Theology in Scotland
33.2 (2026): 5–13
https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v33i2.3263

Mooring and unmooring:
Reflections on researching the self

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Abstract

This article examines the insider-outsider experience of qualitative research. Reflecting on the author's experiences of undertaking a research project of personal relevance to her, the article explores the ways in which the process of research can create both a sense of mooring, where the act of research can be a grounding and affirming experience, and unmooring, where research unveils anxieties and insecurities. The article ends with suggestions for researchers navigating similar complicated positionalities and dynamics.

As I write this article, the 2026 FIFA World Cup is in full swing, and for the first time in twenty-eight years Scotland's men's team has qualified. Between the dramatic qualification, the romanticised narrative of 'glorious failure' that haunts the national team, and the sheer joy of returning to the tournament after decades away, there is a very real sense of excitement and energy across Scotland.

It is hard not to get caught up in this fervour. Sitting in a packed pub in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town, wearing the Scottish flag across my chest and singing along with the crowd as a kilted bagpiper played "Flower

of Scotland", I was filled with a rare and unfamiliar feeling: a sense of wider belonging. I am a migrant. I am from a small ethnic minority, the Zomi people, and was born in Myanmar/Burma. When I was five, my family and I moved to Glasgow, where we stayed until I was ten. We then moved to England, but as an adult I returned to Scotland – to Edinburgh – to begin my postgraduate studies, and I have remained here ever since. In many ways, I feel Scottish, and I have always harboured a deep affinity and affection for this country. Yet despite this personal connection, my place of birth, my ethnic identity and physical appearance, and even my accent all mark me out as different, as Other, as not immediately or obviously 'Scottish'. I am in-between: neither fully Scottish, nor fully Burmese or Zomi. Moments of connection to a larger group identity – like the one I experienced in that pub – are rare for me.

In an issue exploring theology, migration, and belonging, beginning with a mention of sport might initially seem out of place. Yet its relevance becomes clear, when we remember that sport is one of the few arenas where explicit displays of nationalist pride are not only acceptable but expected. Michael Billig calls this 'banal nationalism', which refers to 'the routine and familiar forms of nationalism'[1] that play as important and pivotal a role in constructing nationhood as borders, language, and citizenship requirements do. International sporting competitions, when it appears as if everyone around you has an easy point of entry into group identity and belonging, become moments when the upheaval caused by migration, displacement, and Othering becomes most apparent. Sport is therefore a useful lens through which to think carefully about identity, belonging, and nationalism: the very themes I have been exploring in my most recent research project, on ethnic minority Christians in Edinburgh and their understandings of Scottish national identity. Examining that subject as an ethnic minority Christian myself has surfaced some complex thoughts and feelings about my own identity and sense of place – a complexity compounded by the fact that this article and Special Issue has come together against the backdrop of an international sporting competition, with its constant, explicit displays of Scottish identity and pride.

What follows is a reflection on the process and experience of researching a subject that is both professionally and personally significant to me. My aim is not to prescribe, but to name and articulate some of

[1] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Sage, 1995), 8.

the complexities of doing academic research on a topic from which, as researcher, you cannot simply step away. In my case, this is migration and identity, but researchers in other fields will recognise the dynamic too. I begin with a brief overview of the research project itself, before discussing some of the ways the process has helped both moor and unmoor me. I end with a suggestion for how researchers might approach this complicated positionality.



Researching ethnic minority faith and belonging in Scotland

In 2025 I conducted a short-term research project with the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Theology and Public Issues. My project, titled "Minority/ies Nationalism: Faith and Scottish National Identity", explored the experiences and reflections of a small number of ethnic minority Christians in Edinburgh, and how their faith and identity informed their understanding of, and relationship to, Scotland and Scottish nationalism. My participants differed in ethnic origin and expressed varying degrees of identification with Scotland and Scottishness, but were united in the important constructive role that their Christian faith played in the creation of their identity and sense of belonging in Scotland.

As a Christian, a member of an ethnic minority, and someone who has lived in Scotland for most of my life, I found strong connections and commonalities between my own experience and my research topic. This is not surprising: research is often undertaken because the researcher is interested in the topic, and that interest often stems from personal experience. In my case, my interest in faith, belonging, and race seems to have taken root the moment my parents brought my siblings and me to Glasgow so that they could pursue theological education. Therefore, when I asked my participants about experiences of un-belonging, of not quite fitting in, or of struggling to feel Scottish, I asked not only as an interested researcher but as someone who has lived through some of those exact situations and feelings myself.

Acknowledging and theorising positionality in research has become increasingly important – not just within qualitative research, but theological work too.[2] Positionality refers to 'how the researcher is situated

[2] See for example Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), Joyce

relative to their research participants within the broader environment they are studying.'[3] It is an acknowledgement that the researcher's social identities and personal perspectives, as well as the broader social and political context, will influence the research framing, process, and results. Reflexivity regarding one's own positionality is thus a crucial step in the creation of sound and rigorous academic work since it enables the declaration and analysis of how the researcher's assumptions and biases have directly or indirectly impacted the research. This task is made all the more difficult – and more crucial – when the researcher themselves have a key identity marker in common with the research participants.[4] Writing on this complexity, the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod asks: 'What happens when the "other" that the anthropologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self?'[5] In the section that follows, I attempt to answer Abu-Lughod's question, using the ideas of mooring and unmooring to unpack the ways in which the process of researching the self, as I call it, is both stabilising and destabilising.

Mooring

One of the questions I asked my participants concerned their identity: how their faith and ethnicity formed their sense of self, and whether they would consider themselves Scottish. My own sense of identity has always been contested – by others, yes, but also by myself. Growing up in Scotland as someone from a small ethnic minority, from a far-away country few had heard of, left me with a deep sense of confusion and instability about how to present myself. It is something I still struggle with at times, even now that I have grown familiar (though not comfortable) with that confusion.

Ann Mercer and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Conundrums in Practical Theology* (Brill, 2016), or Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[3] Roehl Sybing, *Writing Positionality for Qualitative Inquiry: A Meta-Analysis of Written Research* (Routledge, 2026), 7.

[4] Emmanuel Akwasi Adu-Ampong & Ellis Adjei Adams, "'But You Are Also Ghanaian, You Should Know': Negotiating the Insider-Outsider Research Positionality in the Fieldwork Encounter," *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 6 (2020): 583–92.

[5] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (School of American Research Press, 1991), 140.

Through conversations with my participants, I came to realise that we shared a similar unease about our identities. As I listened to them describe how their identity was at times steady and at other times in flux, I recognised my own confusion and frustration in their words. This recognition is one of the fruits of researching a topic of deep personal significance: in the process of academic discovery, we may find our own experiences, thoughts, and opinions affirmed. It confirmed things I had long suspected but could not previously verify. Listening to my participants echo my own fears and feelings was an incredibly gratifying and reassuring experience, one I treasured – I am not alone in feeling tongue-tied when people ask where I am from; I am not alone in loving Scotland even as I feel slightly removed from it; I am not alone in feeling uncertain whether I am Scottish enough to support the Scottish football team. This provided a much-needed mooring. An unexpected but welcome benefit of this process of academic research is that not only are valuable academic insights gleaned, but one's own personal experiences might be affirmed too.

Researching the personal has also been grounding in another way, through the sense of joy, liberation, and pleasure the process can bring. Researching a topic of great personal significance can be a genuine delight. It offers a chance to devote dedicated time and attention to something that has always fascinated you, and it can bring new perspectives on your own experiences that you might not otherwise have considered. In my case, many participants spoke of belonging to heaven, or to God's kingdom, as the primary way they mitigated experiences of being made to feel unwelcome in Scottish society. Although I had always considered my faith central to my identity, it had not played much of a role in how I understood my belonging in Scotland specifically. Yet listening to one participant speak of her ultimate belonging as being in heaven – of her home here as cherished but temporary – led me to reconsider my own attempts at attachment. Another participant described how her commitment to making Scotland a better place to live in came from her reading of a line in the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' For her, this meant that Jesus asks her to care for her country even as her ultimate home lies in heaven; the two were, in her reading, equally important to God. This new interpretation of a line that had grown overly familiar to me has shaped how I understand and engage with that prayer ever since. The familiar becomes new and strange, in good ways, through research that at

first glance seems predictable. We may enter a project believing we already know what it will show us, yet it is more likely that we leave with new ways of thinking about the familiar and the routine.



Unmooring

There are tensions, too, that arise from researching the self. Just as there is mooring, there is also unmooring.

When investigating something you have also lived through yourself, the line between researcher and researched blurs and it can be hard to maintain the division between the two, between insider and outsider.[6] That line is relational, situation-dependent, and constantly negotiated and renegotiated. My insider status as an ethnic minority Christian with ties to Scotland placed me alongside my participants and granted me valuable, intimate understanding of some of their experiences. Yet at the same time, I am differentiated enough that I cannot presume the particularities of how their identity, history, or social locations would combine to inform their relationship to Scotland. Moreover, I am also the researcher, who is ostensibly expected to maintain a degree of objective distance in order to conduct the research successfully. The precariousness of this balancing act becomes clear in the interview process, where questions asked out of personal interest, or to build rapport, intermingle with those asked out of academic necessity. Roni Berger writes that her experience as a migrant interviewing other migrants to the US, 'required a constant deliberate effort to maintain the separation between mine and theirs, curb the drive to compare experiences with immigration services, examine myself, and document my reactions.'[7] Although the whole conversation remains of academic value, there is a real risk of either delving too deeply into the personal under the guise of academic curiosity, or otherwise projecting my own experiences onto my participants and coming away having accidentally failed to learn what I set out to learn. Doing research on topics where one has lived experience of the subject under question therefore requires vigilance to ensure the research process and the findings do justice

[6] Roni Berger, "Now I See It, Now I Don't: Researcher's Position and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 2 (2015): 219–34.

[7] Berger, "Now I See It," 224.

both to oneself and to the participants, whose voices are unique and worth amplifying in their own right, not just by comparison.

Another aspect of unmooring I have experienced is when the research process leads to realisations about yourself, or your own experience, that you were not necessarily ready for. For example, I came to a difficult realisation while listening to my participants describe how much their faith and church life helped them feel at home in Scotland. One person described his church as 'family', while others spoke about how their church friends and relationships helped create a sense of belonging. This made me realise, almost involuntarily, that I was missing that sense of community from my own church life. The relationality, comfort, and trust my participant described as having in his own church community showed me, by contrast, how absent those things were from mine – a sad conclusion that I had long suspected and subconsciously felt but was not quite prepared to face until that interview. In moments like these, having such a deep, personal investment in a subject means you cannot help but measure your participants' experiences against your own. This makes for a sensitive and empathetic researcher, but it also brings unexpected and sometimes difficult emotions as a by-product of the research process.

Researching the self: Some suggestions

I want to end this reflective piece with some suggestions for reckoning with this mooring and unmooring. These are not intended to be prescriptive – each person's positionality requires contextualising to their own place and situation – but are offered in the hope that they may be useful, or at least illuminating, to others in similar circumstances.

First, I think it is critical to accept the fluidity of the relationship between researcher and researched, discussed above. At certain moments, my interviewees turned the question back on me: when I asked about witnessing to others as a Christian in secular Scotland, one woman asked me, bluntly, how I personally did it. I recall feeling taken aback that she had asked me, and gave a non-committal answer before immediately returning the focus to her experiences. However, upon reflection, this is a prime example of qualitative research's dynamic and unpredictable nature. It is a good reminder that we cannot assume a static and clear-cut binary between researcher and participant that persists unchanged over time. The

relationship between researcher and participant is dynamic, and even more so when a personal element is involved.

Second, it is worth remembering that writing about people for academic research is precisely that – writing. I have found it helpful to think of my positionality as that of a chronicler, or diarist – someone who journeys alongside an expedition, in this case, ethnic minority Christians in Scotland. My role is to faithfully record their experiences: noting events, words, and reactions, and offering some background and context. And, like any diarist or narrator, I also offer my own thoughts and musings, interpreting what I see through my own lens and biases. Pete Ward notes that, 'the point is that what we saw, and indeed what we eventually chose to say about what we saw, emerged from and was shaped by our interests. We were attentive observers, but attentive in certain ways.'[8] Similarly, thinking of myself as a chronicler is useful because it reminds me of the limits of the form. Writing can only capture so much of the complexity of human experience. Theological writing is even more limited since it concerns mediations of the divine. Thinking of the researcher as diarist or chronicler is therefore helpful since it guards against the hubristic notion that we can ever fully capture the richness and complexity of the people we research. What I write is not, and can never claim to be, a complete account of the experiences of all ethnic minorities, their faith, and their relationship with Scotland. It is, instead, a snapshot of a particular moment, in a particular time and place – as good a rendering as I can manage. This framing also guards against the grandiose idea of the researcher as an authority standing above their participants, even as we depend on their knowledge and insight for our work. It helps maintain a position of epistemic humility that keeps participants at the centre of the research, while still recognising that, as researchers, we bring our own genuine interest and stake to the work.

Conclusion

By the time I finished writing this article, the 2026 World Cup has ended, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, Scotland have failed to progress very far into the tournament. Although the fervour and excitement that marked that

[8] Pete Ward, "Attention and Conversation," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Eerdmans, 2012), 37.

moment in the pub have since died, the complexity around my identity, sense of place, and wider belonging persists. Yet the process of researching the self, and the meta act of reflecting on reflexivity through writing this piece, has helped ground me in unexpected ways. I have come to realise, all over again, that tensions around one's identity and belonging might not ever be solved, since that assumes a stable set of internal and external conditions that persist and combine to generate that resolution. As Avtar Brah reminds us, identities 'are marked by the multiplicity of subject positions that constitute the subject.'[9] Some days I may feel more comfortable describing myself as Zomi, while on other occasions, other factors such as Scotland's participation in the World Cup, may lead me to find that elusive sense of Scottishness. On other days still, my nostalgia for the place of my birth hits me so hard that I cannot fathom ever describing myself without thinking of the distinctive hills of my homeland. Yet despite this flux, there exists a possibility of grounding, or mooring, particularly when it comes to the task of researching the self. Both experiences – the unsettled nature of ethnic minority belonging in Scotland and the insider/outsider of qualitative research – are alike in that one is always caught in the middle, shuttling here and there between embrace and suspicion, between intimacy and strangerhood. They are also alike in that both belonging and qualitative research have moments of stability and instability – mooring and unmooring. Such moments of steadiness are possible precisely because of the dynamic and responsive nature of this type of research. Both belonging and qualitative research therefore demand an openness and humility that, if done well, allows for intimacy, understanding, and kinship between researcher and researched, and within the researcher herself too. All that is required is attentiveness, honesty, and humility to the tumultuousness of the process.

[9] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (Routledge, 1996), 123.