated methods.

## Chapter 4: Research Findings

*“Master’s level studies are like the hors d’oeuvres. They give a taste of the ideas and possibilities. Doctoral studies are like the entrée - they allow for a more complete work and for greater satisfaction”*

– Study Participant

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of the data collected and presents the data within the social positioning cycle (SPC) (adapted from Harré, 2010). Quotes have been selected to illustrate the participants’ experiences. The application of discourse analysis was used to support the interpretation of the quotations as examples of positioning.

### 4.2 Overview of the data collected

#### 4.2.1 Survey: Demographics

In total, 23 doctoral students from the Doctor of Education and Doctor of Business Administration programs participated in the initial survey (see Appendix B). The study involved students from 4 cohorts with start dates in 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011, respectively. Both programs are cohort-based and learners are encouraged to work together in groups, engage in peer editing, and participate in online discussions and presentations.

Of the 23 survey respondents, 19 agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C) conducted by cellular telephone, Adobe Connect synchronous communication software, and one was available for a face-to-face interview. Two students were living in the United States whilst 17 were living in Canada.

Table 4.1 lists each participant’s name (pseudonym), program, and stage in program:

- Early (E): 0-2 courses completed,
- Mid (M): 3-6 courses completed,
- Candidate (C): candidacy/confirmation completed,

- Late (L): writing up and/or preparing for final oral defence/viva.

These codes will appear beside the name of each participant at the introduction of each quote presented in section 4.3 in which the results are described.

| <b>Program</b>      | <b>Name</b>         | <b>Stage of program</b> | <b>Code</b> |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| Education<br>(n=15) | Barry               | Early                   | (E)         |
|                     | Candace             | Early                   | (E)         |
|                     | George (mobile)     | Early                   | (E)         |
|                     | Maria               | Early                   | (E)         |
|                     | Brenda (Pilot 1)    | Mid                     | (M)         |
|                     | Denise              | Mid                     | (M)         |
|                     | Karen               | Mid                     | (M)         |
|                     | Nancy               | Mid                     | (M)         |
|                     | Sylvia              | Mid                     | (M)         |
|                     | Tom                 | Mid                     | (M)         |
|                     | Bruce               | Candidate /Mid          | (C)         |
|                     | Maureen             | Candidate/Mid           | (C)         |
|                     | Betty               | Candidate               | (C)         |
|                     | Peter               | Late                    | (L)         |
|                     | Tina                | Late                    | (L)         |
| Business (n=4)      | Gina (face-to-face) | Mid                     | (M)         |
|                     | Steve               | Mid                     | (M)         |
|                     | Vince               | Mid                     | (M)         |
|                     | Rob                 | Candidate               | (C)         |

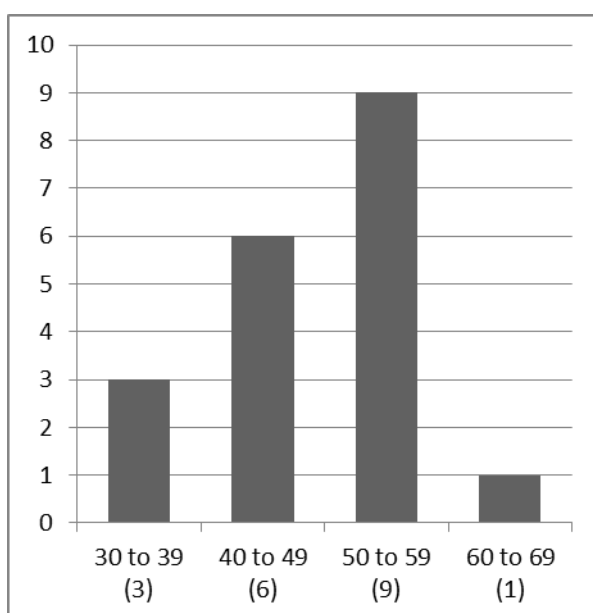
**Table 4.1. The participants.**

The students had self-identified as being amongst the following list of occupations (Table 4.2):

| Field         | Type   | Number |
|---------------|--|--------|
| Education     | Post-secondary professor, lecturer, instructor | 5      |
|               | Learning designer                              | 4      |
|               | Teacher (K-12)                                 | 2      |
| Health Care   | Nurse  | 1      |
|               | Educator                                       | 1      |
| Management    | Director (post-secondary)                      | 1      |
|               | Executive officer                              | 2      |
|               | Accountant                                     | 1      |
| Other         | Writer   | 1      |
| Not indicated | N/A  | 1      |
| Total         |  | 19     |

**Table 4.2. Occupation of interview participants.**

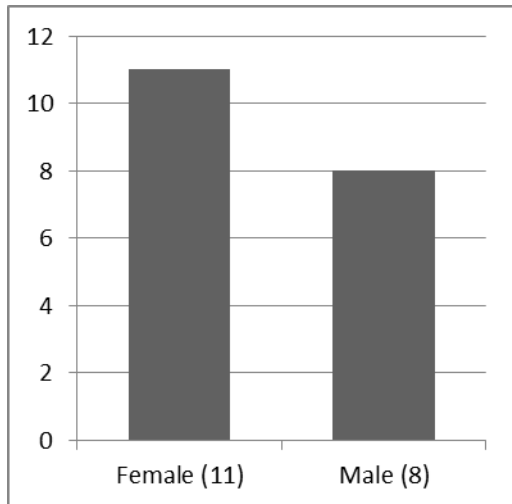
Age ranges of the interview participants were mostly in the 40 to 49 and 50 to 59 ranges (Figure 4.1). Statistics on doctoral students in Canada show that the average age of education students at graduation is 46 while the average age for professional fields in general is 40 (Gluszynski & Peters, 2005).



**Figure 4.1. Age range of interview participants**

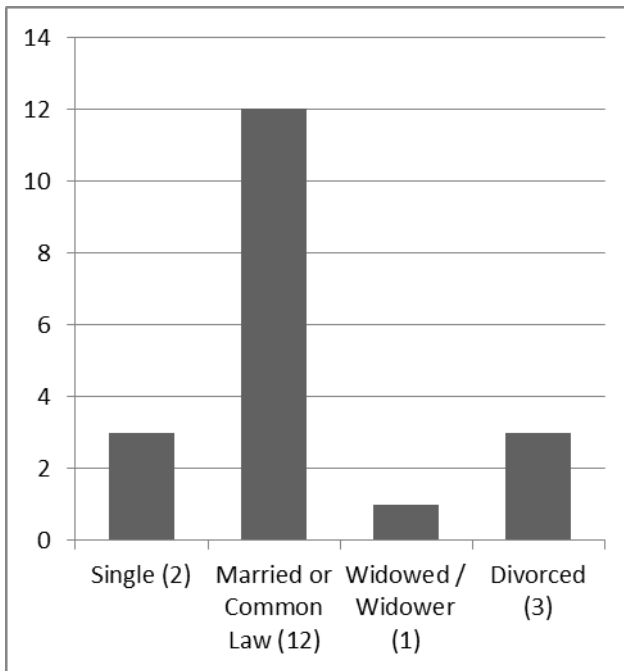


Female participants outnumbered males at, roughly, a 60-40 split, (Figure 4.2). Statistics on doctoral students in Canada show that approximately 65% of education students are female compared with 38% female in other professional fields of study (Gluszynski & Peters, 2005).



**Figure 4.2. Gender of interview participants**

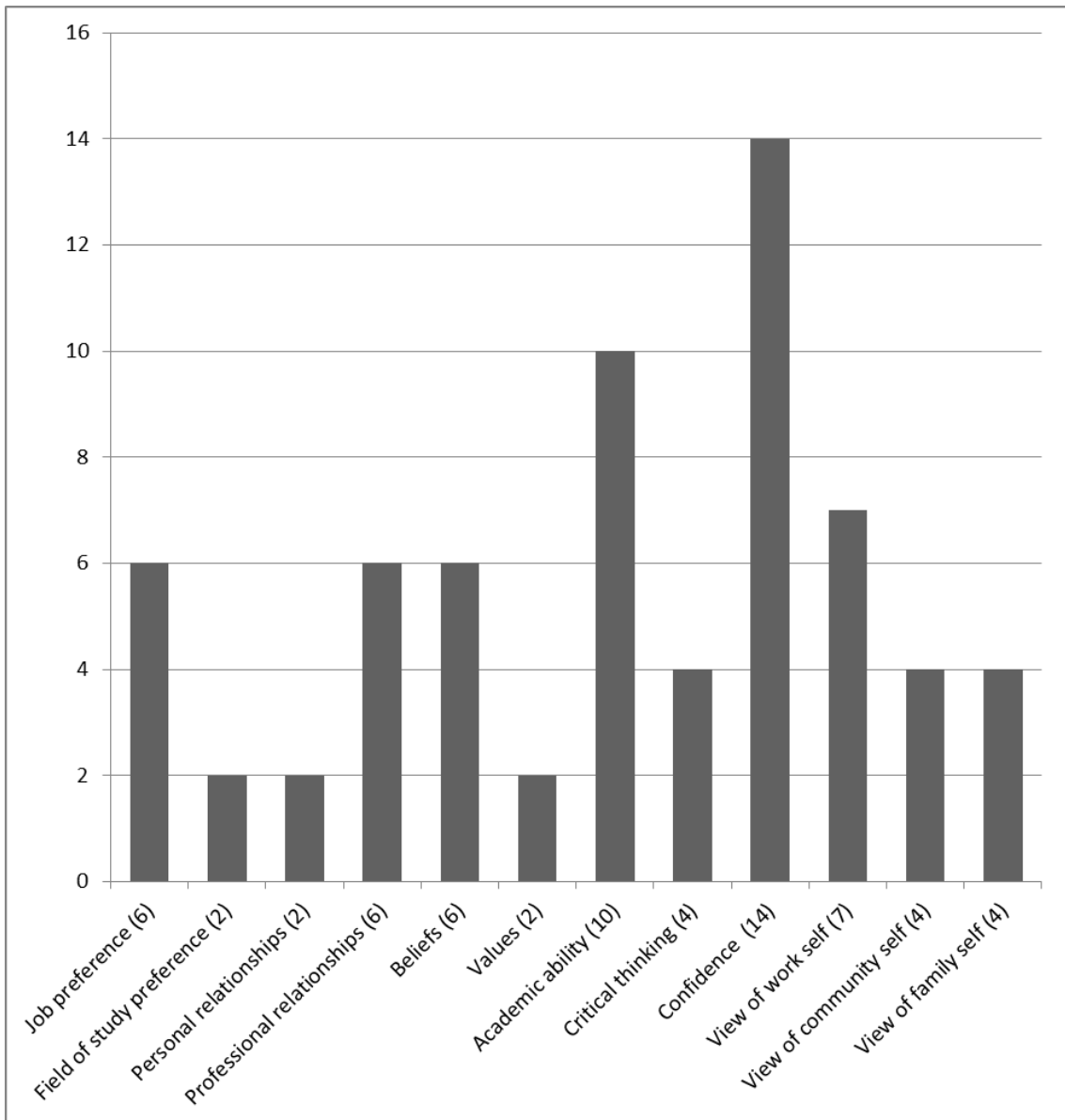
Marital status was included because of its relevance to potential sources of support and context. Figure 4.3 shows that the majority of the respondents (63%) were married or in common law relationships. This appears similar to Gluszynski & Peters (2005) statistics indicating 67% of Canadian doctoral graduates as married (and/or common law).



**Figure 4.3. Marital status of interview participants**

#### 4.2.2 Survey: Perception of influence of doctoral studies

In addition to the collection of demographic data, the survey was also used to explore whether or not the students saw their doctoral experiences had affected their lives. At this point, the students had only a very brief introduction to the study via the letter of consent and the survey itself (see Appendices A and B). Figure 4.4 shows that the area in which the students saw the greatest impact was upon their level of confidence (14 respondents).



**Figure 4.4. Areas of perceived impact.**

The next greatest area of perceived impact was in their academic ability (10 respondents). Together, the categories, *view of work self* and *professional relationships* was indicated by 17 respondents of the respondents as a significant influence in their lives. The areas least perceived to have been affected by doctoral-level studies included personal relationships (2 respondents), preference for field of study (2 respondents), values (2 respondents), and ability to think critically (4 respondents).

## 4.3 Analysis

### 4.3.1. Coding

After all the interviews were transcribed, each transcript was read three times from start to finish. I made preliminary memos about potential patterns and interesting observations. Then, using Atlas-ti, I analysed the transcripts for discursive techniques (Table 4.3). These techniques were helpful in attempting to understand the participants' sub-liminal appropriations of societal discourses and their self-talk. Subliminal appropriations are ideas that an individual has absorbed from social discourses of which s/he may not be fully aware (from Q2 of the social positioning cycle, see p. 30).

**Table 4.3. Discursive techniques**

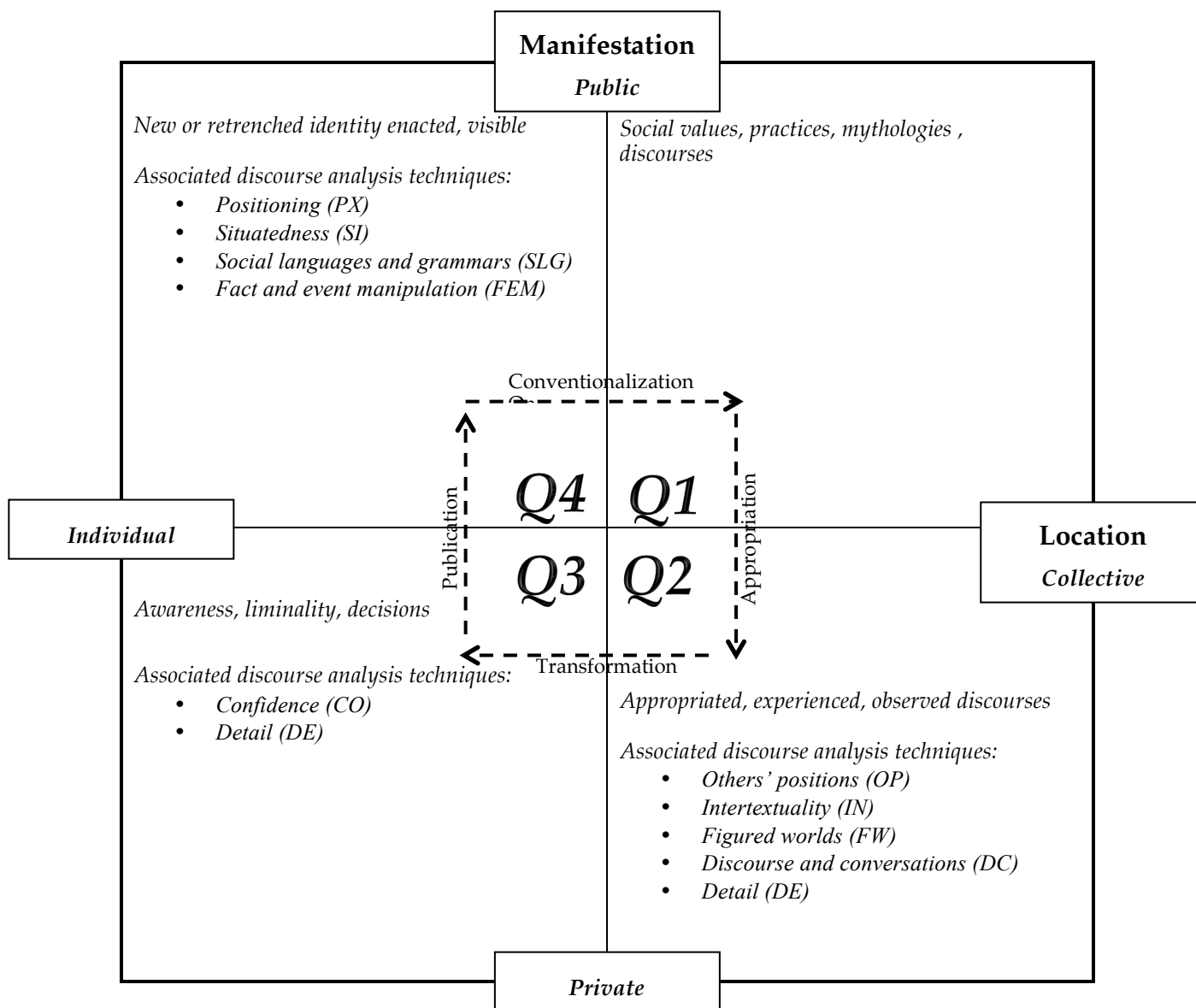
| <b>Indicators (Potter, 1996)</b> | <b>Indicators (Gee, 2010)</b>          |
|----------------------------------|--|
| 1. Confidence (CO)               | 6. Situatedness (SI)                   |
| 2. Proximity (PX)                | 7. Social languages and grammars (SLG) |
| 3. Others' positions (OP)        | 8. Figured worlds (FW)                 |
| 4. Fact/event manipulation (FEM) | 9. Intertextuality (IN)                |
| 5. Detail (DE)                   | 10. Discourse and conversations (DC)   |

As the patterns emerged from memoing and manipulation of sticky notes on my desk, I ran a variety of queries in Atlas.ti allowing me to quickly access quotes corresponding to the co-occurrences. Finally, I re-read the transcripts again to locate other possible quotes that may have escaped the computer generated output.

### 4.3.2. The social positioning cycle as an organizational framework

In the following sections, the learners' descriptions of their experiences will be organized by collective: general society, friends and family, professional,

cohort, academic department, and the academy. The SPC will be used to provide a visual summary of the learners' descriptions of experience for each collective.



**Figure 4.6. The social positioning cycle with discourse analysis techniques (adapted from Harré, 2010).**

The cycle has two axes: manifestation (public versus private expression) and location (relational space, people as locations for speech acts). As per figure 4.6, crossing the axes results in four quadrants:

- Quadrant 1 (Q1) refers to the pool of practices and discourses to which an individual is exposed as he/she interacts within a given collective.

- Quadrant 2 (Q2) refers to those practices and discourses that an individual might appropriate, observe, or experience (overtly or subliminally).
- Quadrant 3 (Q3) is the internal space for positioning work. This is the area in which the learner evaluates questions, rationalizes, and considers that which s/he has become aware of in Q2.
- Quadrant 4 (Q4) is the location in which an individual publicly enacts, publishes, or expresses the decisions and identities that have resulted from the positioning work in Q3. These expressions may, in turn, influence the pool of practices and discourses in Q1.

As will be seen in the subsequent section, I refrained from placing quotations in Q1. Empirically, in this study, I am relying upon second-order observations. As such, I can only access the learners' descriptions of their experience. I was not able to directly observe the pool of practices and discourses directly. I can only report on the learners' observations of the pools to which they refer (Q2).

The discursive techniques aided me in understanding the participants' descriptions of experience and the work that they were doing to understand and alter their positions. As analysis proceeded and quotes sorted into the various quadrants, patterns emerged in which discursive techniques appeared generally associated with specific quadrants (see figure 4.6 above).

Detail (DE) and fact-event manipulation (FEM) were difficult to consistently place within a single quadrant. It was unclear if the recollection of details or manipulation of information was directed towards me, the interviewer, or if this represented observations or opinions of the learners' experiences.

### **4.3 Interview responses illustrating social positioning**

The descriptions and quotes that appear in this section are arranged according to the main collectives that were discussed during the interviews: general society, friends and family, professional, cohort, academic department, and academia. Figures 4.6 to 4.11 provide a visual representation of the learners' descriptions that illustrate the variations in which the study participants (individually and collectively) described their experiences. Codes indicating each speaker's stage in their program (Table 4.1) as well as occurrences of relevant discursive techniques (Table 4.3) have been integrated into the quotations. Underlined portions of the quotations indicate key statements during analysis. To the right of each quotation, there is a brief description of how the participants appear to position themselves through their descriptions.

### 4.3.1 Positioning within general society

Within this context, the main discourses that the participants described as troublesome and transformative pertain to the value of doctoral studies, how one should contribute to society, and how one should behave in society at particular ages.

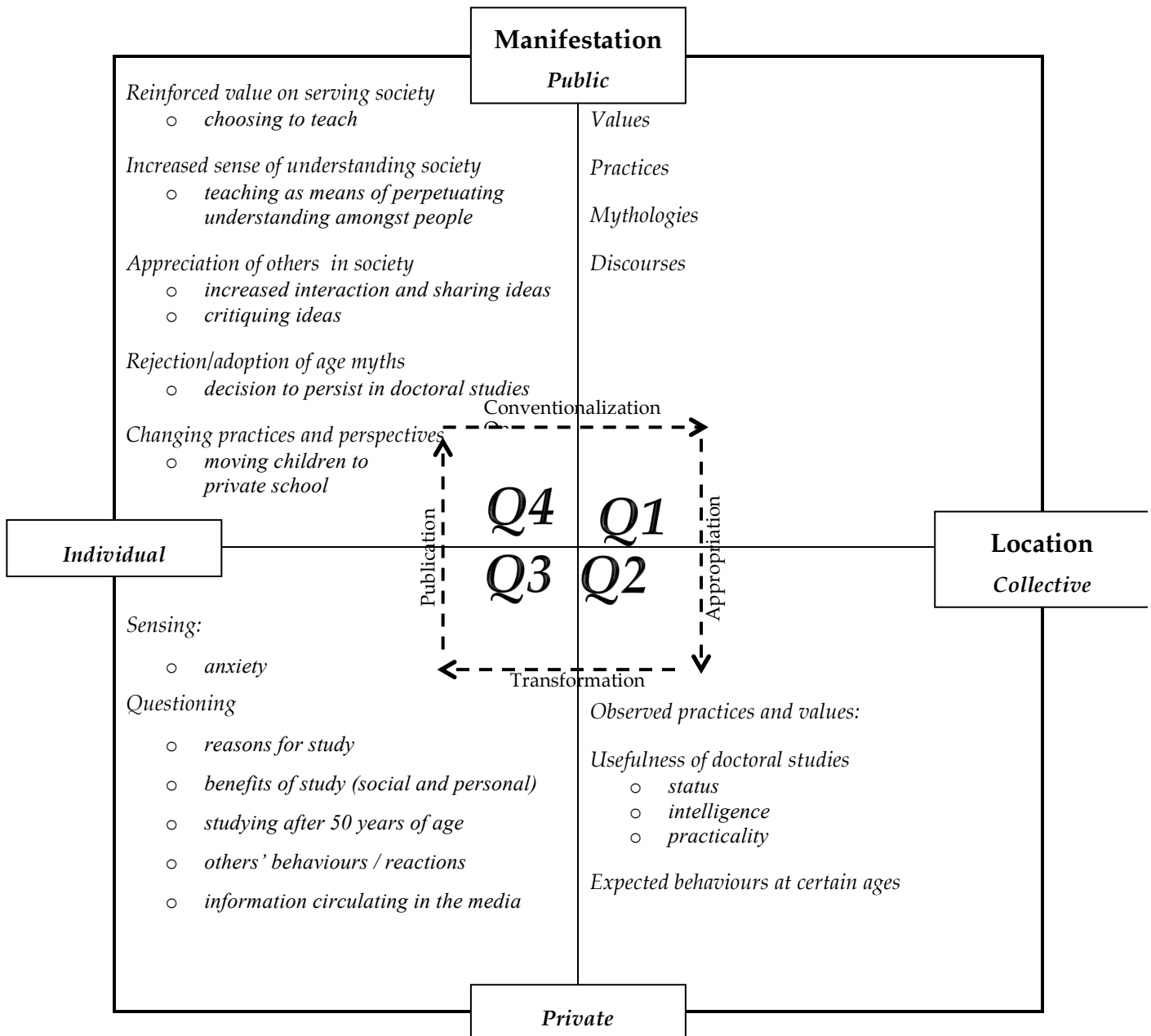


Figure 4.7. Summary of positioning within general society



## The usefulness of doctoral studies

As Brenda recounts a conversation, she describes how doctoral studies contribute to her life in expanding her ability to think more critically and carefully. She expresses anxiety (Q3) about the perceived lack of usefulness of doctoral studies (Q2), but also indicates how she applies her newfound critical skills.

### Quotation

Brenda (M): *When I first got accepted to the program, I remember talking to somebody about the process of going back to school. And that person said to me, "What? You're not smart enough already? You're going back to school to become smarter?" (FW, OP) And, it was a bit of a— it stung a little bit. But, I thought, "Oh, I'm trying not to be boastful or, you know, a smartass" (PX) . . . So, then what's the difference between [the master's] and doctoral studies? . . . just more conscious, more thoughtful, more reflective about applying those critical skills and critical edge (SI). So, it makes me wonder what we mean by "smarter". Do you know more stuff? Do you do more things? I suppose (CO).*

Brenda (M): *That idea that, you know, that you can write an entire research thesis/dissertation on some tiny—to everyone else— meaningless thing (OP, DC). And . . . I get some anxiety about that. You don't want to be the one who wrote their dissertation on garbage collection (FEM).*

Brenda (M): *I think there's an assumption that you're really specializing (OP). So, you're focusing in on a tiny, esoteric area of interest. And, that's true to some extent (PX) . . . But, there's also a more expansive side to it (SI) . . . while you're drilling down, you're also widening the way you look at questions to capture the essence or all the possible permutations of that topic.*

### Positioning as

Humble  
Intelligent

Useful

Specialized, but  
useful

Steve goes a step further in his analysis in suggesting that greater understanding of the world (Q4) can have a positive impact upon society (Q1).

### Quotation

Steve (M): *And, so I think I'm gaining that [general studies] in the doctoral program as well as at a greater level, too, (SI) because of all the various theories that in business come primarily from, you know, the social sciences, which are about living, about life, about people particularly in organizations, in groups and interactions (IN) . . . But, the more people that have that general perspective and more of a reflective attitude, I think, the more of those types of people you have in an organization or in society the better (DC).*

### Positioning as

Understanding society;  
reflective

Barry indicates some struggle (Q3) with the status others might attribute to those with higher education (Q2). But, he also suggests that higher-level studies can increase one's voice and agency (Q4).

### Quotation

Barry (E): *In some ways, you know, it is an unfortunate aspect of our society in general (PX). It's not necessarily that I am now more educated after only one year in the program, but being in the program—being someone who is pursuing a doctoral degree gives you more status. And, that's not in a— not in a negative sense. And, it is not of a desire for status, but you are seen as someone whose opinion matters (OP).*

### Positioning as

Humble (non-status seeking);  
having a voice;  
respected

## Enhanced understanding of the world

The participants described the evaluative work (Q3) they did as they began to question the values and practices that they had observed (Q2). In Sylvia's case, she examines herself and what she thinks she knows (Q3). And, she sees herself changing (Q4).

## Quotation

Sylvia (M): *Yes. And, I'm totally confused right now (CO) . . . Well, I look at what we know or what we think we know, and then the theories don't always explain what's happening . . . There's certainly no universal theories (FW). And, there's such a difference between kind of concrete day-to-day knowledge, and beliefs and belief systems and even though belief systems aren't necessarily something that you know (IN).*

Sylvia (M): *Well, when I think about what I know — if someone says to me, "You must know a lot" (OP). I don't think I do. I know a very little bit about a very specific part of [type of] education. But, I see trends and I see patterns much more broadly than I did before (SI).*

## Positioning as

Truth-seeking

Seeing trends;  
humble

Karen provides a more concrete example of how her behaviour has changed. She more closely scrutinizes information (Q3), and she makes visible changes in her family life by moving her children to a private school (Q4).

## Quotation

Karen (M): *I think I read, say like a newspaper (IN), for example, if they have backed up their point of view with research. I'm a bit more critical of accepting the research without thinking about it (SI).*

Karen (M): *Alright, here's another complete, complete off the wall change that has been linked to my doctoral studies — I've taken my kids out of public schooling and put them into private schooling and that is something I thought about, but not really considered (PX). And, then in [course number] . . . we spent quite a lot of time talking about private schooling just because there's a bunch of us in my cohort that have kids . . . it really helped me think about how the education system is run in this country and how they base all their objective testing (SI).*

## Positioning as

Critical

Critical (with  
physically  
observable  
change)

## Age discourses

Some of the participants described their evaluations (Q2) of the social discourses about age-related roles and behaviours. Maria questions certain “myths” (Q2) in light of her own life choices.

### Quotation

Maria (E): . . . *I think that we sort of have as a society bought into that myth of ‘freedom-55’, and we’re not supposed to work past 55 (DC). And, I think that’s crazy (FEM) . . . if I look logically that seems insane to me to be doing a doctorate at age [50-59] (PX).*

### Positioning as

Unusual; older

Both Steve and Tina discuss shifts in perspectives as people age. Steve comments on shifts in political positions and how that might be related to his doctoral studies (Q3). Within the greater context of their interviews, these comments appear to serve a rationalization function for their decision to take on and persist in doctoral study (Q4). Nevertheless, rather than rejecting age-discourses, they locate themselves within the discourses.

### Quotation

Steve (M): *I’ve had a few major, I guess a few major life events. So, I think my views have definitely shifted (SI). Yeah. And, part of it is just maybe getting older (PX). I’m almost 50 now . . . And, I find myself being more of a social liberal than I certainly was at 20 or 30 (DC, SI). Is that part of the doctoral program? Maybe it contributes to that. But, maybe also the other events in my life—(CO).*

### Positioning as

Social liberal;  
experienced

Tina (L): *Well, I think that is part of being more well-read and I think that’s true as we get older . . . I just think education just does that for you. It sort of opens windows or puts on a pair of glasses that you look at things differently (SI).*

Well-read;  
older; wiser

## Understanding society & contributing back

Peter describes his sense of connectedness (Q3) with other learners across Canada and attributes this to his doctoral experience.

### Quotation

Peter (L): *I've learned how to work with people at a distance [through] online collaborative assignments. . . I have certainly got a way better appreciation about . . . the learning culture across Canada because I've had them [the cohort] to be able to talk to and . . . find out their life situation and why they got in and what they're doing and where they're going (PX).*

### Positioning as

Peer; more informed

The comments by Betty and Gina more strongly connect their doctoral programs with contributing back to the greater society (Q1).

### Quotation

Betty (C): *I would say that the program is, um, trying to achieve having individuals in society that care about education . . . Critically think about the merits of [area of] education, the strategies used behind it . . . And, to create life-long learners along the way who . . . basically who can contribute to society in one way or another in terms of improving education in whatever sector (FW).*

### Positioning as

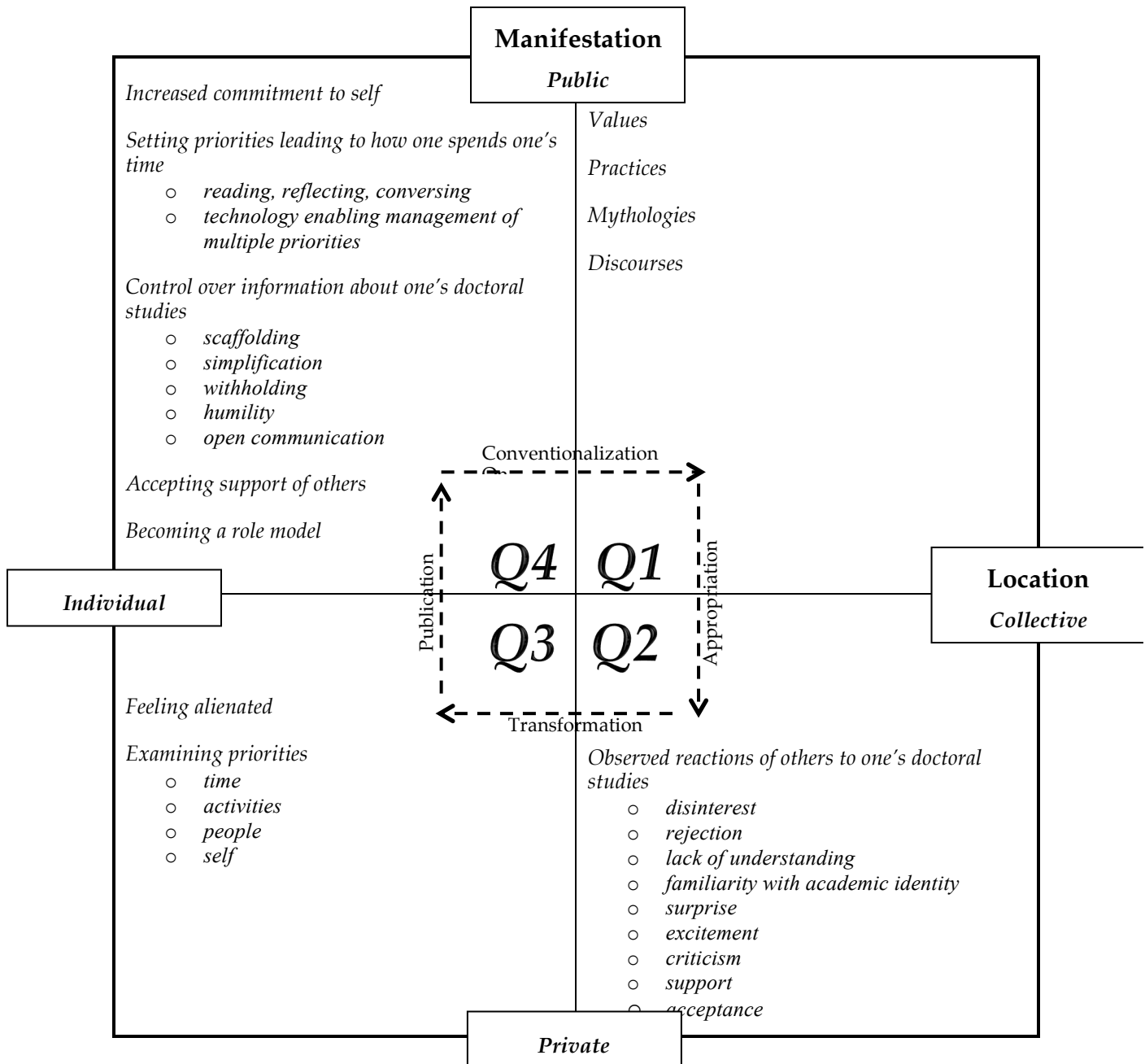
Valuable; shaping others

Gina (M): *I've been, over the years, going down a path of a lot of self-reflection (SI) . . . And, frankly, I'm done making money for shareholders, and lining other people's pockets (FEM). I want to be doing something of value. And, working for one of the educational institutions in town, to me, adds value not only to me and my students, but to the community (PX).*

Valuable to community

### 4.3.2 Positioning amongst friends and family

The most salient narratives in this context were related to how friends and family members reacted to the participants' doctoral studies. Figure 4.8 provides a visual summary of the participants' descriptions.



**Figure 4.8.** Summary of positioning amongst friends and family

## Feelings of alienation

The study participants described how they experience less engagement (interaction) with friends and family. Having time for everyone was a significant issue (Q3) that arose in some of the interviews.

### Quotation

Denise (M): *Relationship-wise, on a personal level, I don't have the time that I had for relationships prior to starting—and that's caused some angst with some of my friends (OP). And, and that's, you know that's their problem, not mine (PX) . . . And, people are blaming it on my studies (OP).*

Nancy (M): *I told myself that I was going to immerse myself in my studies as much as I can. And . . . I cloistered myself . . . I was losing my grip on reality at some point (FEM) because it was just too much . . . You know, I mean, academics really do that (FW). It's the emotional costs of academia. And . . . you're away from the social world . . . You feel that sense of alienation (PX).*

### Positioning as

Distanced from others

Distanced from others

When the participants told friends and relatives about starting doctoral studies, they noted a range of reactions (Q2).

### Quotation

Denise (M): *I think my younger brother was surprised. My older sister was just, "It's going to be too much work for you." My parents were quite excited about it. Then, I have siblings who live away and they were quite excited about it . . . Most of my friends were very supportive of me starting the program, and are still supportive. There are a few less happy, but they are the minority (OP, CO).*

Steve (M): *I guess it would range from dumbfounded to, like "Why would you want to do that?" To, I guess interested. I don't know if I would say excited. I don't know—intrigued maybe. (OP, CO).*

### Positioning as

Various

Various;  
uncertain

Bruce (C): *Most of my friends know exactly who I am. And, they go, "There you go. I hope you're having fun." . . . But, those that don't, "It's just—It's Bruce." . . . I have two sisters . . . My younger sister is a Dean of the [faculty] at a university. She has a master's degree. But, she dismisses me . . . It's unfortunate. Yeah. I have great difficulty with her. I don't quite know what it is. My mother-in-law doesn't quite understand it. But, she goes, "He's doing some schooling" . . . My kids are okay with it. I don't think they fully appreciate or understand what's involved. But, they're very supportive (OP, PX).*

Various

Some participants noted that various friends and family members appeared to lack interest and comprehension of doctoral studies and research (Q2). Gina observed how her partner assumed he could not understand, so he didn't try. This led her to an increased sense of alienation (Q3). She attempts to come to terms with this, but returns to the issue throughout her interview.

### Quotation

Gina (M): *Oh, yeah . . . It's a very alienating process . . . In terms of you're now reading stuff that such a small percentage of the population reads or is interested in (FW). That you're already marginalizing yourself (PX). Because the people around you have no idea what you're talking about if they even choose to ask you what you're reading about (FEM). That most people assume right away like my partner . . . "Well, I probably won't understand it anyway, but what are you working on? (OP) . . . But, I realize now, it's them concerned with their own insecurities (PX).*

### Positioning as

Alienated, but others have the problem

Steve also comments on a general lack of support and interest (Q2) from family also causing anxiety (Q3).

### Quotation

Steve (M): *And, even at home before my wife and I split up. And, she's got a master's degree in [field] . . . She said, "No. I do that [discuss theory] at work. I'm tired of that. I'm not going to do it at home." So, I don't have any friends that are that way inclined either (OP, PX).*

### Positioning as

Alienated; alone



## Setting priorities

In order to address these issues, some participants describe sorting through their priorities and attempting to balance commitments (Q3).

### Quotation

Gina (M): *So, with two young children—when I started the program, I had a #-year old and a #-year old—I didn't have the ability to just read 10 articles a weekend (DE) . . . So, it was also an exercise in prioritization for me in terms of what actually is important to me (SI).*

Bruce (C): *It's probably if nothing else it's solidified what's important to me . . . You know, it's the idea that it reinforced my love of reading, of reflection, and wanting to sit down and talk with others (SI) . . .*

### Positioning as

Family as  
priority

Friends and  
family as  
priority

Technology-enhanced learning increased comfort in the integration of personal and academic aspects of their lives. In effect, studying by distance permitted Candace to manage multiple priorities (Q4).

### Quotation

Candace (E): *I think a lot of that is because school is also very flexible. So, I don't actually have to miss, you know, 50th wedding anniversaries . . . So, when things are a little bit hectic if I'm absent for a little while, they're quite forgiving (OP).*

### Positioning as

Flexible;  
multiple  
positions at  
once

Karen describes a rather complex sorting of priorities and balancing of responsibilities (Q3). Her musings lead her to an acceptance of support and increased commitment to her studies. She notes her actions as providing examples for her children (Q4).

## Quotation

Karen (M): *I mean, when you're so intensely involved in something, it affects all aspects of your life. On a personal level, I've had to rely on my husband's support as well. And . . . [he] takes on more of the child care duties (DE) . . . So, it's definitely, I rely on him a lot. And, sometimes I worry that I'm so preoccupied with myself (CO). I ask him every now and again, "You would tell me if me doing this doctorate is a problem in our relationship." And, I let him know that if it was, he could—he can tell me that, and I would stop. 'Cause obviously my relationship is more important than my doctorate, I think in terms of my children, obviously, they get less of me because I study (PX). So, I think I struggle with that as a mother. But, I also think it's a very good role model for my daughters to see that learning is a life-long thing (PX). And, sometimes I worry that I just think that in order to make myself feel better (CO). But, I do think my kids see me studying, they see me organizing my life and how I read and my notes. I see that they take on some of that in their own homework and study. So, it's affected my personal life, but I think it's positive (SI).*

## Positioning as

Role model;  
wife; mother

Having set her priorities, Maria becomes increasingly committed to her own growth (Q4).

## Quotation

Maria (E): *I've made it very clear that the rest of my life is my journey. . . So, I'm doing this for me. And, I think like a lot of women, they've given up a lot for their families (DC). And, I feel I'm doing this for my family. And, I'm not really looking for approval from anybody else (CO, PX).*

## Positioning as

Woman who  
has had to  
sacrifice; self as  
priority

## Controlling information and managing relationships

Reacting (Q3) to a sense of rejection, lack of understanding, and lack of support (Q2), some participants described withdrawing or withholding information about their studies (Q4).

## Quotation

Sylvia (M): *I've stopped telling people outside the school (SLG) that I'm even taking a doctorate. And, when I was in [country], the wives had this little dinner that somebody organized. And, so I went. And, part way through, one of the women actually whose sister-in-law I work with, she's a teacher, said that I was doing a doctorate. And, most of the women physically recoiled from me (FEM, DE).*

## Positioning as

Rejected

Gina (M): *And, I remember someone . . . one of the professors in the program saying, "If people ask you about your research, don't tell them. Just say, 'It's going great.' If they ask a second question, give them one more sentence" (SLG) . . . because they really don't want to know (OP) . . . And, [the professor was] so right. I will say to people, "Yeah, it's going great. I've got this great, new topic." And, most people at that point go, "Oh good." . . . And, they don't ask again. It's done (OP). Yeah, I was surprised at just how isolating it would be.*

Isolated

Rob (C): *Oh, my family was — my parents were really happy. They're well educated . . . I really haven't told too many of my friends just because I don't think they, they understand what a doctoral program is (OP), what's involved with it. And, I would rather just keep that to myself (SLG) . . .*

Isolated

Sylvia (M): *My one brother just says, "Oh, you guys in Education. You just keep going to school." (FW) Okay. So, that's fine . . . Well, mom and dad are both gone. Dad would have been thrilled. Mom kind of . . . Other relatives that I've been in contact with, they're pleased (OP). And, they like the idea of it. But, they're not people I can discuss it with (SLG).*

Isolated

Some participants described trying to discuss their studies amongst friends and family whilst maintaining humility (Q4).

## Quotation

Rob (C): *I mention just the general area that I'm studying because if I get into more of the details, a lot of friends and family tend to get lost or*

## Positioning as

Humble;  
respectful

*don't understand it (OP). Because it's kind of . . . it's at a higher level . . . I don't want to come across as demeaning them or as talking down to them if they're not really going to understand what I'm doing (SLG, PX).*

*Brenda (M): You try to be as simple as possible as you watch their eyes glaze over (SLG, OP). And, it's not that I try to avoid that question, but I haven't made a big deal about it. You know, you just say that I'm going back to school. But, I'm not real comfortable with waving that flag around too much.(PX).*

Humble;  
approachable

Other participants described using techniques such as scaffolding, exemplification, and increasing clarification as social situations unfold (Q4). These techniques appear to help the participants co-occupy (co-location) social locations by bridging gaps in understanding.

**Quotation**

**Positioning as**

*Candace (E): Sometimes if they don't really know what it means (OP), the only extra clarification I say is it's basically the highest qualification in this field. And, that makes sense to them (SLG).*

Co-locating

*Tom (M): Probably pretty generally. I'll say "[type of] education." And, then, they want to know what that is and what that means (OP). That's usually as far as it goes. Unless I'm talking to somebody who has been involved in higher education, then I talk at kind of the next level. . . (DE, SLG)*

Co-locating

*Peter (L): A lot of people are curious, "What are you doing?" I tell them I'm doing a doctorate in [field of education] and, you know, and I'll often add on, "I'm trying to design learning in places like Facebook." And, everybody goes, "Oh, okay. That makes sense." . . . But, I frame it in a way that they understand it in their own lives. And, they go, "Oh, okay. That's understandable." (OP, SLG).*

Co-locating

*Barry (E): I say I'm studying [field] . . . And, then I [go into detail], if*

Co-locating

*it's usually with family members, they have some background already (SLG) . . . it doesn't usually take a lot of explaining. I think that they immediately sort of jump to, "Oh, you're going to be a professor like your dad." (OP) And, that's close enough for me. I don't usually try and go too deeply into the distinctions between [kinds of] education and things like that (SLG).*

Although there were many stories of negative reactions, some participants also detected high levels of support from key individuals in the family or friend-circles—especially those who share in understanding the doctoral experience (Q2). These stories appeared to correspond to less self-examination and less alienation than the more negative stories (Q3). In the interviews, these stories held a sense of comfort and acceptance of the learner as s/he moved into his/her doctoral studies.

**Quotation**

**Positioning as**

Betty (C): *I always had a lot of support from my husband . . . both my family and my in-laws have been very supportive of it (OP). And, I haven't noticed a huge change in my relationship with any of them. I know, my brother-in-law is also doing his PhD in Education at [university]. And, so we kind of talk about it, or you know, complain about it . . . or what have you, and have a competition as to who's going to defend first (PX, DE).*

Accepted;  
understood

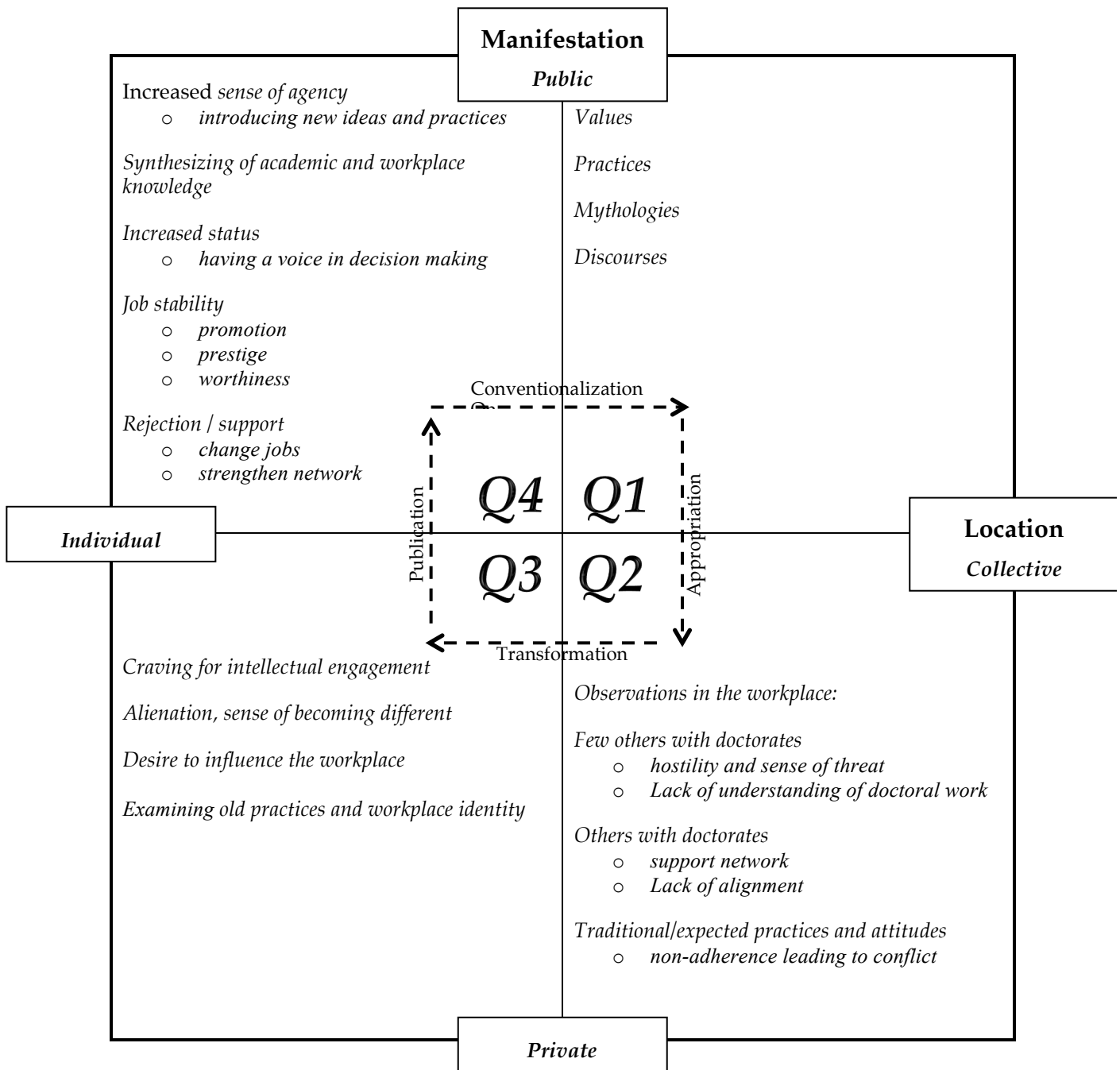
Peter (L): *My family's—my dad's—sort of followed that route, although he never finished his doctorate. So, our family, in terms of my immediate family, sister and parent, have had that as an identifier (PX).*

Accepted;  
understood

Vince (M): *So, we [Vince and his wife] commiserate with each other with respect to our studies and our time commitment, which is kind of fun, too. . . And, now mutually [supportive] in our two doctorate roles. So, it's affected our relationship in terms of having less free time for one another, but probably a pretty good understanding of one another's priorities . . . So, we did actually do quite a bit in terms of sharing theory and looking at the whole approach of literature reviews and how do you write proposals and different things like that (PX, IN).*

Accepted;  
supported;  
understood

### 4.3.3 Positioning within the professional context



**Figure 4.9. Summary of positioning within professional contexts**

## Alignment in the workplace

For some participants, they note that there are few other doctoral students or professionals with doctorates in the workplace (Q2). As a result, some participants described craving a level of engagement that seemed lacking in their current workplace. Steve noted a sense of misalignment and lack of engagement with academically-inclined co-workers (Q3):

### Quotation

Steve (M): *Intellectual support, that would be tough because I would say that's what's lacking right now (OP) . . . But, I hope to have some—some of that intellectual conversations with some colleagues here . . . probably the doctoral faculty is in the minority here yet because I think the transition from a college to a university . . . But, it has been lacking in the past. Companies I've worked for in the last little while have been, not huge companies, so the [field] departments I managed have been small. So I didn't get any intellectual stimulation at work (PX, DE).*

### Positioning as

Intellectually  
isolated

Some participants described some misalignment in the workplace because of differing approaches and practices (Q2). Whilst Candace noticed a divide between her work and studies, Bruce and Nancy both recounted sensing a degree of conflict arising from disagreement with established practices. George senses that his colleagues struggle with his new identity (Q2).

### Quotation

Candace (E): *And, I just my actual teaching job, a lot of it is done using online technologies . . . what I found was I love online learning. (PX) But, where I'm at, it's actually still quite new . . . So, that's why I sort of had to break out of what I call a traditional [health care] preparation for my position. And, I went into the education domain (SI).*

### Positioning as

Isolated  
(changing  
practices)

Bruce (C): *And, so I've changed the way I see my classroom (SI). And, I know that when I look around and how I originally was teaching and how many of my peers teach. They they're trainers . . . And, so I've*

Isolated  
(changing  
practices)

*become somewhat of an anomaly. And, it's become — it's difficult for me at times (PX) . . .*

Nancy (M): *And, so I want to take writing from like being a cognitive activity to being more of a skill-based activity—the teaching of the writing, that is (SI). And, that's going to result in a little bit of a conflict with the, the person who's, who's in charge of the writing program because he's like into Bloom (OP). And, I'm trying to get away from Bloom (PX).*

Isolated  
(changing practices)

George (E): *Yeah. A unique situation with the school . . . people knew me as a [professional designation] first, and then, you know, it's hard to accept change. I don't know (OP, PX).*

Isolated  
(changing field of study)

There was, however, a range of acceptance from others in the workplace (Q2). In Karen's case, she found a support network made up of like-minded colleagues (Q3).

### **Quotation**

Karen (M): *From a work perspective, I've got some great colleagues who are also going through the doctoral process. So, we get together, and have a right moan, or compare, or people that complete, we celebrate their completion. And, they give us advice. So . . . I have that network at work which is great (PX).*

### **Positioning as**

Member; peer

### **Status and influence**

Early in his doctoral experience, Barry appears unsure of the potential impact of his studies upon his professional life (Q4). Later in the interview, he suggests that increased status may be a vehicle to agency and promotion in the workplace especially in non-university institutions (Q4). He indicates struggling with this discourse of status, yet appears to embrace the shift in position (Q3).



## Quotation

Barry (E): *I'd have to say, not much. The master's program did do that [change in thinking] for me in a big, big way (SI). Um, that was a major turning point in my life. Or, at least, a pivotal point where I really went from seeing myself in relatively junior kind of position within an institution to really shifting where I saw myself and my contributions (PX). And, then, you know subsequent to finishing the [master's], I have had some really good fortune to move through positions here at the [institution] and have a far more senior role. So, I don't think that for me the doctoral program would be sort of personally transformational . . . But, you know, it's also—keep in mind—that I'm only a year in (CO). I have not written my dissertation. And, this could well change. If you were to interview me in two or three years, I may have discovered a level and a transformation that I wasn't expecting (PX).*

Barry (E): *But, I derive much greater satisfaction from my work if I have a role in shaping what it is that I'm doing. And, I think that there's some stature that comes with having completed doctoral studies (FW) that helps you to be in a position like that . . . And, for some people, the idea of more and more people within the organization having doctoral credentials, it might be slightly threatening (OP, PX).*

## Positioning as

Already having status; possible future positioning

Attaining status; threatening others

Brenda and Karen both described the interplay between their work and doctoral studies (Q3). Karen and Tina both elaborate on how this interplay affects her practice and acceptance in the workplace—in influencing students and colleagues (Q4).

## Quotation

Brenda (M): *I was afraid that I wasn't going to be able to keep up with developments in the field . . . and stay on top of the literature (IN). And, I'm less concerned about that now (SI) . . . But, I think the feeling I've got is that I'm building on—as you read, you are really learning and synthesizing (SI, PX). . . And, maybe because I'm working in the same field that I'm studying in, things get more consolidated.*

## Positioning as

Unstated / ambiguous; consolidating knowledge

Karen (M): I also tie in my assignments with work projects, which really helps. And, I found that I'm more confident. I feel that I know more what I'm talking about. And, I'm a bit more articulate (CO).

Increasing confidence

Tina (L): Well, for example, in doing the [activity], in the lab . . . In an undergrad or even in my masters, I would have looked at providing the experience for the student . . . I would have just provided it. I would have done a few surveys after (DE). But, now I see that the act of providing the practice lab, the simulation practice lab. And, making the connections for the distance students at a doing-level and at a social-level I think I can go beyond that . . . And, also when I think about it—when I do it, I look at the literature that supports it [IN]. So, it just really widens my perspective (SI).

Integrating knowledge

Karen (M): I can see how much I benefited from structured, organized training [experienced in doctoral courses] (SI). And, I feel that other people could also benefit. I feel quite strongly that higher education professors often could benefit from some training in pedagogy and methods. That doesn't necessarily make me popular at work (PX).

Unpopular; integrating practices

Tina (L): I am in such a different place than I was in my undergrad, in my master's. I just have a—it gives me a vision. It gives me a pair of glasses that I see things from just totally different perspectives (SI). Again, it [pushes] me to do more, to help others to get to that point (PX).

Influential; wise

Three participants noted how their doctoral studies were connected to increased competence, knowledge, skills, and respect (Q4)

**Quotation**

**Positioning as**

Gina (M): [Institution went through a change.] And, so I didn't get renewed. And, I just became a, part-time lecturer. So, I was very aware at that point that if I didn't get a doctorate, I wasn't going to be teaching there full-time (PX, DE).

Worthy; knowledgeable

Tom (M): At a professional level, I'm a faculty member in a field which

Worthy;

*doesn't really require a doctorate (SI) . . . But, it's helpful, professionally, as a faculty member to have a doctorate. Also, I have a fairly active consulting practice—again, there's sort of business interests in having a doctorate—can charge more, you can possibly get more clients and so on (FW).*

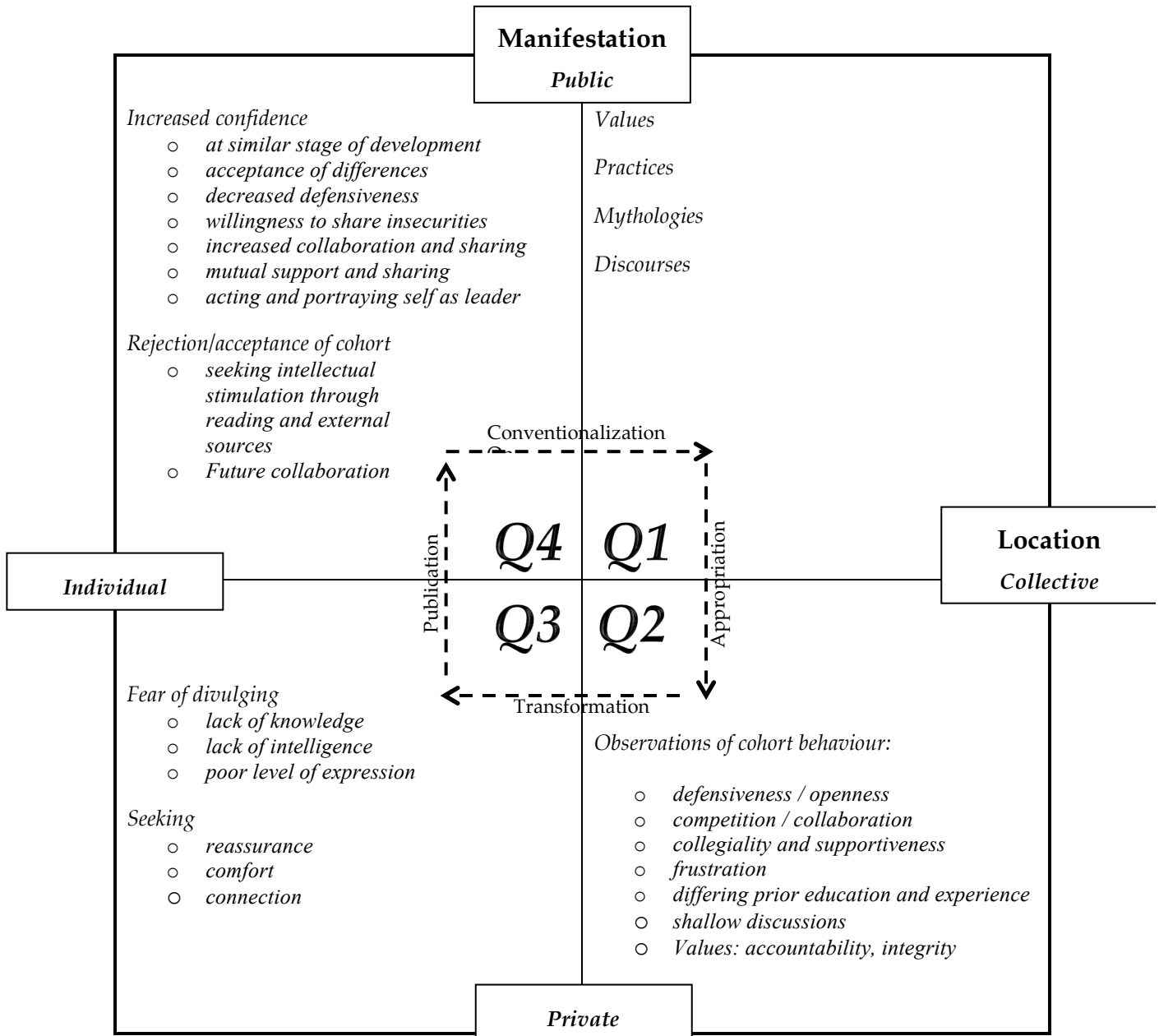
knowledgeable

*Karen (M): And, because I work at a college, and I already had a master's, um, the doctorate is the next level in terms of promotion (PX), etc. . . . I didn't want to get a second master's. A second master's wouldn't have the same clout, the same effect as getting a doctorate (FW). So, it's—it's really for career.*

Worthy;  
knowledgeable;  
status

#### 4.3.4 Positioning within the doctoral cohort

During the interviews, the doctoral cohort emerged as a significant location of positioning. Figure 4.10 provides a representation of the participants' descriptions of their experience.



**Figure 4.10. Summary of positioning within the doctoral cohort**

## Comparing backgrounds

The participants recount anecdotes illustrating their initial uncertainty of their position within the cohort (Q3). They observe backgrounds of their cohort-mates (Q2) and compare these backgrounds with their own (Q3). They also distinguish their cohort from other cohorts.

### Quotation

Maria (E): *Well, the value of the cohort, I could see even from the shared experience in the summer . . . I think everybody comes with different expertise in different areas, different gaps (OP). And, we can all learn from each other's different styles or different presentations, and their own uniqueness (FW). And, hopefully, develop trust and learn to share and help each other (PX).*

Sylvia (M): *I'm kind of envious (PX) of my—the colleagues and cohort who are [working] in a higher-education environment because it seems that they're just thinking that way all the time. They're thinking in terms of theories and trends and big pictures (OP).*

Sylvia (M): *We're friendly and supportive, but not chummy (SLG). And, actually had a discussion about that last year. I think it was with [professor-1]. Because she's said—and [professor-2]'s mentioned, too—that we're very different from cohort [number]. And, cohort [number], I guess, is very chummy and they see each other a lot (OP) . . . But, we're not super close (SLG) . . . Part of it is because we're separated by distance. And, part of it is because we're not all Canadian. Apparently the [other] cohort is all Canadian (PX).*

### Positioning as

Equally experienced though different backgrounds

Lacking experience

Separated by distance, but cooperative; unique cohort

Alignment with peers appeared to be a measure of progress and intellectual worthiness (Q3) but was accompanied by oscillating feelings of competence and incompetence.

### Quotation

Maria (E): *I was a bit surprised that we were given an assignment*

### Positioning as

Inadequate;

before the orientation. And, we had to work with a partner . . . And, you know you were able to sort of share some of the doubts and maybe what was ahead (PX). And, it's perhaps took away some of the fear. And, it kind of boosted confidence that you knew quite a bit. And, that you — they hadn't made a kind of a mistake by accepting you into the program (CO) . . . even sharing something like the imposter-syndrome that you feel, "Oh, my god. They've made a mistake in accepting me. What were they thinking?" You know, everybody sitting there feeling that a little bit.

imposter

Maria (E): One thing that I did notice when I was working with that younger student. . . I was getting frustrated with him because he was so into using the technology (PX) . . . And so, I think he thought I was a real dope in terms of the technology (OP) . . . And, I felt quite inadequate (PX). So, I was relieved to hear [Professor] say [technical solution] (OP) . . . And, I went, "Oh my god. Thank goodness. Something practical that I can — I don't have to take another degree in technology to get through this" (SI, CO).

Adequate

Sylvia (M): They've broadened my view of what should be studied . . . And, so they look at areas that I would have skipped if I had a choice because I'm not mathematical and statistical. And, they look at different aspects of learning that I wouldn't necessarily have thought of or considered (SI).

Others as resources

Bruce (C): To talk to your peers to get a sense of where they are. It helps — it certainly helped me to feel that I was on track relative to my peers. Whether the lot of us were on track was another question. But, most of us, I think, feeling that we were within a reasonable distance of each other (PX, OP).

Adequate

### **Being valued**

Value-themes (Q2) such as integrity, accountability, and leadership were significant for some participants.

## Quotation

Maureen (C): *I think they view me as an active person in the cohort, somebody that they can reach out to. Somebody that is very willing to share whatever as far as any types of tools that I may have . . . Yeah, and I think that they see me as somebody that has set a goal and is working really hard towards that goal. And, living the learning, right? (OP, FW).*

Betty (C): *I think different people in the cohort view me differently. I know one person views me as someone she can talk to, and someone that'll be supportive of her and will listen to her, and is there step-by-step along the way with her at all times. And, accountable . . . We don't communicate all that often, but when we do, it's really great. Okay. So, it's almost, they know I'm there in the periphery (OP, PX).*

Brenda (M): *I did get the sense that in my last course that I'm a little privileged because I'm in this institution, you know in this same institution that we're studying in (PX, OP). So, then you should probably use that position with care and be helpful (SI).*

Gina (M): *And, I've had to also pull back from that [leadership] role because I don't have to fight everybody else's fights for them (SI) . . . I really believe in justice and fairness (PX). And, when I see injustice, I want it changed . . . They know I'm outspoken. And, open. And, seemingly approachable (OP).*

## Positioning as

Having integrity

Accountable;  
supportive

Accountable

Leader; just;  
approachable

Early in her program, Candace notes the potential importance of developing collaborative relationships for future endeavours (Q3; potential for influence on Q1).

## Quotation

Candace (E): *I think that, you know, relationships are developed between, you know, what could be future colleagues and partners in research once this program is over . . . One person in my cohort is already talking about . . . everybody can sort of write a chapter of a book or something and make a bigger contribution as a whole . . .* (DE, OP).

## Positioning as

Colleague; peer

## Bonding and support

Early in his program, George indicates his uncertainty at the possibility of a collaborative bond amongst cohort members (Q2). Meanwhile, Maria chooses not to bond with another student (Q3).

## Quotation

George (E): *I already know there is some frustration from all of them (OP) . . . So, I don't know if some will drop out. But it'll be interesting to see how the cohort's developing; how the bonds are there with that community feeling. But, how much collaborative interaction we'll have will yet to be seen (CO).*

## Positioning as

Uncertain

Maria (E): *So, it was a frustration with me to try to work with somebody from a completely different background and a completely different style than I had (SLG) . . . So, I decided that I certainly wasn't going to work with him if I could avoid it on any future seminars because he didn't listen (SI).*

Different;  
incompatible

Some participants indicate feeling connected to their cohort by virtue of sharing a common experience (i.e., doctoral studies) (Q3) leading to support and sharing amongst the cohort (less sharing with non-cohort) (Q4).

## Quotation

Tom (M): *Many of us are in the same boat (PX). They're, uh, professionals who are getting a doctorate. So, that's the main kind of support group. Talking about it with friends and family, they don't*

## Positioning as

Similar



really understand what it entails (OP).

Nancy (M): *Well, it has opened doors actually . . . because once the relationships develop— we’re there supporting each other. And, we’re also all in the same basket kind of thing. So we, we sympathize and, I don’t know, maybe we understand each other’s strengths (PX).*

Similar

Brenda (M): *You don’t want to feel like you’re boasting about something (PX). And, yet, it is so exciting. Maybe that’s why it’s so important— those connections with your cohort— because they know what that experience is like (PX). And, you can share that with them easily and openly (SLG).*

Similar

Maureen (C): *The cohort has provided the collegiality and the support from, from the beginning (OP). And, now, I’m finding where we may not always have . . . the accessibility . . . to the faculty or to the [acronym] department in general for the support we’re looking for (PX), we’re seeking that support from each other (SI) . . . It can be academic support . . . emotional support. It may be just collegiality also in that it’s just nice to be able to talk to somebody else who’s walking in the same shoes (PX).*

Similar; part of a team

Candace (E): *I really like the cohort model. When I did the master’s it wasn’t a cohort model (PX) . . . But, with the cohort, like I actually feel like I have relationships with these people (SI) . . . But, it’s nice to just share the experience with somebody who’s going through the same thing, who understands.*

Similar

Tina (L): *I really felt strongly about bringing the students together [face-to-face] for that one opportunity would really help bring them together online. And, it really worked . . . And, it kind of also was solidified and maybe it came about because of that first initial cohort meeting we had in the doctoral program (SI). . . It’s great for a sense of connectedness (PX). And, again, I keep going back to my own research . . . there is a lot in the literature about students and students’ dissatisfaction sometimes with strictly online because you feel so isolated and lonely and disconnected (IN).*

Similar; connected

Tom (M): *Academically, it's kind of an interesting mix of the support of a collaborative group, but it's also competitive. And so you know people who are first to respond to a posting or who I'm told that our particular cohort is a bit unusual in how open we are with our work (OP). So, for example, we're at the point now where most of us post our completed assignments for others to read (SLG).*

Similar;  
collaborative;  
competitive

## Behavioural expectations

Some participants express conceptions of how doctoral students should interact in academic discussions with regard to participation, academic integrity, and effort (Q2). Some carefully shape their online performance by taking time in drafting responses (Q4). The first two descriptions from Tina and Rob suggest how shifts in confidence may lead to changing behaviours (Q4).

## Quotation

Tina (L): *Sometimes they'll talk . . . on discussion boards because I remember in the beginning it would take me an hour. I painstakingly wrote it out and rethought it and read what others wrote—for one posting (SLG). An hour. That's a long time . . . I got more confident as I went along (CO).*

## Positioning as

Confident

Rob (C): *I started to get more comfortable. And, I started to post fairly extensive postings (CO). And, I read a lot of, a lot of additional readings. So, it's almost like people looked up to me as, for myself, as being a leader in the cohort (PX).*

Confident;  
leader

Rob (C): *Besides the [plagiarism], which was a big shocker, I was surprised about the—I thought at the doctoral level that, everybody would be putting 110% effort in . . . I thought the bottom [lazy] group would disappear once we got into the doctoral program (FW). And, that was a shocker to me that it didn't happen (SI) . . . It upset me . . . Now, mind you, from my perspective, I put in the effort because . . . I know that the more work you put in, hopefully later on it pays off when you start doing your dissertation (SI).*

Hard-worker

Gina, a business student, repeatedly discussed the troublesome nature of developing collegial practices within her cohort (Q3).

### Quotation

Gina (M): *It's an isolating process . . . And, I offered to read people's papers. I—we had a . . . student in the class. And, I corrected 2, 3, maybe 4 of his papers along the way. And, how many of my papers did he read? I'm going to give you a hint. Zero (FEM). So, again, it's partially a factor of me being a helper and a giver as opposed to a taker (PX).*

Gina (M): *Yeah, we have our own little sub-sects now . . . I thought there was going to be more collegiality, but it was more competitive than I realized. People just wanted—maybe it's because we're in a [Business]-degree, but there wasn't a lot of helping each other . . . And, someone posted something and you came back and asked them a question—not a criticism—but, "Clarify this." Or, "whichever, whatever." All of a sudden, they're like jumping down your throat . . . (OP)*

### Positioning as

Caring; sharing

Truth-seeking;  
non-defensive;  
threatening to  
others

### Criticality, depth, and not knowing

Some participants describe a general criticality, depth, collaboration, and non-confrontational discussion in the online forums (Q2). Brenda alludes to a general reluctance to challenge one another or to admit not knowing. There is difficulty in achieving a balance between challenging and ensuring smooth social interaction (Q3).

### Quotation

Brenda (M): *People seem very open to sharing their ideas. Perhaps we are a polite group (CO) . . . there isn't ever much disagreeing going on. Lots of verifying and affirming. Once in a while people are brave enough to say "I don't get this can somebody help me out" (OP).*

Tom (M): *And, so in some senses, I think it's done mostly as a, "Here's*

### Positioning as

Part of polite  
group

Collaborative;

something that you guys might be able to learn from. And, I can learn from your comments back on it" (OP). And, it's very much collaborative. But there is an element of competitiveness, I think, in there, too.

competitive

Sylvia (M): *In that I'll disagree with them a little more than they disagree with each other . . . I think sometimes they think I either ask tough questions or have a tough point of view* (OP) . . . And, that's something I'm working on purposefully because it's something that I haven't been able to do a lot of (PX) . . . Sometimes I think they don't know quite how to take me (OP).

Tough; wanting to challenge ideas; misunderstood

Steve, a business student, elaborates on his struggle to achieve depth in discussion but which is met with defensiveness and conflict (Q2). He resorts to reading journal articles to achieve depth (Q4).

### Quotation

Steve: *It's a small cohort and a wide range of interests . . . So, really, I'd say there's one person out of that cohort that I can identify with a little bit* (PX) . . . So, unfortunately I don't find a lot of opportunity for those discussions in areas that interest me within that cohort. And, I find that some of them too are not very good at—well, some of them are . . . if you disagree with some of them, most of them get really upset (OP).

### Positioning as

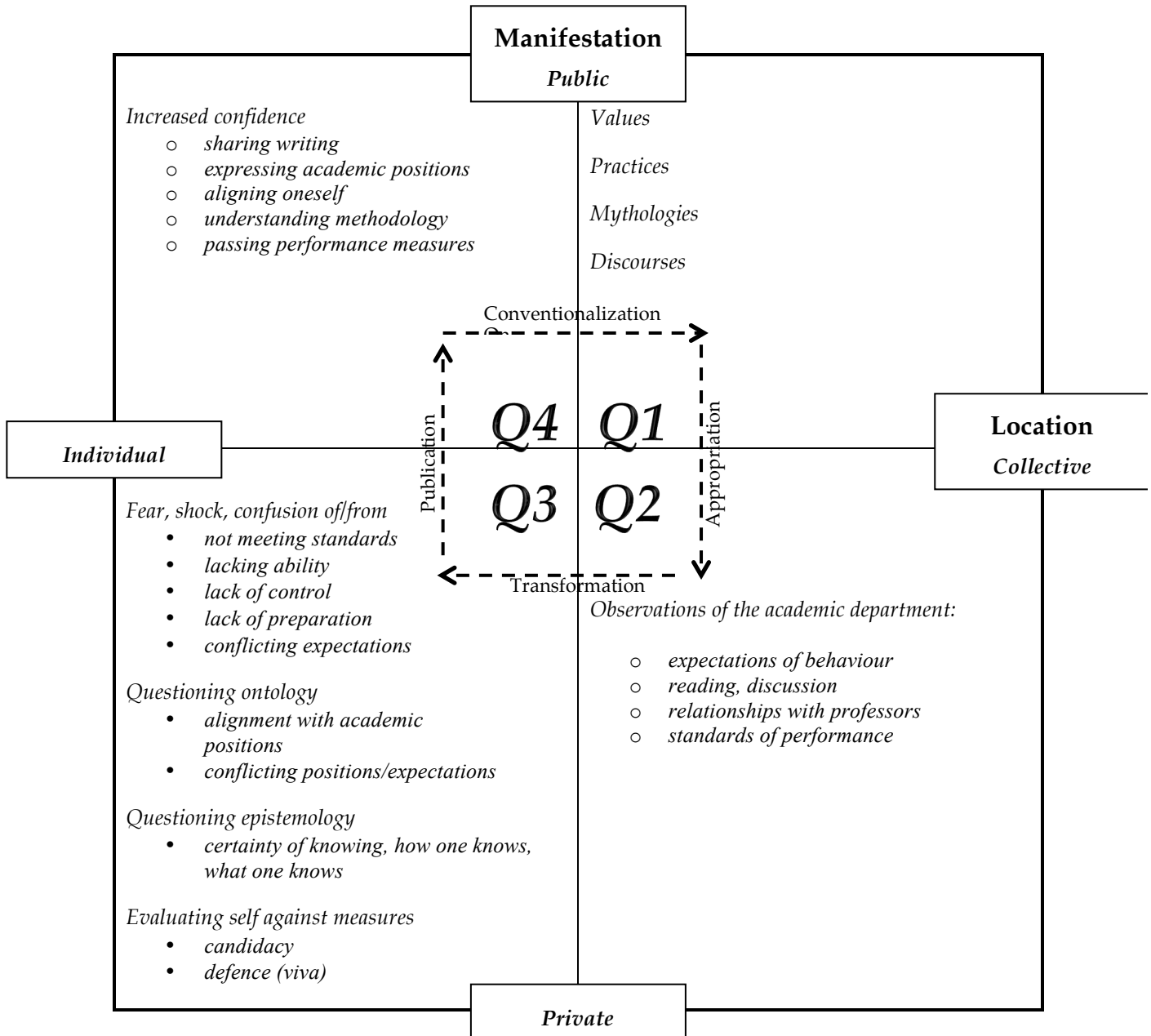
Truth-seeker; rejected; self-sustaining

Steve (M): I know some of them don't like me very much (OP). And, I think that's because I am very much—I do want to get to the bottom of things, I guess. I am much more questioning than most of them (PX) . . . And, some have taken that very poorly. In fact, one has . . . made it personal by name-calling when I have questioned some of his beliefs about a specific topic (PX).

Steve (M): I would say that some of them get really upset when you don't agree with them. Others try really, really hard not to disagree with anybody (OP). So, as a result, I find a lot of the discussions that are supposed to happen to be very shallow . . . So, I find I get most of my intellectual stimulation, I guess, from the readings. I read a lot of journal articles and get it that way (PX, IN).

### 4.3.5 Positioning within the academic department

During the interviews, the participants revealed some of the struggles they experienced whilst attempting to locate themselves within the academic department (figure 4.11).



**Figure 4.11. Summary of positioning within the academic department**

## Anticipating departmental expectations

Unclear academic standards of the academic department (Q2) is a source of troublesomeness for the participants. This difficulty appears related to the participants' varying levels of confidence and their understanding of expected workloads and participation (Q3).

### Quotation

Denise (M): *Working on the doctorate program has for the most part increased my self-confidence. Occasionally it decreases my self-esteem, especially as deadlines approach (CO). I think this may be common among students (OP).*

Steve (M): *So far, I think it's pretty much what I expected: a lot of reading and participation in the online discussions (DC). I wouldn't say I have found it overly onerous. I have, I think I have estimated the time that I needed to put into it. And, uh, I've been able to do that. I have certainly enjoyed it so far (PX).*

### Positioning as

Similar to other students

Ready / suited to doctoral studies

Epistemology and ontology challenged participants to varying degrees. Two of the business students, in particular, recount various levels of apprehension as they began their doctoral studies. Whilst Vince *expected* a transition (Q3). Gina and Rob, both describe being more shocked at the beginning of their studies (Q3). New vocabulary, philosophical discussions, and producing academic writing appear to be troublesome areas challenging their prior identities as high-achievers (Q2). Rob adds, during his interview, how he emerged from this state of self-doubt (Q4).

### Quotation

Vince (M): *I don't think so. No, I don't think so. I basically didn't understand a lot of that when I started. Again, not having the background. So, I don't think any surprises. (PX). (Somewhat ambiguous perspective.)*

Gina (M): *I was ready to leave after the first three weeks. 'Cause I just thought, I don't understand any of this (CO) . . . In business school, the*

### Positioning as

Prepared

Initially unprepared

*first academic journal I think I opened was in my doctoral program (PX). And, so, that was a whole new world . . . I was a highest honours student in my undergrad and in my master's. Scholarships all the way through, top of the class (PX). And, all of a sudden, I was sitting there going, "I don't think I can do this" (CO).*

Rob (C): *I was lost for the first week or two. I really questioned if I should be in it because when you're kind of out in the practitioner world and you do very well at your job, and you've performed well in any courses you've taken, you're really very confident in yourself (PX)— what I found is that when I went in the doctoral program, all of a sudden you're exposed to articles and readings that are a foreign language to you (SI).*

Rob (C): *But, now, I probably have a better understanding of research methodologies . . . because of doing more research in that area and having read more broadly and more deeply, in that area I have a much more rich and nuanced understanding of what that means (PX, SI).*

Initially  
unprepared

Adjusted

There were varying reactions to new ideas. Nancy, for example, provides a somewhat ambiguous description of her journey through philosophical issues (Q3).

### Quotation

Nancy (M): *I think being academically inclined (PX) . . . Because I do esteem that as an epistemology that is more grounded and more real than some of the things that people think they know . . . And, understanding those arguments, too. And, but then sort of like how do we know anything? And, Dr. [Name]'s class we took post-modernism and (?) the university or whatever. These articles by [writer]. And, they really do speak to the heart of universities in the sense of who's knowledge is of most worth? And, how that knowledge represents your identity. And, oh, it's an incredible maze . . . And, I think it has influenced my own epistemology and ontology (PX).*

### Positioning as

Prepared, but  
adapting

Rob's observation of the behaviours of academics (Q2) within the department help reduces anxiety (Q3) about admitting his own lack of knowledge (Q4).

### Quotation

Rob (C): *Well first it would be just when you're dealing with paradigms, epistemologies, ontologies all of this new language . . . even through the courses, I found that some of the, you know, even the PhDs or whoever's teaching sometimes they say, "Sometimes we have to actually go back and just clarify because there's so many definitions and interpretations of each one." (OP) So, I'm not as concerned about something like that. But, definitely through the doctoral program, too, is that there's no problem saying you're not sure what this is, you have to check on it (PX, CO).*

### Positioning as

Similar to academics; non-defensive

### Being accepted and meeting standards

Barry describes his feelings of acceptance (Q3) with the department based on the reaction of a former professor (Q2).

### Quotation

Barry (E): *When I went for my orientation for the doctoral program, professors that I hadn't seen or spoken to in a few years remembered my name, remembered things about me. [Professor] came up and gave me a hug. You know, it was all those kinds of things (DE). There was a tremendous sense of community in that program without necessarily, you know, all being buddies and things like that. There was a real sense of belonging and acceptance that I really appreciated (PX).*

### Positioning as

Accepted

Some participants described their attempts to enact appropriate behaviours and control over their own doctoral journeys (Q4). This drew attention to an underlying tension between control and conformity (Q3), and the need to balance potentially conflicting or overly high expectations (Q2).



## Quotation

Maureen (C): *I'm finding that sometimes we have control over how much we learn. But, some things, we don't have control over. And, so it's been really interesting learning new things and trying to stay ahead of what the expectations are as a doctoral student (FW) . . . Well, it's kind of nebulous, isn't it? (CO)*

Denise (M): *The other thing that sort of surprised me about the program is . . . I have to write a proposal that meets [professor's] requirements which may or may not be congruent with my supervisor's requirements and expectations (PX).*

Maria (E): *And, [invited doctoral student] seemed to talk in a very different language which was highly abstract (OP). And, when they bring in somebody like that who thinks at a different level than, I would think, the average doctoral student, and seems sort of revered by the profs, it's a little bit daunting (OP) . . . And, you feel that you're going to be held against sort of that high standard and part of you is saying, "Can I do it?" And, "Do I want to do it?" (CO)*

## Positioning as

Lacking control

In-between positions

Un-prepared;  
below standard

The participants express varying levels of confidence in their ability to meet expectations (Q3). For Betty, relationships with supervisors had the effect of destabilizing or building a sense of adequacy and alignment (Q3).

## Quotation

Betty (C): *The ability for myself to do research came up [with the first supervisor]. And, again, I think that was because of suggestions that were given to me from the initial advisor indicating that I may need to take some courses from the master's program to get me up to speed. And, I really felt that I shouldn't have been accepted in the program if there was a feeling that I didn't have the necessary skills or experience to complete the program (PX). And, so there were definitely times that I felt, you know, "What am I doing? Am I not fit for this? Will I not be able to complete this?" (CO) . . . I was lucky enough to be able to find*

## Positioning as

Initially inadequate;  
adequate in the eyes of a different supervisor

*someone to take me on. And, it's been really good ever since (SI).*

Gina (M): *I mean very quickly, I started learning that the people who use the biggest words didn't actually know what they were saying (FEM). And, so as soon as I started learning that, I started becoming more and more interested in the authors that spoke in more plain language. And, found myself very much aligned with professors in the program that were more human (PX).*

Human;  
ordinary

Belonging and alignment with the academic departments' appear related to successful defence of candidacy and the oral defence (viva) (Q4).

### Quotation

Betty (C): *At work, I was able to tell my director, that "Look. I'm done. It's passed. I'm a candidate now." And, I could sense that he was really happy that things had progressed finally in terms of that (OP). So, overall, it was just huge. And, since then, I've been a little bit more relaxed now, too (CO).*

### Positioning as

Worthy

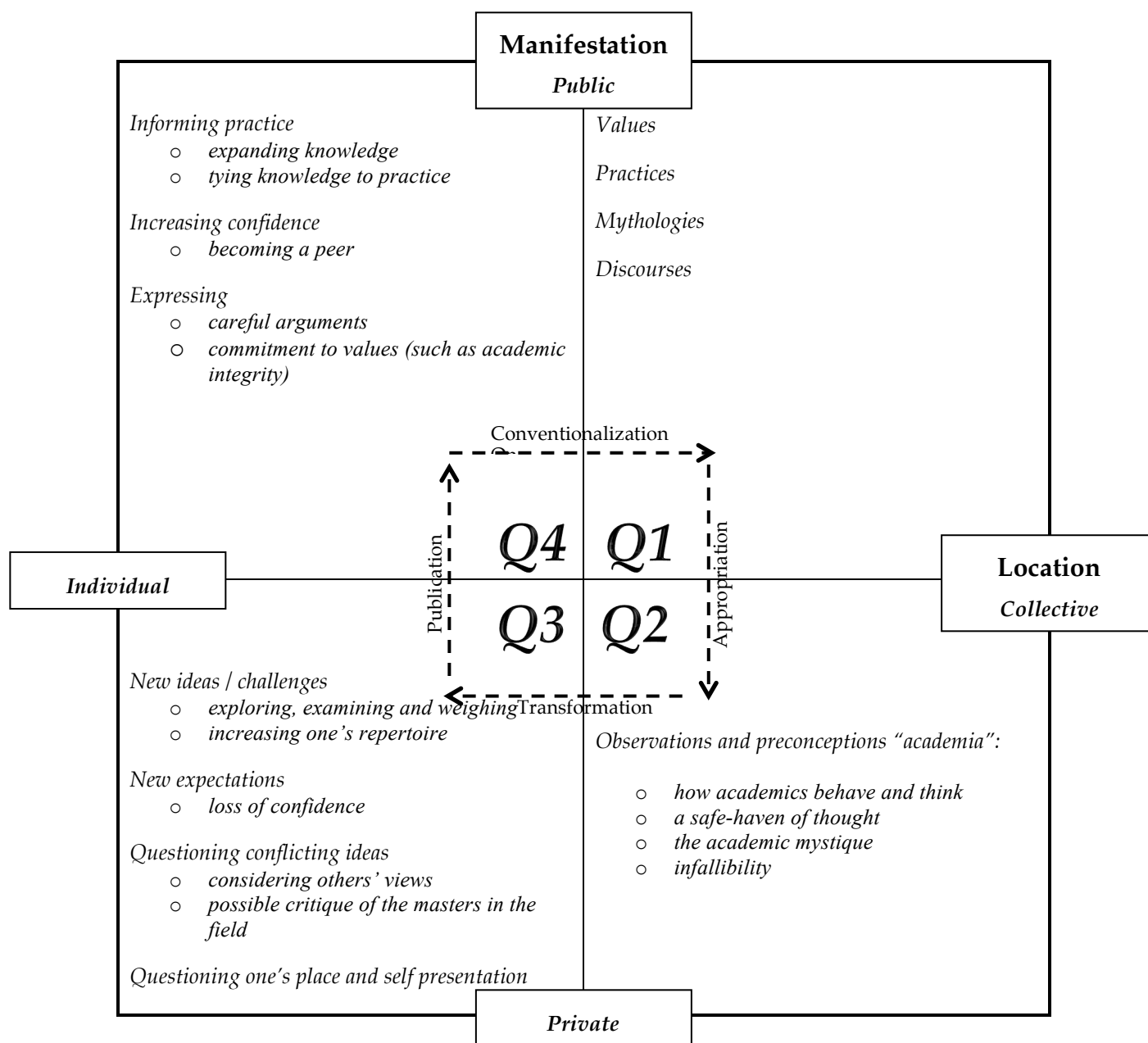
Bruce (C): *You need to ask me this question after I've withstood the rigor of the defense of my dissertation. Then, I will know — that will tell me if I'm a researcher. Because . . . I have a pretty good idea what I need to know to withstand the rigors of my defence. I need to know how . . . how I've arrived at the things I've arrived at through my data and my understanding of my data (CO).*

Uncertain;  
determined by  
performance  
against  
standards

Tina (L): *Well, I think that, well for example, the writing, the dissertation . . . I'm feeling more comfortable and more confident in my writing. Through all the writing that we've had to do for the assignments through the program. And, I just think that I approach it in a different way (CO, SI).*

Worthy

### 4.3.6 Positioning within the academy



**Figure 4.12. Summary of positioning within the academy**

#### Conceptions of the academic world

Some participants entered their doctoral studies with preconceptions of what "academia" means (Q2). Intertextuality (IN) and reference to figured worlds (FW) refer to acquired myths.

## Quotation

Nancy (M): *I think I've put a pretty high value on doctoral studies (PX) . . . Like it's really kind of a safe haven . . . There's, there's kind of a—I know there's like academic ambition, and there's different factors that make people corrupted. But, I see it as a less corrupted environment. You know, just because of the autonomy of the university professors (FW).*

Brenda (M): *There's a really interesting aura, this doctoral business. You know, there's a mystique to it or a (FW)—there's a lot of things that I didn't understand the level of study before I started doing it. I really like it and I feel very at home in that environment (PX).*

Steve (M): *Well, one thing, I guess that has surprised me in reading one of the papers that I read by—it was three scholars that have written a lot of stuff together on this topic . . . And, they misrepresented a paper that they referenced. And, you know, I found that by looking up their reference to this article and reading the whole thing and they clearly, substantially misrepresented what that article was (IN) . . . Some that I have read are not very good papers—not written well, not argued well. Well, so, one of the things that I've—that's caught my attention [and] surprised me is that I guess, academia, like anything else, even doctoral researchers, people who have already achieved their doctorates—are not always right and make some mistakes, and they don't agree. So, I guess they shouldn't be put on a pedestal as, like some people might think (DC, FW).*

## Positioning as

Part of a “pure” endeavour

Fitting into a mystique

Challenging the academic-infallibility myth

## “Accepted” academic practices and discourses

Tom, Gina, and Betty all describe their struggle to position themselves within the academic world (Q2). Betty and Tom appear more hesitant whilst Gina chooses a pragmatic strategy (Q4).

## Quotation

Tom (M): *And, in some ways, before I was very self-assured because I came in with a professional background, was quite assured of my*

## Positioning as

Less assured in academic

*knowledge and abilities based on my performance in the professional world (PX). And, now I'm kind of changing streams into this research world. And, it's a world where I'm more of the youngster, and I don't have the same experience. And, probably not as self-assured in this world as I was in the professional world (CO, PX).*

environment

Betty (C): *I would consider potentially teaching on the side. But, it's not—at this point, it's not something I want to consider yet fully. And, mostly because I'm still not sure what I think of research (CO) . . . So, I'll have a better idea in about a year as to whether I want to go the research front or if I want to do, go the more administrative front (CO).*

Uncertain

Gina (M): *Frankly, I think a lot of—it's still bullshit (FEM) . . . What I do know because I've been told by teachers that I can't sit on the fence—that I'm not allowed to be both someone who believes in positivist research but also believes in sense-making (DC). Well, sorry, but I do. I've got a foot in both camps (PX).*

Truth-seeking

Gina (M): *Oh, I've just jumped into the positivist camp for doing my dissertation. And, I will play that little game and do that. And, then, afterwards I will probably go over to discourse analysis and deal more with a lens that makes more sense to me (PX). I do not understand how anyone can say, "The truth is out there." Now, just go find it with your little quantitative methods (FEM, PX).*

Feigned /  
strategic  
position

The participants note an increasing depth of understanding as they are exposed to more readings and as they think through their writing (Q3). Although Tom claims that his epistemological position has not shifted significantly, he exposes that his depth of understanding of the field and his epistemological position has changed. Denise and Steve also note an increased depth of understanding of their philosophical positions (Q4).

### Quotation

Tom (M): *One of my master's programs was in theology, so we did a fair amount of that sort of thing. And, so it hasn't changed significantly I don't think . . . So, even though I teach in the area of business, we*

### Positioning as

Acquiring  
academic  
/intellectual

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>spend a lot of time talking about: What is the purpose of business? What is its role in society? And, how do you know that? And, what is it grounded in? And so on. It was a part of my world before, I guess (SI).</p>   | <p>depth and increased self-understanding</p>                                   |
| <p>Tom (M): I did a paper on [theorist]. And, just probably read 2000 pages about [theorist] and some of his original work, translated (DE). And, so doing that kind of in-depth research, as opposed to doing, you know, firing off a paper at a master's level. <u>I think that there is a greater depth of understanding</u> (SI). (Note the contrast with the previous quote.)</p>   | <p>Acquiring academic / intellectual depth and increased self-understanding</p> |
| <p>Steve (M): I have focused on the <u>Academy of Management Review</u> (IN). I've read a lot of papers from there to get a better understanding of the epistemology and where my, I guess, bias is or where my preference is (SI).</p>  | <p>Acquiring academic / intellectual depth and increased self-understanding</p> |
| <p>Karen (M): Yeah, and if you asked me [about ontology and epistemology] two years ago, I'd have said, "What?" So, one thing is that I now know what they mean. And, I've spent a lot of time struggling with those two words in particular (PX) . . . But, <u>now at the doctoral level, I've had a chance to look back and see how much the post-structuralist approach in my bachelor's degree influenced, has influenced the way that I think. And, know that post-structuralism is something that is a big part of me in how I think and how I approach research</u> (SI).</p> | <p>Acquiring academic / intellectual depth and increased self-understanding</p> |

In addition to sensing an increased depth of understanding, Denise and Brenda also describe taking different approaches to reading and learning (Q4).

**Quotation**

Denise (M): I think that my depth of understanding when I'm reading an article has increased (SI) . . . I would read 3 or 4 journal articles a week before I started the program (DE). But, I think that the program through the class discussions and through the assignments, I've really come to really read the journal articles differently (SI).

Brenda (M): It wasn't very long ago, I had to write in the margins of

**Positioning as**

In-depth reader

Able to

*the book that's what this means, that's what this means . . . And, if you asked me to articulate my personal philosophy, I'd grapple around and struggle (PX).*

articulate  
positions

*Brenda (M): Earlier on like when I was in my master's studies . . . the argument that you're trying to present or articulate in that writing is more intuitive than conscious (PX). And, now, I find myself being more conscious of the argument that I'm trying to build . . . Now, it's more nuanced . . . I think it's more of a conscious process (SI).*

Writer with  
sensitivity and  
nuanced  
expression

### Appreciation of the writing process

Some participants describe an increased appreciation for the writing process (Q3). Peter notes a heightened sensitivity to the relationship between thinking, writing, research, and the literature review.

#### Quotation

*Peter (L): When I write, I clarify what I'm thinking. And, then, I re-write and re-write it. And, I go back and forth. And, in that, I end up finding a lot more support for my own definitions and stuff like that (PX) . . . And, now, because I'm writing more and . . . being questioned about it, I've had to set up a lot of explanations, which is the whole point (SI).*

#### Positioning as

Strong writer

*Peter (L): And, even after I did my [master's] thesis, I didn't publish because I didn't understand that last part telling other people about what you're doing in researching. Nor did I really understand, even though I did a literature review, how you draw a literature review into what you're doing (PX). So, in other words, how you tie your current practice into, or your current research into past research (SI).*

User of writing  
as a tool (tie  
research to  
practice)

*Steve (M): Well, I guess initially because I knew it was part of an academic career, so. And, part of it is that you have to [publish] if you want to, uh, get a tenured professorship position (DC)—which is what my goal is. But, having started down this path, I really enjoy the knowledge acquisition. So, I really learn a lot from reading. And, that's*

User of writing  
as a tool  
(promotion);  
research as a  
tool for self-

probably my primary method of learning anyway. So, I am looking forward to doing research to, just to continue expanding my knowledge. I enjoy learning (PX).

development

Positioning through writing appears associated with growth in confidence and perceiving oneself as having an influence in the field (Q4, possible Q1).

**Quotation**

**Positioning as**

Maureen (C): *I have grown as a writer. I have grown with confidence too in that when I first started in the program, I would write something and would re-write it . . . I may go through the same process now. But, I'm more sure of what I'm saying. I know that I'm more assertive. I think that I'm growing in confidence when I first wrote a paper for publication, I was so nervous about it (CO, PX).*

Published;  
author;  
confident

Maria (E): *I can see the value of that now whereas perhaps when I finished my master's in [health care field] in [year], I wasn't really thinking like that when they said, "Oh, you need to publish" (OP). And, all of that. I thought, "Oh, gosh. That's so much work." You know, "Who needs that?" And, now, I think about it's about informing practice—especially when there's a whole new area like [field of] education and teaching online (SI).*

Influential in the field/practice

Peter (L): *I think that the big thing that my courses provided, or did for me was to connect me to the research community, to give me an understanding about the publishing and academic publishing system (DC). Confidence has been a huge one for me . . . I was a pretty confident person before. So, I wouldn't say that it's changed that. But, I'm confident in a different world, an academic world, a research world (CO).*

Connected to the academic community; peer

In addition to increased confidence and connectedness, Peter describes a sense of acceptance associated with dissemination of research and contribution to the academic literature (Q4, possible Q1).



### Quotation

Peter (L): *At the end of my thesis for my master's, I had an application that I was unable to find a place to disseminate it besides my own school division (PX). I would say my doctorate experience allowed me to change that because one of the first things I did was actually publish some of that once I got into my doctorate (PX) . . . And, overtime, because in the last 6 months, I've still been writing. And, now I have a chapter [published] on it in a book.*

### Positioning as

Influential;  
contributor

### Positioning oneself as a peer

Some participants appeared to struggle with how the academy appears to value different degrees (i.e., professional versus philosophical) as well as selected methodological techniques, and philosophical perspectives (Q3).

### Quotation

Betty (C): *But, internally, I know that it's, um, an EdD and I know there are some differences between the two. So, I call myself someone who is pursuing their EdD, but other people call me someone that is pursuing their PhD (OP). . . But, [I am] definitely not a researcher (PX). Not at this stage.*

### Positioning as

In the process of  
becoming;  
uncertain

Gina (M): *And, most of the market research is all in the positivist camp (IN). And, if you want to get published, or if you want to be recognized as anything within that field, then you've got to play their games (DC, OP) . . . So, I figured if I didn't understand their language, how could I possibly bring them over to understanding where my thinking was at? So, I figured, perhaps incorrectly, that it would be easier for me to learn their world first. And, then, fall into more of an interview process, open-ended qualitative discourse analysis, narrative analysis part later . . . (PX)*

Strategic  
positioning

Participating in online seminars with scholars in his field provided Bruce with an opportunity to measure his growth and see himself as becoming a peer, increasing his confidence (Q3).

## Quotation

Bruce (C): *Anyway, we had [speakers] from all across the country and the United States. . . And, then, to feel that you can comfortably stand on the same plank as them and have a conversation. To feel that it was a peer conversation (SI) . . . I began to realize that I could do it (CO) . . . [He sought clarification from a speaker] "Okay. What you're really saying from my perspective is X and Y and Z" . . . And, I got a response back that said I wasn't that far off (PX).*

## Positioning as

Peer; confident

Special cases involving perceived forms of academic dishonesty (or mistakes) (Q2) caused particular surprise (Q3), but appeared associated with a strengthening of values regarding academic practices (Q4).

## Quotation

Rob (C): *It was to an extent that I was shocked. And, it [plagiarism] occurred more than once, more than one individual. So, what I—from there it's, my values as far as ensuring that I give credit no matter what to who deserves it is so important. I've always felt that way even in work. I would never take credit for something that someone else did (PX). And, it just further enhanced that aspect when I saw that even at—I thought at the doctoral level that this would not happen. And, that kind of opened-up my eyes (SI).*

## Positioning as

Having integrity

## 4.4. Personal reflections

Having re-examined and re-organized this data so many times and via differing methodologies (phenomenographic categories of description, open coding, discursive techniques, print-outs, and sticky notes on my desk), I have come to see these quotes in a multitude of ways. The various lenses I tried on led me to slightly different shades of interpretations. Yet, what remains clear to me is that the participants, like me, experienced identity positioning throughout the different social contexts of their lives. Although my personal situation was unique to me, their descriptions were very much familiar to me. I was fortunate to have had time away from work and reduced working hours during my doctoral studies, but I understood the need for setting priorities, of having to sacrifice some aspects of my life for successful completion of the degree. Although fairly confident myself, I understood their insecurities in

undertaking a doctoral degree. Stories of support and rejection also resonated. I, too, found myself withholding comments about doing a doctoral degree for fear of seeming out of reach or uncomfortably erudite amongst some of my non-academic acquaintances. And, I experienced varying levels of support. As part of my own preparation for doctoral studies, my husband made me promise to save some time for him. It was the best promise I had made. It ensured, ironically, on-going support from him and healthy distractions. I could share with him my thoughts and struggles with the doctoral process; his support was invaluable. I can see how this collection of quotations—even without additional discussion in the following chapter—can be a significant source of reflection for learners considering doctoral studies.

#### **4.5. Summary**

In this chapter, I reported the descriptions of experience of 19 individual students' at different stages in their doctoral journeys. Having surveyed and subsequently interviewed these students, I was able to organize their stories according to Harré's social positioning cycle (SPC). I cannot claim to have depicted *all* the different ways of experiencing positioning. However, the selected quotes reflect salient issues that arose during the interviews with respect to the participants' observations of their sense of their place within their 1) societal interactions, 2) friends and family, 3) professional lives, 4) cohort relationships, 5) academic department, and 6) the greater academy.

The interpretation of the quotes was a messy, iterative process that required continual shifting between the transcripts, the codes, and the arrangement of sticky notes on my desk. It was also challenging to depict graphically the categories of description so that the resulting figures would convey the richness of the participants' experiences. The sample quotations provide a snapshot of the participants' collective experiences at the time of the interview. The quotes provide a starting point from which researchers and practitioners can reflect upon potentially troublesome experiences that may hinder or, with [care] create spaces for growth and successful completion of doctoral degrees. Chapter Five offers a discussion of the data, how it challenges or supports the literature, and how the findings might be used to enhance doctoral education.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

*Needless to say, our stories did not emerge from an existential vacuum but rather were profoundly shaped by evolving circumstances in our everyday lives as doctoral students, teachers, researchers, and family members. We believe this is relevant to the field as a whole, and what is at stake is nothing less than doctoral students' academic identities.*

— Simon-Maeda, Churchill & Cornwell, 2006, p. 18

### 5.1 Introduction

From the perspective of the SPC, identity positioning is a discursive process in which individuals locate themselves relative to one another. The process may be stuttered, iterative, repetitive, halted, and confusing. Confrontation with alien or conflicting discourses may stimulate an awareness of difference. Some variations in experience may or may not come into awareness and may or may not cause lasting changes in the observer. Overt attempts to discern the sources, reasons, and means of integration or rejection of these variations can lead to liminality and self-questioning. The goal of the study was to explore how students experience identity positioning. One of the main goals was to identify those experiences that cause doctoral students to evaluate themselves in relation to other people around them. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do doctoral learners in NL programs describe identity positioning?
2. How do doctoral students in NL programs experience identity positioning in relation to their field of study (Education or Business)?

This chapter will be divided into three main sections. The first section will discuss the demographics of the participants and the effects of the technology on the participants' experiences during their doctoral studies. The second section will provide a observations of the learners' experiences of identity positioning and how those observations are reflected in the literature. In the final section, the experiences described by the business students will be compared to those of the education students.

## 5.2 Demographics and technological setting

All the participants in this study were located in North America (17 Canadians and 2 Americans) and studying by distance. The instructors were also distributed throughout Canada. There were 4 business students and 15 education students. The courses were offered primarily through a Moodle learning management system providing access to static resources and asynchronous discussion forums and Adobe Connect for synchronous discussions.

### 5.2.1 Age

The majority of the participants were slightly older than the statistics for Canadian doctoral students. Nine students were in the 50-59 age range whilst six were in the 40-49 age range. The average age for Education doctoral students in Canada is 46 and other professional fields approximately 40 (Gluszynski & Peters, 2005). Of the participants, 18 of 19 were working. This might bear a relationship to the age difference of the research sample compared to the statistics. The participants had indicated a variety of reasons for undertaking doctoral studies: to advance their careers, to maintain faculty positions in light of institutional changes, for personal interest, and as a retirement option (distance teaching). If they had decided to attend more traditional doctoral programs, course scheduling and requirements for physical attendance could have impacted their professional lives. As Loxley and Seery (2011) observe, newer professional doctorates offer flexible alternatives for professionals and practitioners to maintain careers whilst engaging in advanced studies. This supports the work of other researchers who observe that education students, in particular, are often middle-aged and in mid-career (Costley & Lester, 2011; Kamler, 2008). Mid-career professionals may have motivations related to attaining higher positions professionally (Costley & Lester, 2011; Kamler, 2008), but also have lives replete with financial and familial responsibilities. So, it is reasonable that online doctoral programs would appeal to mature students in mid to late-career situations. During the interviews, societal age-discourses were the source of some tension and will be further discussed in section 5.4 below.

## 5.2.2 Technology and the doctoral student experience

### 5.2.2.1 Technology in academic environments

The data from this study does not provide information on how the technological requirements for the two doctoral programs might have affected the participants' decision to commence and persist through their programs nor does it offer insights regarding technological readiness. But, the participants did reflect upon how the technology-enhanced environment affected their interactions and confidence. For example, Maria, an early stage participant (enrolled in her first course) noted how she could not easily establish a rapport in order to select a like-minded project partner. It would be interesting to return to this participant to ask whether or not she was able to acquaint herself sufficiently with her cohort-mates as she engaged with them through subsequent course work online. Hypothetically, more frequent contact should enable individuals to discern patterns of behaviour and inconsistencies helping them to decode identities (Chayko, 2008). Sylvia (mid-stage) felt that her multi-national cohort was not as "chummy" as other cohorts because of differences in nationality as well as the greater physical distance between them (different continents). Peter (late stage), however, noted how he gained knowledge about people in other parts of the world due to his increased connections in the doctoral program. The above examples show a possible progression from early to middle to late stage experience and merits further study.

It is possible that there was a distance-effect at work since there were few opportunities outside the one-week residential for in-person meetings with instructors or cohort members. During the interviews, the learners, though located at a distance, indicated that they were in regular contact with each other. Maureen (candidate / mid-stage) recounts how she felt cohort members reached out to each other as their contact with faculty members waned after the courses were completed. She described contacting others for support as well as garnering comfort in knowing that others were going through similar experiences. The emphasis on the relational nature of online learning in NL theory (Ferreday, Hodgson, & Jones, 2006) appears in line with Maureen's description of her emotional processes associated with her learning and development (i.e., increased comfort and feelings of being supported). NL appears to offer possibilities for relational activity; the seeking of emotional

connection is not necessarily confined to physical learning contexts (Bendixen & Rule, 2004; Hockey, 1994; Wisker, Morris, Cheng, et. al., 2010). Although the participants in this study had selected attend a NL-based doctoral program, their comments suggest that they still needed interaction and support. Cohort-based NL programs may offer a type of community of practice or support network for students (Govender & Dunpath, 2011). However, it is also possible that in the absence of a cohort, learners may locate or create their own support networks. There is room for additional research on the online-doctoral experience—in both individual and cohort-based formats.

#### **5.2.2.2 Technology and non-academic environments**

Many of the participants refer to alienation related to specialization of knowledge and others' lack of understanding. This may reflect a widening gap between the students and their communities as noted by Holley and Gardner (2010). Whilst the above examples (in section 5.2.2.1) describe the cohort experience, it is also important to note that distance doctoral study has an impact upon other relationships. Within the interviews, there are narratives of alienation from friends, family, and professional contacts possibly related to the need for solitary time for study (such as "cloistering" oneself). Although doctoral students in traditional programs would also need study time, the networked environment may heighten the sense of aloneness. Yet, as one participant noted, the flexibility of distance study allows the possibility for continued interaction in the personal sphere since students have more control over their own schedules. This flexibility allows learners to attend family events, for example. Ivankova and Stick (2007) suggest that distance study frees students from the constraints of face-to-face study, allowing them to sort their priorities and balance their employment and other obligations with their study time. So, it is possible that taking a NL degree might enable learners to remain connected to their support networks. However, being rooted in multiple worlds semi-simultaneously may exacerbate gaps in beliefs and practices between the learners' social, professional, and academic worlds. It is unclear whether NL learners will become more attuned to differences than learners in more traditional programs, nor is it clear if increasing gaps in practices would create more or less turmoil.

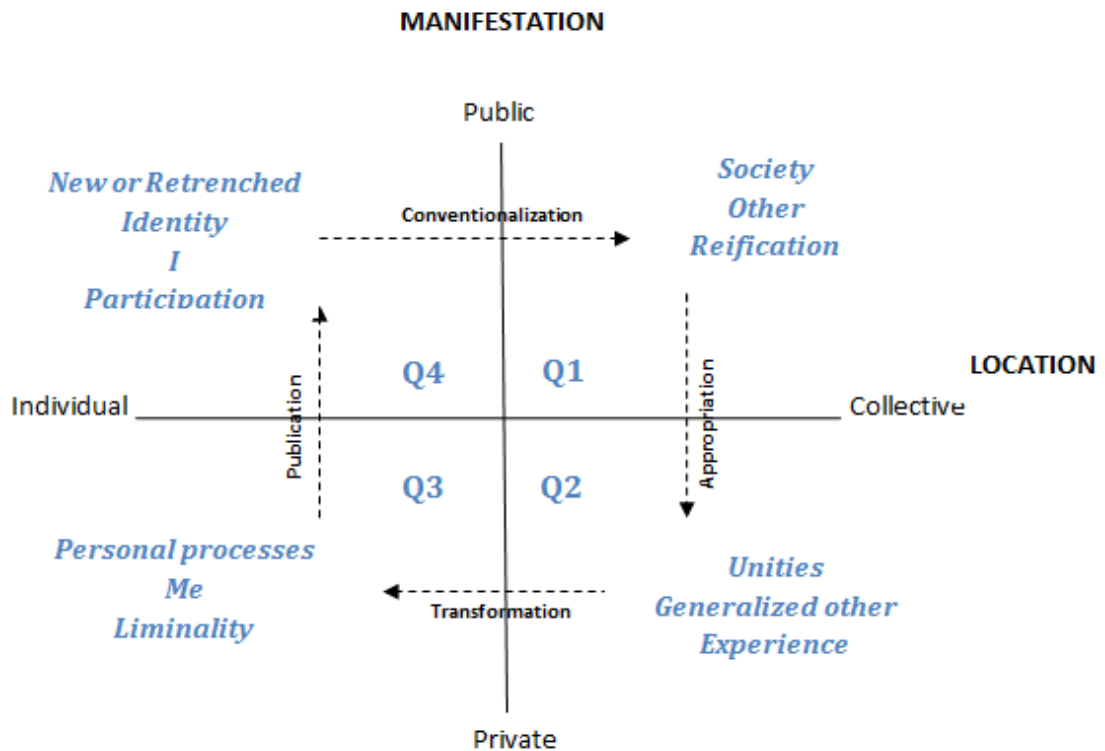
### **5.2.2.3 Technology and the learners**

Technological expertise also had an impact upon the learners' confidence. This was not merely because some students had more advanced knowledge of current technologies than others. The semi-permanent nature of the online forums in learning management systems such as Moodle means that a learner's voice, expression, and opinions are recorded to varying degrees of permanency. This may affect a learner's willingness to participate. Doctoral students who perceive that there is a relationship with one's writing and one's identity (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Hyland, 2002; Ivanič, 1998, Kamler, 2008) may experience anxiety in text-based communications (Kamler, 2008; Castelló, Iñesta, & Monero, 2009). In the interviews, Denise described how, early in her doctoral studies, she would spend an hour crafting a single forum response. She and other participants also described how they became increasingly confident in their writing and their online interactions as they progressed through their courses. These results tend to support the notion that individuals adapt to the networked medium and learn to position themselves (Savin-Badin & Sinclair, 2007). This can also be viewed as an advantage of TEL environments in that learners can take time to craft their performances (Walther, Gay, & Hancock, 2005). Through time, several individuals appeared more comfortable and gradually became more confident in their writing.

### **5.4 Contexts of identity positioning**

Social positioning theoretically occurs by means of interaction and negotiation (Davies & Harré, 1990). As individuals interact discursively they take up different positions relative to others (Figure 5.1). In the sub-sections that follow, I will indicate in parentheses quadrants of the SPC that are relevant to the participants' experiences in the six contexts. At the end of this section, I will summarize the experiences and the relevance of the SPC.





**Figure 5.1. The social positioning cycle.**

In my literature search, I found that there was a paucity in literature on non-academic contexts and the doctoral experience. Yet, in this study, I found that the participants experienced identity positioning on multiple levels—not just the academic level. Hopwood (2010) also notes that “the current literature tends to focus on relationships grounded in encounters that take place during doctoral study, only incidentally acknowledging those that may predate the doctoral experience in references to the role of friends and family” (p. 107). Sweitzer (2008) notes a similar trend in the literature in that there is much written about student-advisor relationships, but that there is less acknowledgement of doctoral students’ relationships outside their academic programs. She goes on to suggest that external relationships can affect the doctoral students’ learning experiences as early as the first semester. Högskoleverket (2012), the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, reported that 35% of doctoral students surveyed responded that they had left their studies for social reasons. As learners approached graduation, they reported quitting for reasons of illness, family situation, inadequate supervision, unsatisfactory study environments, loss of motivation, and lack of funding. Through this research, I have come to appreciate the importance of the learners’ varied contexts of interaction upon their progress and their overall enjoyment during their studies. In the following sub-sections I discuss

the participants' descriptions of their positioning experiences across contexts alongside current literature on the doctoral student experience.

#### 5.4.1 General society context

Tinto (1987) acknowledged the importance of membership in non-academic communities as well as interaction with others as important in student persistence at the undergraduate level, in particular. A study by Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat, and Farley (2004) also list non-academic networks as one of many factors significant in doctoral student completion. But, of the literature I have found, only Holley and Gardner (2012) discuss the impact of community upon doctoral learners: they note a growing divide between the learners' academic experiences and their day-to-day community experiences (Q3).

Within the society context, key sources of anxiety revolved around perceptions of uselessness of doctoral-level studies and being viewed as too old to continue one's studies (Q1/Q2). Usefulness was addressed, to an extent, through demonstration of the participants' increased understanding and appreciation of society and their potential to add value to their community(-ies). Teaching was a visible enactment of contributing to society (movement from Q4 to Q1).

Some participants described their examination of social expectations of age-appropriate activities (Q1). This was possibly a salient topic in the interviews because of the age range of the participants. Some of the participants who were over 50 felt that their experience over the years allowed them to bring a degree of wisdom and perspective to their doctoral studies. An individual cannot reject her/his age, but s/he can challenge age-discourses. The challenging of social expectations of upper-middle-aged learners appeared to help some participants to draft a new position for themselves. In some cases, it was as a wiser, more knowledgeable member of society (Q4). To an extent, the participants' reflections on age-discourses revealed a tension (Q3) between social disapproval and the shaping of a new persona targeted at regaining acceptance.

The participants also recognized that their perceptions had changed with regard to general knowledge about the world. Their comments indicated they had developed an increased sensitivity to patterns and sharper skills in

evaluating societal practices (Q3). For example, one participant described having selected a different school for her children based on discussions during one of her courses (Q4). Other participants recounted becoming more thoughtful and critical of information disseminated in the media such as newspapers. The participants described how their studies enabled them to better connect with and contribute to society in a general sense.

It appears that the participants were more overtly aware of negative opinions on their doctoral studies than they were of their appropriation (Q1 to Q2, Figure 5.1) of more subtle social knowledge. It is unclear from the interviews *how* engagement in doctoral studies sharpened the participants' awareness of social patterns and practices. Holley and Gardner's (2012) study of first-generation doctoral students describes an increased gap between the learners' academic and non-academic lives. Perhaps awareness of differences in practices grows as the gap in practices between the learners' worlds grows. It is possible that learners attempt to apply practices and concepts from one world into the other and become aware of incompatibilities. For example, should a doctoral learner begin to apply academic techniques (such as discourse analysis or deconstruction) while having political conversations in a pub amongst trades workers, s/he might meet with ridicule or social rejection. Through the reactions of others (Cooley's (2009) looking glass), the learner may become aware of her/his shifting position. As Wiley (2011) contends, the double mirror of social interaction provides phenomenological consciousness as well as self-consciousness and self-reflectivity.

#### 5.4.2 Friends & family

Although family and social contacts are mentioned in the literature as a significant source of support for doctoral students (Högskoleverket (2012)), there appear to be few research studies in this area that explain how or why friends and family contexts are important in the doctoral student experience. In the initial survey of my study, few respondents felt that their doctoral studies had an effect upon their personal relationships. However, during the interviews, relationship management amongst friends and family was an important endeavour for many of the participants. Demands upon the participants' time led them into prioritization activity (Q3); they needed to determine who and what would merit their attention—should friends, family, or studies would take precedence? Some participants encountered situations

in which others did not wish to engage with them (Q2). In some cases, others were perceived to assume that the doctoral students' work was too difficult to understand. At times, friends and/or family members were described as intimidated by, uninterested in, or even hostile towards their doctoral experiences.

Several participants described feeling distanced from others, sensing alienation, and outright rejection. Yet, others also described feeling accepted, understood, and supported. Questions of status did not appear salient amongst friends and family. For me, what became salient in examining the participants' comments on their friend and family positioning were the ways in which they managed these relationships. The participants who expressed less anxiety seemed to find ways of bridging the gap between face to face and their academic worlds.

Attempts to garner or maintain acceptance appeared to coincide with the development of techniques to control and present information appropriately (such as through scaffolding and simplified descriptions of their research) to different audiences (Q4). In other words, some participants were active agents in their positioning in that they selected techniques contingent upon the reactions and expectations of others at various times and within various contexts (Hyland, 2002). Scaffolding and sharing information about one's doctoral studies, enables learners to enter into a form of relational dialogue (Ferreday, Hodgson & Jones, 2006) with friends and family. In this form of dialogue, individuals can actively co-construct their identities in relation to one another.

Some participants also commented on balancing the amount of information that they would divulge about their doctoral work so as to avoid demeaning or boring their listeners—or, for one participant to avoid ostracism. Maintaining humility while interacting was an important theme for some participants. In other cases, the participants preferred withholding information about their studies. This may have had the effect of deemphasizing their individuality and reducing threat to group standards (Bonnett, 2009). It is possible that appearing similar to others and/or adherence to norms might limit the learners' growth and creativity (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008). However, it might also serve to harmonize social interaction and maintain support within non-academic contexts such as

friends and family. It is possible that for, some participants, maintenance of relationships that may be unreceptive to academic-activity is preferable to loss of relationships.

It is unclear why some participants were more willing to enter into dialogue than others who would withhold information about their doctoral studies. It is also unclear whether or not such individuals were more confident, had less concern for what others thought of them, or had particularly supportive relationships elsewhere. At the academic level, Wisker, Morris, Cheng, et. al., (2010) note that doctoral students in the later stages of their programs become more open to criticism and sharing their apprehensions. Hypothetically, their confidence increases and they become more sure of who they are. Baxter Magolda (2004) suggests that learners with a strong sense of identity showed less concern for what others thought of them and were more willing to integrate ideas. A reduction in defensiveness might also occur in non-academic contexts. Peter, for example, who provided the most detailed description of scaffolding was in the later stages of his doctoral program. Alternatively, differences in defensiveness between the participants are unrelated to developmental stages, but reflect idiosyncratic patterns of interaction. More research on social positioning of doctoral students in the friends and family context is recommended.

#### 5.4.3 Professional

Some participants who worked within academic settings reported that they were able to find others with whom they could discuss their doctoral experiences. It appeared, however, that other participants lacked such contact in the workplace. Misalignment in the professional context, perhaps due to changing relative status or shifting identities, appeared to be associated with disengagement from co-workers (Q2). Bonnett (2009) notes that individuality can threaten group standards and result in efforts to stymie individual expression and agency. Indeed, two participants, described the conflict they detected (Q3) as their teaching practices changed due to information they were absorbing during their doctoral studies.

Other participants noted that there was a positive interplay between their studies and work and described integrating knowledge and practice. The individual who noted the greatest effect upon her work (Q4) was a late-stage

participant who was readying herself for her defence (viva). It would be interesting to interview the other study participants upon entering the same phase to explore whether they could also describe effects of their higher-level studies (such as exposure to the literature in the field, authorship, and critical thinking skills) upon their work.

Although questions of status do not appear salient amongst friends and family, such questions arise in the professional context. This may suggest that one's status within intimate circles is already established or that status is ascribed due to criteria unrelated to academic prowess. In professional environments, however, outward appearance and performance may be reified and subject to judgement more readily (Q4 to Q1). It is possible, then, that professional position (status) may shift as others become aware of an individual engaging in post-graduate studies. As Wellington and Sikes (2006) note, the doctorate might influence attitudes and confidence more than performance. Over time, one might also assume, others will be able to observe whether or not doctoral studies increase/improve the students' performance within professional contexts (Chayko, 2008). Levels of respect might, then, continue adjusting with on-going interaction as performance and confidence change.

During the interviews, participants commented on perceived changes in their competence, knowledge, and skills as a result of their post-graduate experience. Some participants hoped for increased job stability—particularly those whose institutions were transitioning from community college to university status. In such cases, having a doctorate was a *symbol* of increased competence. At the level of the organization, issues of status and respect were improved through identification as a doctoral student. But, at the colleague-level, participants experienced isolation and unpopularity if their doctoral student status was perceived as threatening. Co-workers who were described as supportive were often those who also had doctorates or were also studying at the doctoral level.

Within the professional context, there seemed to be an on-going thread of tension (Q3) between group conformity and individuality in which new or different ideas and practices may threaten others (Bonnett, 2009) as if expression and agency of the individual constrains expression and agency of other individuals in a zero-sum game. McClure and Brown (2008) found that

fear, rejection, and competition were associated with feelings of not-belonging. The participants of this study described various levels of acceptance at work (Q2) suggesting that their co-workers were threatened to varying degrees by the individual participants' learner-status. This supposition, however, does not take into consideration the complexity of the work environment with regard to stress-levels, group dynamics, duties, responsibilities, competition, effectiveness of leadership, and personal and idiosyncratic aspects of personalities. As McClure and Brown (2008) state, "people are multifaceted social creatures" (p. 12). Nevertheless, there appeared to be some corroboration across the participants' descriptions of the status and rejection-discourses in their professional context.

#### 5.4.4 Cohort

Participants discussed their sense of belonging, isolation, and value amongst their fellow students. Bendixen and Rule (2004) note that peers introduce new ideas and perspectives to one another and may attempt to solve problems together prior to seeking assistance from professors. In the cohort category, alignment appeared to bring a sense of support as it provided a location for open conversations about the doctoral experience whether intellectual, financial, or emotional (Hadjielia Dotarova, 2010). Chayko (2008) suggests that group interaction can help individuals find others who may act as role models, sounding boards, and sources of feedback. Misalignment amongst cohort members appeared associated with disinterest in each other's writing. Competitiveness, defensiveness, and varying levels of participation in online discussion forums also punctuated some cohort interactions.

Baxter Magolda (2004) proposes that intellectual development is interrelated with social relationships. According to her, learners with a stronger sense of their identity are less concerned about what others think of them, are more open to new perspectives, and can more easily integrate and evaluate ideas. Wisker, Morris, et. al. (2010) and Switzer (2009) also note how doctoral students' confidence is challenged as they enter their doctoral studies (Q3). Reduction of defensiveness, which Wisker, Morris et. al. (2010) recognize as a threshold crossing, appears connected to greater self-awareness and reflexivity. I would add, based on these interviews, that the establishment of a comfortable position within the cohort may alleviate the learners' focus on self-protection and enable them to focus on learning. According to Chayko

(2008) frequent contact can aid learners to detect patterns of others' behaviours. So, it is possible that on-going, sustained interaction over time might also lead to a better understanding of one's relational position to other members of the cohort.

Within the cohort context, the participants described tensions between their reluctance to challenge one another's knowledge with their desire for more direct interactions focusing on questioning and argumentation (Q3). As mentioned previously, levels of defensiveness may be associated with self-reflexivity and self-awareness (Wisker, Morris, et. al., 2010). In his study of group dynamics in an NL course, McConnell (2005) noted that achieving balance between self-reflection and getting on with tasks is a significant issue in online group dynamics. He recognized that in the particular groups he was studying that the individuals' reflections upon group dynamics may also be indicative of "a real and genuine concern for each other" (p. 34). However, in different groups and different contexts, it may also be associated with frustration and disappointment with the group interaction.

The participants of my study described situations in which they were unable to achieve a balance between politeness and satisfyingly critical online discussions. Some participants who attempted to stimulate critical discussion described ensuing hostility as some cohort members reacted in defensive, hostile ways. Other participants saw questioning and critique as opportunities for growth and collaboration. Sylvia, for example noted an increased awareness of her own tendencies (to avoid statistics) when confronted by her cohort-mates approaches. She then describes exploring new academic territory as prompted by her cohort-mates. Yet, she also notes that her cohort-mates did not always know how to interpret her intentions as she challenged them in online discussions. Her experiences reveal a complexity in cohort interactions in which members experiment with alternative ways of presenting and challenging themselves (and others), using other cohort members as their looking-glass.

Positioning in the cohort milieu was complicated by peer comparison (Q3). Cohort members judged appropriateness of behaviour and gauged intellectual worthiness through comparison and competition. Caffarella and Barnett (2009) noted in their research that anxiety associated with peer comparisons (peer editing) never completely disappeared, but would



dissipate with experience. Other researchers also recognize the importance of peer relationships in doctoral programs (Sweitzer, 2009; Trigwell & Dunbar-Goddet, 2005; Kuang-Hsu, 2003). Trigwell and Dunbar-Goddet (2005) link teamwork to higher completion rates based on their research comparing the experiences of science and education students. Tensions arising from peer-comparison and competition may lead to a sense of crisis (Lee & Williams, 1999) and/or create a conceptual space for intellectual growth and self-reflection (Govender & Dhunpath, 2011; Trafford, 2008) (Q3). However, my results do not provide insights on the degree to which peer comparison and competition foster or hinder student performance and persistence in doctoral programs.

The participants expressed concerned about whether or not their cohort-mates viewed them as reliable, supportive, having integrity, or being a leader. These ideas point to an underlying discourse of what it means to be a respected part of a group. For the education students integrity was associated with using the technology. In one quote “living the learning” was a reference to studying, teaching, and communicating through online technologies as the learner, herself, was studying the topic of educational technology. As a doctoral student in educational technology, actively engaging with technology appeared to legitimize (Q4 to Q1) the participant as a steward of knowledge in the field (Lee & Williams, 1999).

#### 5.4.5 Academic department

Some participants, particularly the business students, reflected upon their sense of unpreparedness as they began their studies. Other students expressed various understanding of expectations and even “folkloric conceptions” of the academic world (Q1) (Loxley & Seery (2011, p. 10). There were various descriptions of self-doubt and insecurity (Q3). This variety of descriptions was reflected in the literature in relation to the learners’ struggle to understand their intellectual and social positions within an academic context where expectations of behaviour and performance seem ill defined and where boundaries of interaction shift from those previously learnt during bachelor-level or master-level experiences (Hockey, 1994; Hopwood, 2010; Morton & Thornley, 2001). Gardner (2010) also suggests that doctoral students must contend with the ambiguity of expectations and the shift to greater self-direction (Q3). The need for alignment with the academic department

appeared manifested in concerns over control and expectations. Some participants struggled with meeting academic standards and writing documents that conformed to the expectations of multiple professors (Q3). The participants sometimes found themselves trying to locate individuals (professors and supervisors) whose approaches and expectations were compatible with their own (possibly remaining in Q3).

Some participants exercised choice in how they aligned themselves (for example, as a researcher, as a positivist, or alignment with plain-speaking professors) (Q4). Two of the participants of this study elected to work with faculty members who could support their needs and growth rather than attempting to change their orientations and conform to expectations. In Sweitzer's (2009) terminology, learners who actively align themselves with others would likely be classified as "assessing fit" rather than "perceiving fit" learners. Active, conscious positioning may be connected to a strong sense of *relational agency* (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004) in which learners reach out to others in their environment as resources. Nevertheless, relationships with faculty members were significant for the participants. Girves and Wemmerus (1988) suggest that faculty-student relationships are connected to completion rates. Failure to align with faculty members, may impact doctoral learners through reduction of support and confidence.

Participants varied in their struggles with ontology, epistemology, methodology, and their adjustment to doctoral-level study. Comments regarding the academic department suggest that the ability to support and defend their arguments was an important indicator of academic development and acceptance; that is, the establishment of oneself as a peer (Q4). Passing candidacy (confirmation) and successful defence of the thesis (viva) was viewed as legitimating the students' crossing (rite of passage) into an academic role such as PhD candidate, researcher, and/or academic (Q4 to Q1).

There was evidence in the transcripts of academic socialization within the department context (Golde, 2000; Trafford, 2008; Wisker, Morris, et. al., 2010) through observation and interaction with professors (Q2 to Q4). Rob, for example, appears to appropriate behaviours of his professors. Rob's comments show a reduction of defensiveness as he learns, through observation, that one can admit lack of knowledge without losing respect

from others. This would suggest that supervisors and other members of the academic department can, through their behaviour, influence doctoral students who may then appropriate these discourses and enact them (Q2 to Q4).

#### 5.4.6 Academia

Feelings of misalignment in the academic department and the academy appeared to result in the participants' questioning their own abilities (Q2 to Q3). Self-doubt arising from the struggle to understand their intellectual and social positions (academic language and norms) as they proceed through doctoral studies is corroborated by the research of Anderson and Swazey (1988), Sweitzer (2009), and Wisker, Morris, et. al. (2010). Anderson and Swazey's (1988) survey research indicated that "nearly half of [the doctoral] students disagreed that their prior basic concepts had been reinforced supports the conclusion that graduate school has considerable strength as a change process of the most fundamental kind, for better or for worse" (p. 10).

The initial survey that I used to solicit volunteers was also used to explore how the respondents' perceived their doctoral studies to have influenced their lives. Of the 19 interviewed participants, 14 felt that their confidence had increased. Over half (10) felt that their academic ability had been affected. But, only four respondents felt that doctoral studies had affected their ability to think critically. Yet, during the interviews, several participants commented on their increased depth of understanding of the field (including methodology, philosophy, publishing, and writing). This appeared to be closely associated with exposure to literature in the field. Growth in writing skills appeared to be associated with clarity of thinking and awareness of nuanced meanings. The ability to see connections in the literature, to comfortably read the publications of academics in the field, and to converse with academics outside of their academic department appeared to increase the participants' confidence. It is yet unclear why there was a disparity between survey answers on critical thinking and interview reflections on depth of understanding. It is possible that, at the time of the survey, the participants felt that their critical thinking ability was already well developed. Perhaps the participants saw critical thinking and depth of understanding as unrelated processes.

Writing appeared to be a significant source of tension and aspiration (Q3). This is not surprising as writing has been traditionally, and continues to be, an important means of entering into academic discourse and identity positioning (Ivanič, 1998; Kamler, 2008; Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). Participants who entered into the world of publication (Q4) reported developing a sense of belonging, contribution, and confidence. Successful publication in academic journals can offer legitimization and recognition of academic performance (Q1) (Bansel, 2011; Ruth, 2008). This would suggest that it is important to encourage doctoral students to publicly share their work through journals and other publishing opportunities. However, the data from this study does not provide information regarding learner readiness and, as such, when a student should begin to publish. Furthermore, publishing may not be of interest to doctoral students whose intentions are to seek non-academic employment subsequent to graduation.

The late-stage participants who had completed candidacy and were readying themselves for their oral defence (viva) noted the importance of publishing their work. Publishing may be a means of measuring their adequacy by standards external to the academic department (Q3). Another participant measured his growth through interaction with a respected academic during a doctoral student seminar. The ability to articulate and defend one's position is noted to be a rite of passage into the academic world (Morris, et. al., 2009; Wisker, Morris, et. al., 2010). It also implies an overall influence of appropriated expectations of academic performance (Q1) upon learner identity (Q4).

The learner's growth in confidence in reading, writing, communication, and interest in publishing may indicate that the participants were gaining clarity in their understanding of their own position relative to other "thinkers" in the academic world (Q3). Ivanič (1998) contends that writing positions the author relative to dominant social and academic discourses and, therefore, is closely interrelated with identity. A sense of "taking part" in the conversation may suggest that a learner is crossing a threshold or rite of passage into academia (Q3 to Q4).

Experiences that I had expected but did not detect in the transcripts included *being cited* by other researchers and *being invited* to conferences to speak. Such experiences would indicate that the individual was moving into

conventionalization (Q4 to Q1). However, there were no participants who had indicated having experienced this kind of conventionalization. Movement into Q1 via conventionalization might more likely appear in interviews with early-career academics.

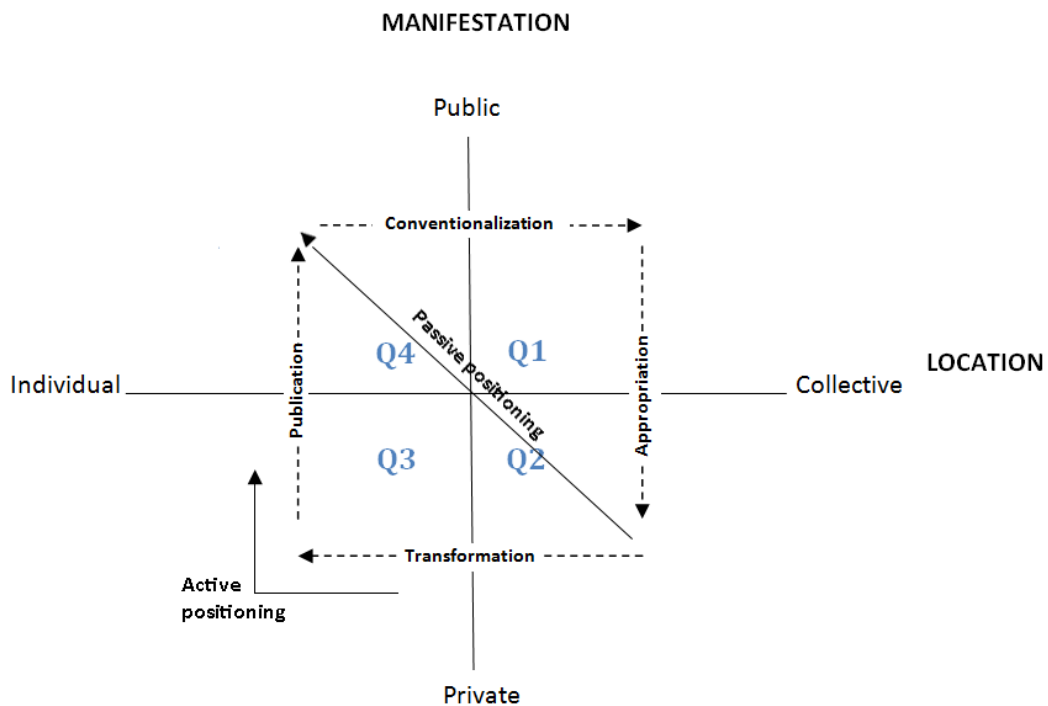
#### 5.4.7 The social positioning cycle as a framework

The learners' experiences are summarized in Table 5.1. Displaying the results in this way highlights some features of the SPC. For example, the Q1 column of Table 5.1 contains some empty fields. Theoretically, Q1 represents social values, practices, mythologies, and discourses. It can be thought of as the social information. The fields are empty because it is empirically difficult to access such information, even through research participants' descriptions. A researcher can infer this information, but cannot observe it directly.

The SPC implies that the social positioning process flows in one direction and that individuals pass through each quadrant in cycles of transformation. In considering the complexity, I began to wonder if it were possible to skip quadrants entirely. Because individuals are born into social relationships, it is not possible to avoid Q1 (although the contexts experienced are unique to individuals). In Q2 individuals appropriate social information through observation or experiencing it through the senses. And, the individual's activity is observable to others in Q4—regardless of any transformations or evaluative work by the individual. However, it seems possible that individuals can intentionally or unintentionally skip Q3. And, individuals can appropriate ideas, behaviours, values, and practices from society (Q1 to Q2), and enact them without awareness (Q4). Without evaluation, enactment or expression of Q2-unities implies passive positioning. Figure 5.2 offers shows a diagonal line from Q2 to Q4 depicting passive positioning. An employee who performs time-consuming, ineffective procedures without questioning them may be exemplifying passive positioning. Active positioning, on the other hand, is associated with evaluative work (Q3) and is depicted as the arrow in the bottom left corner of the diagram. An employee who notices that procedures are ineffective and considers how they might be improved is showing evidence of evaluative work (Q3). Some of the participants of this study described how their doctoral work affected their teaching practices and resulted in some tension in the workplace (movement into Q4).

| <b>Context</b>              | <b>Q1 – Values, beliefs, and discourses</b>                                 | <b>Q2 – Observations of others, sources of appropriation</b>  | <b>Q3 – Tensions and evaluative work</b>  | <b>Q4 – Performance, publication, and enactment</b>   |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| <b>Social</b>               | - Age-expectations<br>- Usefulness of doctoral studies                      | - Gap between academic and non-academic practices and beliefs   | - Evaluating age-discourses and societal practices  | - Positioning as wiser, knowledgeable<br>- Understanding of social practices<br>- New behaviours adopted<br>- Knowing how and when to use academic and non-academic discourses    |
| <b>Friends &amp; family</b> |   | - Interest in and comprehension of learners' academic work  | - Prioritization of time, activities, and people  | - Scaffolding, rephrasing, contextualizing, simplifying, and withholding information about doctoral studies   |
| <b>Professional</b>         |   | - Co-worker engagement/acceptance/rejection<br>- Institutional approval of doctoral work                      | - Tension between group conformity and introduction of new practices acquired in doctoral studies<br>- Alienation, status   | - Application of academic information and practices into work situations<br>- Change in voice or agency<br>- Seeking other employment<br>- Strengthen network                     |
| <b>Cohort</b>               |   | - Observations of cohort behaviour and abilities<br>- Seeking reassurance and connection                      | - Comparison of self against peer behaviours and abilities<br>- Tension between social comfort and intellectual challenge in discussions<br>- Conflict, rejection, acceptance | - Reduction of defensiveness<br>- Adjusting social position amongst cohort<br>- Adoption of behaviours garnering respect from cohort (sharing, leadership, collaboration)         |
| <b>Academic department</b>  | - Folkloric conceptions of academic life                                    | - Ambiguity/clarity of department standards and expectations<br>- Observations of faculty members' behaviours | - Conflicting/unclear expectations and standards<br>- Understanding faculty behaviour<br>- Questioning epistemology and ontology  | - Passing candidacy, viva defence<br>- Adoption of faculty behaviour<br>- Increased confidence<br>- Varying alignment with faculty<br>- Epistemological / ontological positioning |
| <b>Academy</b>              | - Folkloric conceptions of academic life<br>- Publication as legitimization | - Reading published works; attending academic conferences   | - Comparison of work against standards in the field and with work of established academics  | - Publication as a measure of belonging and contribution to the field<br>- Positioning on values (i.e., plagiarism)   |

**Table 5.1. Summary of key areas of social positioning**



**Figure 5.2. Active vs. passive positioning**

However, social positioning is more complex than can be represented in a model. There are instances in which individuals may realize discrepancies in practices, beliefs, and/or values, but who may choose to ignore it. One participant in this study, Denise, described how her friends were unhappy with the time she had given them after starting her doctoral studies. She actively decided not to take the problem on herself; rather, she decided that it was their problem. Neither *passive* nor *active* positioning can account for this. The individual is active in the decision not to work through the tension, which suggests that she is avoiding Q3. Yet, at the same time, she has actually made a decision (suggestive of Q3 work) to avoid the problem. Her comment suggests that she is acutely aware of a problem, and that she has processed it to an extent.

Denise’s avoidance-positioning technique raises additional questions about Q3 work. The activity in Q3 may fit on a continuum from intensive evaluative work to brief or superficial evaluations. Either (intensive or light) work can result in delayed decision-making or snap judgements. Individuals can get stuck in Q3 or exit quickly. The SPC does not provide a means of predicting the time an individual will take to process contradictory observations and/or tensions arising from experiences and observations in Q2. Although, it is

tempting to use the quadrants to link events and behaviours causally, researchers must be careful in making such interpretations.

For my purposes in this study, the most useful aspect of the SPC was the identification of Q3 activity. The participants' descriptions of troublesome moments during their doctoral experiences have highlighted the types of issues that cause them to consider where they belong in their social environments. Encountering acquaintances, friends, family, and co-workers who question or criticize a student's decision to begin doctoral studies can trigger self-reflection. Seemingly abrasive interactions in online forums amongst cohort-mates can lead to self-doubt and defensiveness. Hostility amongst colleagues at the workplace can result in a sense of alienation. The SPC cannot help predict what events will trigger self-reflection, transformation of self-conception, or shifts in behaviours and practices. But, it can be used as a lens to examine how individuals have reacted in such situations. Observations of others can, perhaps, help us to develop our own techniques and to consider alternative pathways through our own journeys.

## **5.5 Identity positioning in different fields of study**

### **5.5.1 Business students vs. education students**

Because there were only four business students interviewed (fifteen education students), it is difficult to compare the two groups. Therefore the following comments can be viewed as notes for further investigation. There were three main areas of difference in the experiences described by the two groups: preparation for doctoral studies, perceptions of leadership, and competitiveness.

Although one business student did not appear surprised by the difficulty and workload, others described nearly dropping out in the first few weeks of their program. Two participants had described themselves as high achievers academically and professionally which appeared to make the challenge of doctoral studies all the more difficult. However, the difficulty in adjustment, as noted through their comments, appeared related to the students' preparation at the undergraduate and graduate level of business studies. They described how they had never/seldom been exposed to academic journals prior to their doctoral studies. Philosophical jargon, especially, *epistemology*



and *ontology* was like reading a foreign language. The education participants appeared to have adjusted with greater ease. Although being challenged by ideas such as epistemology and ontology, the education students more frequently focussed on meeting expectations, passing candidacy (confirmation) or the viva defence. The two business students who initially had struggled with adjustment indicated having overcome this threshold within the first year. Hockey (1994) posits that the first year is the most precarious in doctoral studies. In their follow-up study of new doctoral students for the 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 academic years, Högskoleverket, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (2012) found that most of the students they surveyed had left before completing 50% of their programs and that one out of ten had completed around 80% of their studies upon leaving their program (the researchers note that late-leavers may be under-represented). The results of my study also recognize the importance of the first year; however, there is insufficient data from this study to suggest that other stages in the doctoral journey are not equally significant.

Competition and peer comparison was apparent amongst both groups. The education students appeared more inclined to use such comparisons to gauge their own development and locate resources for support and self-improvement. One education student noted a conflict with a project partner, but it appears that the problem did not escalate; rather, she described reflecting on her own reaction to it and decided to avoid the cohort member in future projects. Amongst the business students, however, descriptions of conflicts in online discussion forums appeared more frequent in the transcripts. Regardless of the degree of conflict, both groups described having difficulty achieving a balance between critical discussion and maintaining social decorum and comfortable social interaction.

One of the business students reflected on the nature of the business degree, suggesting that it would attract learners with a certain set of values. This was an interesting observation. For example, being recognized as a leader amongst the cohort arose in the interviews with the business students suggesting that this was a significant discourse for them. For the education students, being viewed as supportive and as a part of the group appeared to be more important. Learners who select different programs of study may bring with them different discourses of what is valuable and what is appropriate. Further research on this topic might reveal possible underlying discourses and

different mind-sets. Understanding the possible array of values and goals of doctoral learners may assist professors and program designers to address learner needs and harness conflict and competition so as to create environments that foster collaboration and learning.

It is possible that the conflict and defensiveness experienced by the participants is related to the learners' lack of preparation upon entering their programs. As mentioned earlier, the work of Baxter Magolda (2004) associates intellectual development with social relationships. And, the work of Wisker, Morris, et. al. (2010) associates reduction of defensiveness with increased self-awareness and reflexivity. It would be useful to conduct further research on cohort relationships and group-reflexivity amongst learners in doctoral-level programs in NL.

### **5.7 Personal reflections**

At one point in my doctoral journey, I was asked if I might consider focusing my study on the academic aspects of the doctoral student experience; that is, to relinquish writing about the society, friends and family, and professional contexts of the participants. However, having had such a challenge in finding literature on these very contexts of the doctoral experience, it strengthened my resolve to continue in this direction.

Being a doctoral student, I can attest to the significance of social, professional, and academic contexts as significant factors. And, I would propose that they may be equally significant to the practices, environments, and quality of interactions in the cohort, the academic department, and the academy. In the literature, the words "isolation" and "alienation" appear (Ali & Kohun, 2006, 2007; Morton & Thornley, 2001; Trigwell & Dunbar-Goddet, 2005), but the source(s) of isolation are complex. Isolation due to lack of academic contact is different than isolation due to lack of affection, unconditional acceptance, and professional respect, for example. Any of these factors can contribute to stress and reduction of confidence. For me there are some important questions: How many doctoral learners have given up because of lack of these particular factors? As more and more NL programs arise, will fewer learners report feeling isolated since they remain situated within their personal and professional environments? Or, will NL learners report a greater disparity between their academic and non-academic contexts?

In my case, I began my doctoral journey with trepidation because I *expected* isolation. However, I found that I could maintain my connections with family and friends throughout my degree. I could disappear into my basement for a few weeks to study, but emerge still to see friendly, supportive faces. Working at the same time, for me, meant that I had to prioritize my time and balance my focus. This was frustrating at times. However, by prioritizing my time and by scheduling ahead, I could to varying degrees anticipate and dissipate stress. I could distribute my self-esteem and my support network. Armed with stories of other students' experiences – of isolation, self-doubt, alienation, rejection, support, belonging within various personal, professional, and academic environments – perhaps new doctoral students can also anticipate and better plan for support.

With regard to the SPC, I began to consider how the SPC might apply to my personal experience. When I experience anxiety, I do not always know why. But, I naturally begin to explore possible reasons for it. The anxiety will bring me into evaluative processes (Q3), which lead me to consider possible reasons for the anxiety. This leads me to examine observations and experiences from my surroundings (Q2). At other times, I know what is causing the anxiety, and I consider possible solutions or whether or not evaluating the anxiety is necessary. My Q3 activity can be lengthy or brief. I discussed the SPC with a close family member and discovered that we disagreed on the extent to which an individual can skip Q3 activity. I concluded that the variations in which we employ evaluative tools and the length of time we spend in Q3 can be very idiosyncratic and can be related to the degree to which experiences are emotionally charged. For me, this attests to the complexity of human behaviour and the necessity to view frameworks and models as abstract tools that may not always reflect our behaviour.

## **5.7 Summary**

The shaping of learner identities is relational, not only amongst learners, but also with the medium through which they communicate (Hopwood, 2010; Savin-Baden & Sinclair, 2007). As such, I opened this chapter with a discussion on the interrelationship between the technology and learner interactions. I then outlined the main sources of anxiety and positioning for each of the most salient social contexts for the doctoral learners who

participated in this study. The chapter closed with a comparison of the descriptions of experience of the education and business participants. Chapter 6 will summarize the answers to the research questions, implications, contributions of this research, and areas for further research.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications

*The self is not something that exists first and then enters into relationship with others, but it is, so to speak, an eddy in the social current and so still a part of the current. It is a process in which the individual is continually adjusting him[her]self in advance to the situation to which he[she] belongs, and reacting back on it.*

– Mead, 1934, p. 182

### 6.1 Introduction

In addition to defining an *eddy* as a “small whirlpool”, the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (Barber, 2004) defines it as “a usu. relatively insignificant trend, opinion, mood, etc. going contrary to the prevailing currents of thought, attitudes, etc.” On the contrary, I would suggest that an eddy can play a more significant role; an eddy can change the course of social currents or merge with them almost imperceptibly. As individuals progress through their studies, their self-conceptions become a significant factor in their learning and acquisition of social knowledge; that is, identity connects the individual to the social (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Lave & Packer, 2008; Wenger, 1998). As they proceed through their studies, their growth as individuals ripples through the various social contexts in which they interact. This rippling effect, however, can cause some discomfort as new paths are explored and old paths become obscured.

This study has explored identity positioning of doctoral learners in NL environments. This was a qualitative study based on methodologies involving open coding and discourse analysis. The social positioning cycle (SPC), adapted from social positioning theory (Harré, 2010), was used as a theoretical lens guiding the analysis and organization of the data.

As the highest degree awarded, successful completion of a doctorate demands that learners work at a conceptual level. The demands of independent, original research intended to extend knowledge in their field can lead to oscillating feelings of confidence, acceptance, and belonging—both intellectually and socially. Exposure to new ideas, norms, and ethics can cause learners to question their position within their various social contexts whether academic or non-academic. The intent of this study was to explore these

challenges and how learners enter into and emerge into new relational positions.

The importance of this work reverberates in the concerns of governments and funding agencies that may pass over the intangible benefits of doctoral studies in favour of direct and measureable economic and social outcomes (Halse & Mowbray, 2011; Research Councils, UK, 2012). More importantly, this work is intended to draw attention to the variety of social contexts that may impact doctoral students' experiences. In this chapter, I will briefly summarise the key findings and answers to the research questions set out in Chapter 1. I then discuss contributions to the field, implications for doctoral education, and, finally, areas for further research.

## **6.2 Answering the research questions**

### **6.2.1 How do doctoral learners in NL programs describe identity positioning?**

The interviews with the participants in this study suggest that doctoral students experience identity positioning—that is, shifts in their relational positions to others—in multiple contexts. The literature offers information about cohort/peer experiences at different levels of study (Bendixon & Rule, 2004; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Govender & Dhunpath, 2011; Maher, 2005; Simon-Maeda, Churchill & Cornwell, 2006) as well as the influences of the academic departments/institutions (Hockey, 1994; Sweitzer, 2009), and the discipline (Bansel, 2011; Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Kamler, 2008; Lovitts, 2005; Wisker, Price, Moriarty & Marshall, 2010). The data from this study suggests that there are significant non-academic contexts that also have an important impact upon doctoral students: community, society, friends, family, and the workplace. However, these non-academic contexts are little mentioned in the literature. Hopwood (2010), and Sweitzer (2008) also note a the gap in the literature on the non-academic relationships of doctoral learners. Within the field of NL, there is even less information which is partially due to the relative youth of the field, which emerged in the late 1990s (McConnell, Hodgson, & Dirkink-Holmfeld, 2012).

This study highlights the ways in which learners locate and shape their position(s) within social contexts—that is, how they see their identities emerge and their perceptions of how they are perceived by others (Wiley's (2011) double mirror). For each context (society, friends and family, professional,

cohort, the academic department, and the academy), the participants found support or lack of support, acceptance or lack of acceptance, understanding or lack of understanding. Their descriptions of their experience often highlighted their ways of managing their relationships—through degrees of sharing, withdrawing, prioritization, rationalizations, and changing practices. Their experiences and their reactions to these experiences were as unique as their own biographies. Yet, the descriptions of experience as depicted in the SPC figures (Chapter 4) offers a *collective* view of the participants' experiences and positioning techniques.

### 6.2.2 How do doctoral students in NL programs experience identity positioning in relation to their field of study (Education or Business)?

The main differences between education and business students' experiences of social positioning were in the areas of preparation for doctoral studies, perceived importance of leadership, and competitiveness. The education students' interviews suggested that they adjusted to doctoral-level studies with greater ease compared to the business students who described having less previous exposure to academic journals and experiencing more shock upon entry to their first year of study. Both groups described the challenge of working with epistemological and ontological concepts. The education students' interview comments appeared to emphasize the value of being part of a group and being supportive. There were more narratives of direct conflict amongst the business students and comments about being viewed as leaders. Commonalities include the need to belong and the desire for challenging, but respectful intellectual discussions.

By examining the described experiences of learners from different fields, it is possible to gain insights as to how to better prepare them for doctoral level studies. Though philosophical terminology is challenging for many doctoral learners, the results of this study suggest that business students would benefit from more experience in reading and analysing academic works prior to enrolment. This may be of concern in other professional fields in which the master-level preparation may be skills or competency-based (Klein-Collins, 2012) rather than more philosophical. Furthermore, professors may need to draw upon different techniques to facilitate discussions with groups of students who share (or do not share) certain values. Group dynamics can be very complex and idiosyncratic depending upon the composition of a given

group. Although it appeared that there was more overt conflict amongst participants in the business doctoral degree, participants of both groups expressed dissatisfaction with online discussions. An implication of this study is that more research into facilitation of discussions amongst doctoral learners in NL is necessary, and that this research should be extended across academic fields.

### 6.3 Contributions of this research

One of the main contributions is the use of the SPC (Figure 6.2) as a tool to examine doctoral student experiences in NL environments. As a lens, the SPC helped me, as a researcher, view the learners' descriptions of experience from a second-order perspective, yet separating observation of others (appropriated discourses, Q2) from emotional reactions, problem solving and theorizing at the individual level (internal positioning work, Q3). It also helps in sorting out the enactment (Q4) of an individual's personal work. The SPC is a lens; it highlights process rather than the end-point. This is commensurate with a social constructionist view of identity, which is constantly being constructed, deconstructed, and co-created through interaction with others.

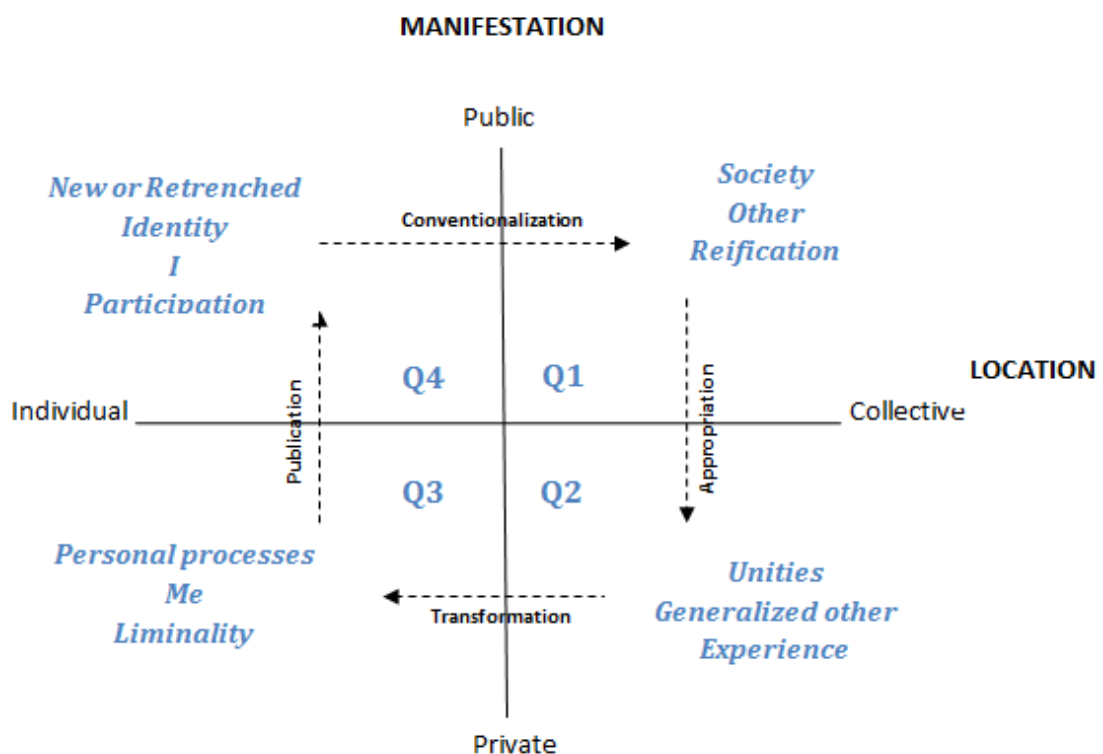


Figure 6.2. The social positioning cycle.



A challenge in using this framework arises in Quadrant 1. As an empirical tool, it is not possible for a researcher to observe the primary structures in which unique individuals are immersed, except perhaps the most reified and visibly marked social discourses such as credentials, ceremonies, and written laws. One can attempt to extrapolate from the descriptions ascribed to the other quadrants, but this would reach beyond the realm of empirical observation and into the realm of inference. The intent of this study was to explore how students described their experiences and to identify potential problem areas for further research and possible intervention.

The SPC also assumes that social positioning moves in one direction through cycles of transformation. As per the discussion (Chapter 5), it seems that it might be possible to move through the SPC without moving through Q3, active examination of experience. In this case, positioning may be more of a passive process. However, an individual may actively choose not to process conflicting information or troublesome events. In such a case, would the individual be engaging in passive or active positioning? Alternatively, it is also possible that individuals move through Q3 to different durations and intensity suggesting that positioning may be thought of on a continuum of activeness rather than in terms of a binary of active or passive.

#### **6.4 Implications for doctoral education**

Practitioners and researchers can use the SPC framework as a tool to identify discourses that might be ontologically challenging for doctoral learners. Awareness of these discourses can help in better preparing learners and shaping learning environments that might increase learners' persistence and completion of degrees. Researchers in Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom note that 10-year completion rates are approximately 57% to 76% (Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat, & Farley, 2004; Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, 2004; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2007). Persistence, then, is an important goal for researchers and practitioners

It might also be argued that this research acknowledges the experience of doctoral students and the challenges they face through their doctoral journeys. Work such as this may help learners and professors anticipate the challenges that might be encountered. Learners may self-examine why they

are experiencing fluctuations in engagement, interest, and respect from others. And, they may take some comfort in knowing that others have similar experiences. Learners who are aware of challenges to their identities can possibly prepare themselves and consider ways of managing their relationships. Some might find it helpful to consider how to interact with others in ways that are comfortable. Learning to describe their research in ways that are meaningful to others depending on their own experience and contexts (scaffolding) could help them manage social interactions. Orientation sessions for new doctoral students might include discussion of how friends, family, and co-workers may react to the learners' new academic world. Orientation sessions might also offer discussion of cohort collaboration, academic critique, and how to engage in academic discussions. Academic departments can clarify expectations and standards of performance—perhaps by offering samples of good writing and analytical work. Academic departments can further clarify expectations for conference participation and publication.

## **6.5 Further research**

A number of questions arose presenting opportunities for further research. I recognize that the SPC analysis presents an abstract representation of the participants' descriptions of their positioning experiences. The results represent comments from this particular group of individuals at a particular point in time, a snapshot of the participants' experience. Though attempting to reflect the depth and breadth of the participants' descriptions, ultimately, the results are still reductionist and decontextualized by their very nature as a representation (Kvale, 1996). Achieving description that balances richness with representation is challenging as only a limited number of quotations can be selected from a body of transcripts that are both individually compelling and complete in themselves. But, to what extent are the experiences described by this group/sample similar to/different from the experiences of other NL doctoral learners from different programs? To what extent is this research useful to other doctoral learners?

Along the same lines, I would like to see additional interviews conducted to further explore the additional contexts significant to doctoral learners identity development. For example, to what extent is the relationship between the learner and the institution important in NL doctoral programs? As noted in

Chapter 5, the discussion, this is a possible context that was not represented in this study. It is possible that the institution, perhaps as a physical entity, is not as significant for distance learners as it is for face-to-face, on-site learners. This line of thinking opens up research opportunities for examining the experience of NL versus on-site learners. How might their experiences be similar and different? How might academic socialization be similar or different in NL compared to face-to-face programs? What are the implications for universities that rely on alumni involvement and donations?

There appears to be a gap in the current literature on doctoral studies. The effects and influences of positioning in personal, societal, and professional contexts on the doctoral student experience do not appear to have been documented. As online doctoral programs evolve and proliferate, there will be a greater need to explore such relationships. Hypothetically, students enrolled in such programs may remain embedded within their communities whilst studying. It is important to explore how stressors and support-levels from community, friends, family, and the workplace may affect persistence and completion rates.

A particularly interesting aspect of this study, for me, was the cohort relationship. As networked learners, their relationships were mediated through communications technology. Some participants described their struggles in finding project partners whilst others described their anxiety to post messages in the online forums. There appeared to be a trend towards increased confidence and an increased sense of getting to know the cohort members (though with varying degrees of “chumminess”) as they progressed into the later stages of the study. However, the study did not provide adequate evidence to fully support hypotheses on developmental stages of transformation of learners through doctoral studies. It is possible, rather, that some of the experiences described by the participants were contingent upon their unique personalities and contexts. Nevertheless, additional research could be done to explore the experiences of doctoral learners as they progress from early to middle to the latter stages of their studies. How do their perceptions of their cohort and their place within their cohort change as they progress? To what degree does the establishment of a “comfortable” identity position within the cohort alleviate the learner’s defensiveness and enable greater focus on learning and sharing? To what degree does peer comparison and competition foster or hinder student performance and persistence?

The doctoral learners' professional contexts are further areas of interest for me. Do factors such as position, status, and acceptance in the workplace arise from other criteria, knowledge, or behaviours? Further research could focus on a study of learners at the different stages (early, middle, and late) to explore their descriptions of how their doctoral-level studies have affected their professional identities and activities. For example, to what extent does exposure to academic literature inform their activity at work? Does their training in methodology transfer to problem-solving at work?

There were no participants who had indicated having experienced conventionalization (movement from Q4 to Q1) in which their identity enactment has been observed and adopted by others within academic contexts. One participant, Peter, described having started to publish and attend conferences, but he did not indicate that his work was being accepted as "knowledge" within the academic world. Is conventionalization something that might be more apparent as the learner transitions from doctoral learner to early career academic? When should doctoral students be encouraged to publish? And, how might publishing affect their adjustment to the identity of researcher? Finally, what kind of conventionalization might take place in the other contexts (friends and family, social, and professional)?

More domain-specific research could be done to explore how identity positioning might be experienced by learners from different disciplines and fields. This study has suggested that some of the differences between Business and education students include preparation for doctoral studies, competitiveness, and the importance of being perceived as a leader. Further investigation may aid professors and learning designers to better address the needs of doctoral learners in specific fields of study.

## **6.6 Reflections on the research process**

The research process offered some insights to me as I, myself, transition into new identities through my own doctoral studies. Through this journey, I saw connections between theories, literature, and the data. I questioned each step. With each question, new perspectives arose.

Towards the end of this journey I was asked to simplify the lenses that I was using. I streamlined the study to primarily focus on the social positioning cycle (adapted from Harré, 2010) and discourse analysis. Prior to this alteration, I had blended the social positioning cycle, threshold concepts, discourse analysis, and phenomenographic analysis into one seemingly elegant model; however, analysis and presentation of the data was complex, potentially drowning itself in detail. I realized that different lenses provided me with different views of the data. Lenses are not wrong or right; they answer different questions and bring focus to different aspects of the study participants' experiences. In effect, simplifying my lens helped me to focus my analysis within the social positioning cycle.

After adopting a more simplified lens, it became apparent that there is a gap in the literature on the doctoral student experience—particular that of the personal, community, and professional contexts. Upon this realization, I enlisted the aid of a research librarian who confirmed my observation. He provided me with only five journal articles written within the last five to ten years—four articles that I had not already located. I am now preparing materials for potential applicants to our doctoral program. The intent is to help individuals assess their support networks and general readiness to begin their doctoral studies. And, I am planning to publish some articles on identity positioning and learning adjustment of doctoral students in networked learning environments.

I had selected the topic of doctoral student identity in NL because it was connected to both my profession as an administrator of a networked doctoral program as well as my position as a learner in a networked doctoral program. During my doctoral journey, I felt influences from my professional and personal circles, which are still impinging on my experience even as I complete my degree. Friends, family, co-workers, and cohort-mates are asking, what was the most surprising outcome in your study? What did you learn? It was a journey unique to my own biography, proclivities, interactions, and social contexts. I can share some of my experiences to varying degrees of truthfulness as I re-construct, de-construct, and co-construct my reflections with whomever is asking at a given time. With time, I hope to gain more perspectives on my own experience. I am now at the end of this particular chapter in my journey, and I am left pondering what is coming next.

## **6.7 Concluding comments**

This research highlights the significance of surrounding contexts in identity forming and positioning of doctoral students. Like an eddy, doctoral studies permeate relationships throughout a learner's life. The ripples move along crossing boundaries, sometimes finding harmony within the currents. At other times, the ripples hit barriers, slapping into them. Sometimes the barriers disappear or erode. At other times, the ripples find a different path. Eventually, they come to rest in a new position, ready for the next journey.

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## Appendix A: Invitation to participate

Dear doctoral student,

My name is Marguerite Koole. I am the Program Administrator for the Doctor of Education program and the Instructional Media Analyst with the Centre for Distance Education at Athabasca University. In addition to these positions, I also teach in the Master of Distance Education program.

I would like to invite you to participate in a study entitled: *Identity Positioning of Doctoral Students in Networked Learning Environments*. This study is the basis for my doctoral thesis in E-Research and Technology-Enhanced Learning in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University, UK.

The main goal of this thesis is to explore how doctoral students in networked graduate programs experience and resolve challenges to their conceptions of their current identities, norms, values, beliefs, sense of agency, and relationships in professional, personal, and/or online contexts.

If you agree to participate, please click on the link at the end of this letter (below) to complete a brief questionnaire. The questionnaire asks for basic demographic information, your program of studies, the number of courses you have completed, and whether or not you perceive your studies to have affected your identity(-ies). The questionnaire should take only 5 to 10 minutes, maximum. You may choose to participate in the survey only. But, if you are willing to be interviewed, the questionnaire will provide you with a field to indicate your preferred contact email and/or telephone number. Due to scope of the study, not all volunteers will be invited to interviews. But, for those who are, the interviews will take place in two main phases:

1. Phase 1 will involve interviews (via telephone, Skype, or Adobe Connect) in which interested participants will be asked about any critical stories from their learning experiences and how these experiences have affected their identities, norms, values, beliefs, sense of agency, and relationships. [Duration: 30 to 45 minutes maximum.]
2. Phase 2 will involve follow-up email for you to review the transcripts and provide additional comments.

These interviews will be recorded and transcribed to better enable with analysis. Identities will be, and identifying comments (such as workplace and institutional affiliations) anonymised.

### **Risks**

There are no known risks, costs, or remuneration for anyone participating in this research. I guarantee the following conditions will be met:

1. The survey data is anonymous unless you agree to be interviewed and provide your name and contact information. But, your name and other identifying terms will be anonymised in the final thesis.
2. Your participation in this research is voluntary; you have the right to withdraw at any point in the study prior to analysis for any reason without any prejudice; in this case, all or some of the information collected will be destroyed according to your preference. Note that it will be almost impossible for the researcher to locate anonymous survey data and therefore requests for destruction of such data will not be possible.
3. All research notes, interview transcripts, and communication will be maintained on secure, password-protected Athabasca University computers and the Athabasca University Adobe Connect system.
4. The data and analysis from this study may be published and/or presented at conferences.
5. If you wish, you will be able to access the thesis after completion.

You are encouraged to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the study and the methods that I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me; please contact me about the study at the address and/or phone number listed below.

### **Benefits for participants**

It is my hope that participation in this study will raise your awareness of the importance of identity and interaction in online learning. In addition, for those of you who are considering conducting research in the future, I will openly discuss my procedures, data collection, methodology, and other



aspects of the project once the interview phases are complete. Experience participating in research projects can help you design your own studies in the future.

### **Contacts**

For more information, you are welcome to contact me: [contact information]. You may also contact my PhD supervisor, [contact information].

### **Consent to Participate**

*I have read and understood the information contained in this letter, and I agree to participate in the study, on the understanding that I may refuse to answer certain questions, and I may withdraw at any time prior to analysis.*

If you agree with this statement and wish to participate, please click on this link to the online survey: [URL].

### **Ethics Review**

Note: This study has been reviewed by the Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please [contact information].

Note: This study has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at [Contact information].

Your help with this project is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Marguerite Koole  
[Contact information]

## Appendix B: Online survey

[Introductory screen]

Dear participant:

The purpose of the questionnaire is to gather some preliminary data about how doctoral students in networked learning graduate programs experience and resolve challenges to their identities, norms, values, beliefs, sense of agency, and relationships. This survey is designed to collect some preliminary data as well as to locate students who are willing to be interviewed about identity in networked environments.

Ethics: Anything you say in this survey will be held strictly confidential. Your contributions will be anonymous in any future uses of the information you provide. The data gathered in this study will be used for my PhD thesis at Lancaster University. Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw or quit the survey at any time. Any information you provide is much appreciated. This questionnaire should take you no more than 5 to 10 minutes.

This study has been reviewed by the **Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee**. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact [contact information].

This study has been reviewed by the **Athabasca University Research Ethics Board**. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at [contact information].

### **Consent**

*By clicking the "Next" button below, you agree that you have read and understood the letter of information and consent emailed to you. In other words, by clicking the "Next" button, you are indicating your consent.*

[Questions begin]

### **Demographic Information**

1. Please indicate
  - a. Your gender [M/F]
  
2. Marital status
  - a. Married
  - b. Single
  - c. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Your age range
  - a. 18-29
  - b. 30-39
  - c. 40-49
  - d. 50-59
  - e. 60+
  
4. Your occupation
  - a. Name of occupation
  - b. Number of years in occupation
  
5. Current job
  - a. Number of years in current job
  
6. Your program of studies
  - a. Doctor of Education
  - b. Doctor of Business Administration
  
7. The number of courses completed in your program
  
8. The number of courses in progress in your program
  
9. During your course(s) in the program you have indicated above, can you recall any events or experiences that may have caused you to reconsider or question
  - a. your choice of job?
  - b. your field of study?

- c. your personal relationships?
- d. your professional relationships?
- e. other aspects of your life?
- f. your beliefs?
- g. your values?
- h. your identity?

10. If you have selected any of the above options, please comment briefly on what happened (i.e., what event happened? What made you reconsider this/these things?) Prompts:

- a. *The event I experienced was:*
- b. *Before the event, I thought/felt:*
- c. *After the event, I thought/felt:*

- d. Are you willing to be part of a 20 to 30 minute interview by Adobe Connect, Skype, or telephone?
  - i. Yes [A field for contact information]
  - ii. No

11. Submit with thank-you message.

## **Appendix C: Interview schedule**

### **Introduction**

*[Welcome]*

*[Grounding, relaxation: Where are you located right now? How are you?]*

Thank you for helping me with my study.

Your responses will be anonymised. And, you will have an opportunity to review the transcript at a later date at which time you can modify or add additional comments and reflections.

The study has been reviewed by ethics committees at both Lancaster University in the UK and Athabasca University.

Do you have any questions?

### **About the interview process**

As we begin the interview, I just want to explain a little about the interview process itself. The title of my study is: *Identity Positioning Thresholds of Doctoral Students in Networked Learning Environments*. This study is the basis for my doctoral thesis in E-Research and Technology-Enhanced Learning in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University, UK.

The main goal of this thesis is to explore how doctoral students in networked learning programs experience and resolve challenges to their conceptions of their current identities, norms, values, beliefs, sense of agency, and relationships in professional, personal, and/or online contexts. As you will have read in the letter of consent and the survey, I am interested in learning more about how doctoral students experience doctoral studies. I'm interested in those "ah-ha" moments that have changed how you view yourself or how you view the people or circumstances of your life.

The duration of this interview should be approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Should you wish to discontinue the interview at any time, please let me know. The interview is semi-structured. There are some specific questions that I have. But, I also want the interview to be flexible enough to explore the things

that you have found significant. At times, it might seem like I am asking the same question multiple times. When this happens, it is done in order to explore a slightly different angle. I might pause from time to time. This allows me to think about your responses before moving on.

*[Begin interview]*

1. I would like to ask you to take a few minutes to tell me about your experience so far. For example, what do you think of this level of study?
2. Why did you decide to undertake doctoral studies?
3. How has your doctoral experience affected your life? (Prompts: relationships, your profession, your way of thinking.)
4. What research topic are you working on [or thinking of working on]?
5. How do others in cohort (and instructors) view you?
6. Describe the doctoral program. What are the program outcomes?

**Critical story(-ies):**

Can you remember an event or experience that may have shocked you or that has caused you to reflect or question:

1. your relationships?
2. your values?
3. your beliefs?
4. your job?
5. your career?
6. your course of studies?
7. your identity?
8. your ideas of research, research capabilities?
9. other aspect of your life?

If yes, explore these questions:

1. How did your viewpoint on [your identity/circumstance identified above] change?
2. How long did you ponder the experience?
3. What new factors made you rethink your viewpoint?
4. Did the experience feel uncomfortable? Describe how you felt.
5. Did you feel an obligation (or, did you feel compelled) to change your behaviour or viewpoint?
6. Prior to the experience, was there something that you took for granted, but now see as “questionable” or uncertain?
7. What was your viewpoint on [your identity/circumstance identified above] before this experience?
8. What did you think was an acceptable viewpoint/behaviour/position before the experience?
9. What aspects of your background might have caused you to have this (prior) viewpoint?
10. Before this experience, how would you have described yourself?
11. How would you describe yourself as a result of the experience?

If no, explore these questions:

1. Do you feel that you have not changed much as a result of your studies? Please explain.
2. Have you felt mostly comfortable with your learning experiences so far? Please explain.

3. Have you found that your studies in X have strengthened your viewpoints?  
Please explain.
  
4. Have you found that you have become more confident in your  
viewpoints/positions/relationships/beliefs/values? Please explain.

*[Grounding, relaxation: What are you going to be doing today? As appropriate.]*  
*[Thank you.]*



## **Appendix D: Permission to use figure (the social positioning cycle)**

**From:** Bavister, Rosemary [ROSEMARY.BAVISTER@contractor.cengage.com]

**Sent:** 15 June 2012 04:56

**To:** Koole, Marguerite (koole)

**Subject:** FW: Permission to use Copyrighted Material in a Doctoral Thesis

Dear Marguerite

### **Re Figure on page 144 in 'People and Societies'**

Thank you for your email, I can confirm that permission has been granted as detailed below:

Permission is granted for use of the above material in your forthcoming dissertation to be in sent in both print and electronic formats to Lancaster University, Athabasca University and to the National Library of Canada, Library and Archives Canada, and to be stored on the dissertations database, subject to the following conditions:

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