

# Navigating Positionality in Economics and Management Research: Ethical and Practical Considerations

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**Abstract:** Positionality in research refers to where the researcher stands relative to “the other” at a particular moment in time and space, and is sometimes described as the researcher being an insider or an outsider. However, it is a complex and multifaceted concept and also takes into account the type of research being conducted, the phases of research, the dynamic context of the research setting, and the social construction of the identities and personae of individuals. Researcher reflexivity is required before, during, and after the research process to deal with the ethical and practical issues associated with positionality. The concept of positionality is well-established in some disciplines but has typically been given less consideration in economics and management studies, even though ethical and practical concerns related to positionality may arise. This neglect is also evident in there being few research studies exploring how positionality is navigated in these disciplines. This research addresses this neglect by presenting an example of how a multidisciplinary economics and management research team dealt with an incident of dynamic positionality. The aim is to illustrate how a research team applied reflexivity to dynamic positionality during research on a business incubation project, where the NGO within which the research was being undertaken provided far greater access to data than initially envisaged by the research team. Using a combination of reflexive procedures and principles as the research method, an illustrative case study is produced, describing the reflexivity of the research team and how they adjusted their positionality. The study identifies ethical and practical considerations in shifting identities, roles and positionality, highlighting the importance of reflexive practice in economics and management research. It also illustrates the value of combining four levels of positioning with various positionality personae into a framework to inform the reflexive practice of a multidisciplinary research team.

**Keywords:** Positionality, Outsider-insider Research Continuum, Reflexivity, Ethics, Positivist Research

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## 1. Introduction

Matters related to the positionality of the researcher are well established in many disciplines, with the idea having its origins in, for example, discussions of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) in feminist research, critical race theory in legal studies (Milner 2007) and ethnographic research in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology (Fleming 2018). It is also prominent in multicultural and postmodern research and studies adopting participatory approaches (Merriam et al. 2001).

The application of positionality to economics and management studies is less developed, particularly amongst those researchers who are more positivistically inclined in their research approach. However, the positivist's assumptions of objective knowledge are contested by assumptions of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988), which acknowledge multiple ways of knowing and the incompleteness of knowledge, compelling the researcher to reflexively consider how they collect and interpret data (Caggiano & Weber 2023). There have also been calls for all researchers to give more careful attention to positionality, irrespective of their research approach (Collins & McNulty 2020), including quantitative researchers (Jamieson et al. 2023). Researcher reflexivity is vital to guide matters of positionality. The aim of this paper is to illustrate a research team's reflexivity in applying a combination of perspectives of positionality to a research project.

## 2. The Insider-outsider Researcher Continuum and Positionality

In every study, based on the closeness of the researcher to what is being researched, researchers adopt a position along a continuum from outsider to insider (Fleming 2018). The researcher has traditionally been described as an insider if they are a member of the organisation, group or community being researched, while an outsider-researcher is not, and consequently has no a priori knowledge of the research setting (Fleming 2018). Insider-researchers, therefore, have a “lived familiarity” with the group being researched (Mercer 2007). As already alluded to, in many instances, insider-researchers have this status by virtue of their membership and will have to navigate their role duality of being both a member and a researcher (Brannick & Coghlan 2007). However, in other cases, the lived familiarity of the researchers is not about membership. Instead, it arises because of having biographic characteristics similar to those of the research participants, such as race or gender (Mercer 2007), which promotes researcher identification with the research participants (Bruskin 2019).

The insider-outsider researcher continuum is part of the more complex set of considerations about researcher positionality. Positionality in research refers to where the researcher stands relative to “the other” at a particular moment in time and space (Bayeck 2022, Merriam et al. 2001) and is, therefore, contextual and dynamic in changing research settings (Caruana & Montgomery 2015), influenced particularly by the research context and the researcher’s interaction with organisation members (Bruskin 2019). Furthermore, positionality is multi-dimensional, as several identities of individuals are simultaneously being socially constructed and influence the position and perspectives that researchers adopt as they experience and socially construct their world (Bruskin 2019, Kezar & Lester 2010).

While a researcher’s positionality may be assumed either deliberately or without much consideration, it can potentially affect many aspects of the research design and process (Fleming 2018). For example, there are several ethical considerations unique to insider-researchers, including their (1) pre-understanding of the research setting, (2) accessing data and matters of consent, anonymity, privacy and confidentiality (3) the risks associated with organisational politics, including power relations and perceptions of coercion and marginalisation by the researcher (Brannick & Coghlan 2007, Fleming 2018). In considering the positionality of the researcher vis-a-vis research participants, interrelated issues of power and representation cannot be ignored (Merriam et al. 2001, Ríos & Patel 2023), particularly in participatory approaches to research or those dealing with sensitive subjects. This obligates researchers to uphold an ethic of care (Reich 2021), and to share their research findings with participants (George et al. 2023). Equally, the potential benefit and harm to the researcher must be acknowledged. On the one hand, the insider-researcher’s positionality can make them vulnerable as they open up both themselves and their ideas to criticism and potential harm, but on the other, it could be a source of credibility and authority, allowing research participants and readers to identify with and connect with the researcher and their work (Massoud 2022).

### 3. Researcher Reflexivity, Positionality and Personae

It has been recommended that reflexivity can be helpful for researchers to navigate their positionality, particularly when becoming insider-researchers (Bonello 2021, Bukamal 2022). Collins and McNulty (2020, p. 210) state that “Reflexively considering one’s research persona at the outset of a project, as well as reassessing it during data collection and analysis, can help researchers articulate the assumptions of positionality likely to be made by themselves as well as others ... [and] can also assist in providing a clearer understanding as to how one’s persona may change over time ... and via what process.”

Reflexivity involves “thoughtful, analytic self-awareness of researchers’ experiences, reasoning, and overall impact throughout the research process” (Råheim et al. 2016, p. 1). It is about the “conscious, active acknowledgement of one’s own belief, bias, and judgement systems *before, during, and after* the actual research process” (Jamieson et al. 2023, p. 2). Furthermore, in his framework Milner (2007) proposes that researchers consider positionality at four levels, which he referred to as (1) researching the self, (2) researching the self in relation to others, (3) engaged reflection and representation, and (4) shifting from self to system. This framework has been shown to help researchers assume developmental and transformational roles concerning their positionality (Lu & Hodge 2019).

The positionality of researchers is determined by their reflexivity and action, and the perspectives and perceptions of the research participants also shape positionality. Drawing on role-based identity theory and considering both researchers’ and participants’ salient shared identities, Collins and McNulty (2020) propose four researcher personae: the *intruder*, *fellow*, *stranger* and *guest*. The researcher *intruder* feels like an insider but is viewed by the research participant as an outsider who is, therefore, likely to be less willing to share sensitive information with the researcher. On the other hand, the researcher *guest* feels like an outsider but is treated by research participants as an insider. In contrast, the views of the research and research participants are aligned with both parties recognising the *stranger* as an outsider and the *fellow* as an insider. The stranger could have difficulty building rapport with participants but is more likely to be perceived as a neutral outsider (Collins & McNulty 2020). Alternatively, being positioned as a fellow demands more transparency and reflexivity from the researcher during analysis, as ethical dilemmas are likely to arise from the privileged data they have access to, and from the ambiguity of their role as researcher versus member (Collins & McNulty 2020).

So far, few studies have applied the personae developed by Collins and McNulty (2020). Only two studies were found that have referred to personae, namely (Mahadevan & Moore 2023) and (Stoten 2024). Mahadevan and Moore (2023) refer to the work in explaining how to self-assess choices in ethnographic research, developing an ethnographic triangle that examines the reflexive engagement of ethnographic researchers with actors (or

research participants) and their audience (i.e. readers of their work). Stoten (2024) investigated the teaching and learning experiences of academics. He explains how “heutagogy places the learner at the centre of the learning journey through a negotiated curriculum in which the nature and scope of the learning experience are determined by the individual” (Stoten 2024, p. 993). He further explains that even though he had published research on heutagogy and the curriculum of business schools when conducting research with fellow Business School academics on their teaching and learning, he deliberately did not present himself as an advocate of heutagogy so as to more effectively access their personal understandings of teaching and learning.

Researchers have recognised the fluidity of the researcher’s role (Bruskin 2019). However, compared to situations of researchers applying positionality to sensitive research topics and engaging with cautious research participants, less attention has been paid to positionality in research situations where participants demonstrate increasing openness towards outside researchers. Stated differently, research on the dynamics of the development of a change in persona from stranger to guest, and guest to fellow has been neglected.

#### **4. Research Methods**

The research method can be described as a combination of reflexive procedures and principles. The research team engaged in self-reflexivity (Cunliffe 2003) and epistemic reflexivity by constructing a thinking task for themselves (Guttormsen & Moore 2023) on the meta-theoretical (Weber 2003) assumptions of the research project and their implications. This thinking task involved applying the personae developed by Collins and McNulty (2020) to the four levels of positionality (Milner 2007) during the research process (Jamieson et al. 2023), to consider the impact (McKenzie & Bartunek 2023) of the researchers’ positionality. As a form of reconfiguring practice (Hibbert et al. 2019), we first explored possibilities and their implications and then reorientated our focus. We explored our research approach and its implications for positionality through a responsive dialogue about a critical incident (McKenzie & Bartunek 2023). The dialogue took place through conversations and written exchanges, and the outcome is presented in the form of an illustrative case study. The illustrative case study in this paper explains how, after identifying potential insights and solutions that could address some of the strategic challenges the organisation was confronting, the researchers deliberated on whether to get involved in sharing these insights and advice and how to do so in a way that upheld the collaborative partnership that had developed, while also retaining their primary identity as researchers.

#### **5. The Illustrative Case Study**

##### **5.1 Background to the Illustrative Case Study**

One research team member met the CEO of the South African Creative Industries Incubator (SACII) when they were both panel discussants at a conference organised by Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (<https://edhe.co.za/>). The meeting was informal and on a level playing field, with both participants acknowledged as experts in their respective fields. From a casual conversation ahead of the panel discussion about current projects, the idea of combining the VFX pilot study being run by SACII with the research expertise of an academic team was suggested. This was followed up in later days by emails further discussing the project and one member of the research team meeting with SACII at their offices in Cape Town. Thereafter, a research team was formed, with their first research project focusing on the economic and management aspects of an incubator set up by SACII to develop VFX specialists.

Key partners in the VFX incubator were SACII, E-squared Investments (<https://www.esquared.org.za/>) as a funder of the project, and Lightseed (<https://www.lightseed.co.za/>), a private company providing VFX solutions to the film and media industry. The VFX project arose because of a global shortage of VFX specialists recognised by Lightseed, who found themselves increasingly outsourcing VFX work to suppliers in other countries. Lightseed initially attempted in-house training but had low completion and success rates. They approached SACII because of their expertise in social entrepreneurship in the creative industries and business incubation. The VFX accelerator programme aims to develop a pipeline of work while simultaneously recruiting and training talented creatives. An innovation of the project’s design was that, during the two years of their internship, the trainees are expected to “earn as they learn” through bidding for gig work via online platforms. They were also paid a stipend, designed to reduce over time as their earnings were expected to increase. A portion of the student’s earnings was also to be retained and used to fund future training rounds.

The purpose of the research was to describe and analyse the innovative way the partnership aims to develop a sustainable digital creative industries ecosystem through a social entrepreneurship approach. Specific objectives

include (1) explaining the project's origins and partnership development, (2) describing the conceptualisation and implementation of the project, including the recruitment, training, and deployment of trainees, and (3) analysing the nature and effectiveness of the project as a social enterprise, including the roles of the partners and experiences of trainees. One particular focus area of interest was the mechanics of the stipend as an economic incentive.

From the start, a collaborative relationship was established between SACII and the researchers, focusing on producing mutually beneficial outcomes. The research team led the articulation of draft research questions for interviews, focus groups, and a questionnaire, which were shared with SACII and edited and shaped by them through comments made on the document and in online meetings. The development of relationships and trust in the pre-research phase of the work was thus instrumental in how much access the research team had to the SACII incubation processes and data, and it was in the pre-research phase of the project that the research team was invited to attend weekly SACII meetings for the VFX incubator project.

The access to the weekly planning meetings served several purposes, even though the research team members did not participate in the meetings other than through greetings at the start. Firstly, the research team's understanding of the VFX project – its aims, the practical details of how it was run, and discussions between the SACII team – was greatly enhanced beyond what could have been gleaned from document analysis only. Secondly, the individual roles and expertise of the SACII team became clearer, helping to shape the interview strategies of the research team. Thirdly, it allowed the tracking of the project in real-time so that the research team was aware of successes and challenges as they emerged, rather than reading about them afterwards.

## **5.2 The Researchers' Dilemma**

Data was collected through interviews, questionnaires, focus groups and document analysis. In addition, after the research team was invited to attend the weekly online meetings as observers, they were given access to all recordings and minutes of meetings. This level of access was not anticipated when the research project was first conceived but reflected the NPO's level of transparency and the nature of the collaborative relationship that had been established. During the early stages of data collection, one of the researchers who had been attending the meetings described how SACII grappled with how they should manage the expectations around the phasing out of the stipend. Due to a downturn in the creative economy, trainees' earnings were not as high as anticipated, and they were, therefore, very reliant on the stipend. SACII was also considering how to manage expectations for the new cohort of trainees to be recruited in the project's second year.

When further investigating and discussing this matter, the researchers recognised several concepts in the literature that provided different perspectives on the problem the NPO was trying to solve. The conversation developed to consider if, when, and how to intervene by providing the NPO with these insights. Several ethical and pragmatic considerations were deliberated upon.

## **5.3 Ethical and Pragmatic Research Considerations and the Intervention**

Firstly, the research team considered the implications of any intervention on their positionality. Even though they had been provided greater access to the research site by being invited to meetings, they had observer status at these meetings and were not participant observers. They recognised that sharing these insights could alter their observer status at these meetings, and they could be drawn into more extensive discussions and feel compelled to adopt an advisory role in the project. The research team discussed the implications of this for their evaluation of the project that formed part of the broader set of research goals, particularly their neutrality. This included discussions about the research traditions of the research team in terms of their disciplinary backgrounds, including ontology, epistemology, and positionality. They also recognised that an intervention may require renegotiating their observer status with SACII and applying for an amendment to the ethics application that had been approved by their university. On the other hand, they recognised that the research relationship with the NPO was for mutual benefit and that withholding or delaying the sharing of critical information could have adverse consequences for the incubation project and the collaborative relationship. Just as SACII has let the researchers into their organisation context by providing access to data and meetings, the researchers agreed that they would reciprocate by inviting SACII into their "world" of data analysis.

Secondly, once the research team had agreed that it was right to intervene, they considered the format of the intervention. Several possibilities were discussed, and ultimately, the intervention occurred in two stages. Initially, articles introducing the concepts the researchers had identified were shared with SACII's CEO. Shortly thereafter, these concepts were applied to create a sample communication brief on the issue of stipends, which

was also sent to SACII's CEO. In other words, the intervention occurred outside the regular SACII meetings where they were observers.

#### 5.4 The Outcome of the Intervention

There were two primary outcomes of this intervention. Firstly, the NPO appreciated the timely and relevant intervention by the research team. In an email, the SACII CEO wrote, "This is definitely very helpful". The research team also asked for permission to write about this incident, to which the SACII CEO responded, "This sounds good to me. ... Part of my excitement about this research project I think, was that the research report would give us some kind of mirror to reflect back to us ... so critical reflection is so needed, and I think this is what your observation provides".

Secondly, after the intervention, the research team could retain their observer status at these meetings and noticed a change in how the stipend was discussed by SACII. In the meetings, the CEO did not directly refer to the articles or the communication brief the research team sent. However, there was a shift in her discourse when discussing the responses of the trainees to the termination of the stipend. In the meetings, it was evident that SACII was aware that the amount of work and remuneration envisaged at the start of the project had not been fully met. Initially, responses had been somewhat defensive, highlighting that trainees were not promised that earnings would entirely replace the reduction in the stipend and that their sense of entitlement to and dependence on the stipend was a problem. Later on, there was a greater acknowledgement of the very real struggles of the trainees, emphasising their changed position after year 1 (access to training and equipment) but facing the realities of the gig economy. That work would be erratic and dependent on the market and available contracts.

Having reverted to their research role and observer status at meetings, the research team recognised that should they be able to contribute to any future problems related to the VFX project that SACII was grappling with, they could readily intervene, and they were confident SACII would welcome this.

### 6. Discussion

This paper presents a case study where a team of economics and management researchers had initially positioned themselves as outsider-researchers (Bayeck 2022) or strangers (Collins & McNulty 2020). However, the organisation being researched was very open to their involvement and provided far greater access to data than initially envisaged, including observer status at their regular meetings. Because of this access, the researchers' personae began to develop as guests and even in the direction of fellows (Collins & McNulty 2020). As a result of their access to meetings, the research team became well-informed about some of the strategic decisions the organisation was grappling with. That is, access to the weekly planning meetings was instrumental in the research team's ability (and decision) to intervene. Therefore, this case study illustrates how the quality of the relationship between researchers and research participants determined the outcomes and mutual benefits arising from research activities.

Secondly, the case illustrates how the multiple identities of the researchers were socially constructed and influenced their positions and perspectives (Kezar & Lester 2010) as they consciously expanded their roles to include a secondary role of advisors. Being perceived by research participants as insiders enhanced the credibility of the research team, helping them to shift into the role of advisors and enabling research participants to connect with the advice given (Massoud 2022).

Thirdly, the importance of reflexivity in guiding researcher positionality (Jamieson et al. 2023, Råheim et al. 2016) has been illustrated. From the perspective of the framework developed by Milner (2007), the case illustrates all four levels of positioning. In their discussions, researchers researched the self through critical self-reflection of their assumptions of research and the implications for their positionality. Milner (2007, p. 395) explains that researching the self "can bring to researchers' awareness and consciousness known (seen), unknown (unseen), and unanticipated (unforeseen) issues, perspectives, epistemologies, and positions." Secondly, in researching the self in relation to others, the researchers reflected on their own research interests versus the interests of the research participants. This was reflected in debates about what made for good research practice versus what was in the best interests of the incubation project and the collaborative relationship with SACII. Thirdly, the level of engaged reflection and representation was evident in developing the communication artefact for SACII. Finally, there was a shift from self to system when the researchers considered the economic realities of the creative industries when formulating their proposed communication brief.

Finally, the case illustrates the value of reflexivity when conducting research in a multidisciplinary team. That is, researching in a team creates opportunities for responsive dialogue (McKenzie & Bartunek 2023) from multiple perspectives and thereby facilitates reflexivity (Råheim et al. 2016). It also illustrates the complexity of multiple identities of multiple researchers and the potential synergies that can arise.

## 7. Conclusion

The study highlights the importance of reflexive practice in research teams, particularly in considering matters of multiple identities and positionality, recognising that they are shaped by the interaction of researchers and research participants to create dynamic personae. The personae described by Collins and McNulty (2020) helped articulate positionality as part of researcher reflexivity. The case also illustrates the relevance of positionality in economic and management studies and the importance of including the perspectives of researchers and research participants informing positionality. It is recommended that other researchers use these personae in their reflexive research practice. The case also emphasises the multidimensional and fluid nature of the researcher's role and identity (Bruskin 2019). The four levels of positionality, as proposed by Milner (2007), complemented the personae of Collins and McNulty (2020) in providing researchers with a robust framework, and creating a helpful thinking task for reflexivity (Guttormsen & Moore 2023). The setting of the study was also outside of critical race research, illustrating the broader application of Milner's (2007) work. Finally, the research was unique in presenting a case of researcher self-reflexivity about positionality in a situation where research participants were very willing for researchers to be insiders. It is hoped that this paper encourages more reflexivity about positionality in economics and management research studies and, in particular, in response to critical incidents that arise and affect the research and relationships between researchers and research participants.

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