

The role of the self in the research process: reflections on researching the REF as a PhD student



*In this short, reflective post, **Emily Yarrow** considers her experiences as a PhD student researching women's lived experiences of research evaluation in the UK and particularly the anxieties she felt as a junior researcher interviewing very senior, esteemed academic colleagues. It is important to reflect on the role researchers play in the interviewing and data collection process, and also on how gender, gendered power dynamics, and one's position in the academic hierarchy can potentially affect interactions with participants from the outset.*

As academic work is becoming arguably more precarious and competitive, shorter contracts are becoming the norm, and the number of people completing PhDs in the UK is increasing, the risks associated with researching academia are high. This post discusses and explores my experiences of being a PhD student researching women's lived experiences of research evaluation in the UK, and my thoughts on and experiences of interviewing very senior and esteemed academics as a junior researcher.

My PhD study explored research evaluation in the form of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) – a weighty force in UK academia – the outcomes of which, I argue, hold the potential to alter the course of an academic career considerably, as well as playing a role in the type of work that some academics do, particularly given the REF impact agenda.

There is currently an international trend towards research evaluation with programmes such as the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), the Performance-Based Research fund in New Zealand (PBRF), and equivalents in countries including Denmark, Switzerland and the Netherlands. What is clear is that there is not enough qualitative, exploratory research into the effects of research evaluation on academic careers, especially for women, and so my PhD study was born. My findings suggest that [research evaluation in the UK actively contributes to the continuance of gender inequality regimes in the academy](#), and that the ability to negotiate managerial control and be politically savvy is increasingly important in the academic world.



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Before embarking on my PhD, I was acutely aware of the sensitivity of my research, as well as my own positionality with regards to my participants. Reflection is and was an important element in the research process for me, as it allowed me to reflect on the effects of the self on the research process and, ultimately, also on the data, as well as the various power dynamics discernible during interviews for my study. I was continually taken aback by participants' generosity and kindness towards me, with many offers of help for proofreading, general career tips, and encouragement. There was a shared understanding of, and empathy with, the difficulties of the PhD process, and not only was this helpful to me as a scholar, but also as an individual.

From the start, much like other doctoral scholars, I was nervous about gaining access to participants, access negotiations, and fulfilling my desired sample size. It was here where, being very junior, I experienced the kindness of more senior academics wanting to help someone at the start of their journey, something several participants explicitly mentioned. I was humbled by their kindness and willingness, particularly during what was an extremely stressful and emotional time for most academics in the UK as interviews were conducted after submissions to REF had been made but before the results were known.

Throughout my study, I often reflected upon my own beliefs and presupposed ideas, while also being hyper self-aware of my very junior status (though this was, looking back, an anxiety of my own making as all participants were extremely supportive of the work I was carrying out). As I interviewed some very senior female academics in my own field, insecurities around having not yet been through a REF exercise myself certainly contributed to my anxieties. However, this enabled me to ask questions that an established academic may have been less willing or possibly able to ask. This is not to demonstrate a naïveté around interview dynamics, but rather, I believe, in part influenced by the level of confidentiality provided to participants, as well as strong rapport-building from the outset.

Another important reflection on being a PhD student researching academia was around my gender and being a woman interviewing predominantly women, but also some men in managerial positions. In some senses, I may have been granted more in-depth responses and additional information by virtue of being a young, female PhD student, rather than an established and well-connected (male) researcher. For me this was a significant opportunity for reflection on the role that we as researchers play not only in the interviewing and data collection process, but also how gender, gendered power dynamics, and position in the academic hierarchy can potentially affect our interactions with participants from the moment we connect with them, even over email.

Reflecting on my own experiences during my time as a PhD student, it is important to be ready and grateful to accept the gift of candidness of participants. This in itself provided me with a rich learning opportunity that encouraged me to think more deeply about my interactions with participants, and use self-reflection as a tool of empowerment in the PhD process.

Ultimately, reflections on ourselves as researchers and an awareness of the role of the self in the research process, can help us contribute not only to our own development as scholars, but also spark opportunities and ideas for new research.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Dr Emily Yarrow is a Teaching Fellow and Researcher at the University of Edinburgh Business School. Her research interests include human resource management with a focus on equality and diversity, organisational theory, inequality regimes, and cross-cultural management issues. To date her research has focused on the impact of research evaluation on female academic careers, women's lived experiences in organisations, pensions, and the experiences of older workers. She tweets [@Emilyyarrow1](#). More information about Emily's work can be found at <https://emilyyarrow.co.uk>.