

Positionality and Reflexivity Practices in Economics and Management Research

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Abstract: Positionality has often been presented along an outsider-insider researcher continuum, but its multi-dimensional nature has also been recognised. Positionality can also combine the perspectives of researchers and participants, identifying several personae that researchers can assume, namely: intruder, fellow, stranger, and guest. This study describes and illustrates positionality in economics and management research and the use of reflexivity to consider where the researcher stands relative to “the other”. The paper has two objectives. First, to investigate the application of positionality in published economics and management studies. This is achieved by systematically reviewing the literature. The second objective is to illustrate a research team’s reflexivity in considering positionality in their research. This is done by applying the personae framework as a thinking task. The systematic review of the literature concludes that the issue of positionality has received most attention in studies where research participants may be vulnerable, research topics are sensitive, or research techniques are more intrusive or personal, including those studies on diversity and inclusion. In addition, the majority of studies addressing positionality were qualitative or reflexive, with only a few quantitative studies identified. The need for greater reflexivity by all researchers throughout the research process, particularly regarding positionality, is discussed. Applying the personae to the relationship between the researcher and research participants, the case studies surfaced several important ideas about reflexivity and positionality, including the implications of the dynamic social construction of researcher identities, the value of reflexivity and thinking tasks in guiding the researcher's consideration of positionality, and the linkage of researcher epistemology to positionality and reflexivity. The study's contribution is to raise awareness of the need for greater reflexivity by all economics and management researchers, particularly regarding positionality. The paper concludes with practical implications for researchers, research educators and supervisors. Recommendations for further research call for further investigation of current research practises concerning positionality, including how this is reflected in research publications.

Keywords: Positionality, Research personae, Reflexivity, Systematic review, Economics and management research, Case studies

1. Introduction

Positionality should be an important consideration for economics and management researchers, because of its role in determining what research topics are investigated (Dallyn, 2014; Ađar and Manolchev, 2020; Duffy, Fernandez and Senè-Harper, 2021; Adikaram, Weerakotuwa and Liyanage, 2022), and how researchers produce, access, and interpret knowledge (Collins & McNulty, 2020; Kipnis, Bebek and Bröckerhoff, 2021; Jimenez, Abbott and Dasuki, 2022). The research implications of positionality are well established in many disciplines. The idea has its origins in, for example, discussions of situated knowledges in feminist research (Haraway, 1988), critical race theory in legal studies (Milner, 2007), and ethnographic research in anthropology and sociology (Fleming, 2018). It is also prominent in multicultural and postmodern research and studies adopting participatory approaches (Merriam et al., 2001). On the other hand, the application of positionality to economics and management studies is less developed, particularly amongst those researchers who adopt a positivist research approach. However, even the positivist’s assumptions of objective knowledge have been contested by assumptions of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), which recognise multiple ways of knowing and the incompleteness of knowledge. This compels 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, Govaart & Pownall, 2023), with researcher reflexivity seen as vital to guide matters of positionality.

The two objectives of this paper are to investigate the application of positionality in published economics and management studies and to illustrate a research team’s reflexivity in considering positionality in their research.

This paper is structured to first explore the concept of positionality and its implications for research, before examining the role of reflexivity in navigating positionality and the four personae a researcher may assume. Thereafter, the research methods adopted to achieve the two objectives are described, followed by the presentation and discussion of the findings, and the conclusion of the paper.

2. The insider-outsider Researcher Continuum and Positionality

Based on the closeness of the researcher to what and who 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 must navigate the duality of their role, being both a member and a researcher (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). However, in other cases, the lived familiarity of the researchers is not about membership, but arises because of personality characteristics (Moser, 2008) or having biographic characteristics similar to those of the research participants, such as race or gender (Mercer, 2007), and which promote identification with the research participants (Bruskin, 2019).

The one-dimensional insider-outsider researcher continuum is part of the more complex set of considerations about researcher positionality. Positionality refers to where the researcher stands relative to “the other” at a particular moment in time and space (Merriam et al., 2001; Bayeck, 2022) 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 theory suggests that positionality is multidimensional, as multiple identities are simultaneously socially constructed and influence the positions and perspectives researchers adopt as they experience and socially construct their worlds (Kezar & Lester, 2010; Bruskin, 2019). The relevance of positionality to translingual research in multilingual and intercultural settings has also been recognised (Crane, Lombard & Tenz, 2009).

While a researcher’s positionality may be deliberately assumed or given little consideration, it can 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-à-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, obligating 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 considered (Branch & Duché, 2024). The insider-researcher’s positionality can make them vulnerable as they open themselves and their ideas to criticism and potential harm, but it can also 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

A researcher’s personal experiences, social identity, professional and institutional context, career path, and political commitments are among the factors that influence the research topics they are interested in investigating (Dallyn 2014; Ađar & Manolchev, 2020; Duffy, Fernandez & Senè-Harper, 2021; Adikaram, Weerakotuwa & Liyanage, 2022). This human dimension of the researcher alone merits some degree of reflexivity. It has been recommended that reflexivity can help researchers 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, Govaart & Pownall, 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 in relation to their positionality (Lu & Hodge, 2019). In team-based research projects, incorporating reflexivity has added complexity, as the research team attempts to develop a common understanding and position as they collaborate and interact with one another and with research participants (Rankl, Johnson & Vindrola-Padros, 2021).

The positionality of researchers is influenced by their reflexivity and action, and vice versa. Furthermore, 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*, the *fellow*, the *stranger* and the *guest*. The researcher *intruder* feels like an insider but is viewed by the research participant as an outsider, which is likely to make the research participant less willing to share sensitive information with the researcher. On the other hand, the researcher, as a *guest*, feels like an outsider but is treated by research participants as an insider. In contrast, the views of the researcher 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). However, 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). Table 1 summarises the four personae.

Table 1: The four personae positionality framework (Collins & McNulty, 2020)

Personae	Researcher Perception of Salient Shared Identities	Participant Perception of Salient Shared Identities
Intruder	Insider	Outsider
Fellow	Insider	Insider
Stranger	Outsider	Outsider
Guest	Outsider	Insider

4. Research Method

This paper has two research objectives. The first is to investigate the application of positionality in economics and management studies. This objective is addressed through a systematic review of the literature. Of particular interest is a description of the evidence of the practice of positionality in these disciplines, and of its use across different research approaches and topics. Studies adopting ethnographic and action research methods were excluded, as matters of positionality are quite well established in these research approaches. The second objective is to illustrate a research team’s reflexivity in considering positionality in their research. Here, an illustrative case study approach is adopted.

4.1 Procedure for the Systematic Review of the Literature

A systematic review of the literature on the concept of positionality was conducted on the Scopus database, following the seven steps identified by Lockwood and Oh (2017), which are:

Step 1: Develop a structured question and objective. The objective of the study was to analyse how the concept of positionality had been applied in economics and management studies.

Step 2: Specify inclusion and exclusion criteria. In this study, the inclusion criteria were: (1) journal articles relevant to the economics and management disciplines, (2) studies where the concept of positionality was applied to the research process and relationship between researchers and research participants, (3) articles where researchers explain their experiences related to positionality in research that they had conducted. The exclusion criteria were: (1) studies that took the form of a commentary, editorial, special issue introduction, literature review or conceptual paper, (2) studies that were based on the analysis of documents or artefacts and not engaging with research participants in some form, (3) articles that were only somewhat related to the economics and management disciplines, such as studies in education or sports management, (4) studies that had adopted an ethnographic or autoethnographic approach as considerations of positionality and reflexivity already receive extensive attention in this field, (5) studies that applied positionality to a context other than the

research relationship, (6) studies published in non-English languages, (7) studies without an abstract, (8) or where the full text article was not available.

Step 3: Describe the search strategy. Initially, “positionality” was entered as a search term in the Scopus database to check its prevalence. The search found 5518 documents, confirming its importance and prevalence. Thereafter, the search was refined as follows: (1) Only the “Business, Management and Accounting” and “Economics, Econometrics and Finance” subject areas were selected. Other subject area options were considered, such as “Social Sciences” and “Arts and Humanities”, but the results were too broad and rendered thousands of results. (2) Only journals were selected as the source type, and (3) they had to be in their final publication stage. The search reported 306 documents.

Steps 4 and 5: Conduct a critical appraisal of the included studies and extract the data. The bibliographic data of the 306 retrieved records, including their abstracts, were exported from Scopus and imported into Rayyan. One duplicate was detected and removed, leaving 305 documents. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied, resulting in the elimination of 238 articles, leaving 67 publications. The full text of the 67 articles was then downloaded and inspected. With this more detailed examination of the articles' content, another 14 were excluded based on the criteria, leaving 53 articles with 252 exclusions. The categorisation of reasons for exclusion is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Reasons for exclusion of search results

Reason for Exclusion	Number of Cases
Wrong discipline or population	79
Commentary, Editorial, Conceptual Paper, or Literature review	61
Ethnographic methods	49
Education discipline	26
Document or artefact analysis	23
Sport management discipline	8
No abstract or full text	6
Total	252

Step 6: Analyse the data extracted from the included research studies. The full-text versions of the 53 articles were uploaded to NotebookLM to assist with analysing the dataset. A summary table was generated for each article, identifying the (1) Research Aim and Objectives, (2) Research Methods Adopted, (3) Sample, and (4) Key Perspectives on Positionality. A large portion of the articles [n=44] were related to the topic of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The remaining nine articles were analysed in-depth.

Step 7: Present the findings. The findings are presented later in this paper.

4.2 Research Procedure for the Illustrative Case Studies

The second objective of this paper is to illustrate a research team’s reflexivity in considering positionality in their research. Based on research projects the research team had personally been involved in, either individually or collectively, four illustrative case study vignettes are described, and the reflexivity of the research team members is explained through the application of self-reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2003) by constructing a thinking task for themselves (Guttormsen & Moore, 2023). This thinking task involved applying the personae developed by Collins and McNulty (2020) to consider their impact (McKenzie & Bartunek, 2023) on the researchers’ positionality, and the implications thereof, before, during, and/or after the research (Jamieson, Govaart & Pownall, 2023).

5. The Systematic Review of the Literature

5.1 Research Design Adopted

The objective of conducting a systematic review of the literature on positionality in economics and management studies was to describe its use across different research approaches and topics. The literature suggests that, by comparison, qualitative research studies tend to give greater attention to positionality than quantitative studies (Jamieson, Govaart, and Pownall, 2023). Therefore, as shown in Table 3, the research approaches used in the 53 full-text articles were classified as Qualitative, Quantitative, Mixed-method, or Reflexive/reflective.

Table 3: Research Design Employed

Research Design	Number of articles
Qualitative	22
Quantitative	3
Mixed-method	2
Reflexive/reflective	26
Total	53

Not surprisingly, the largest category of articles was written by researchers who explored their own experiences of positionality in a reflective or reflexive manner. Also expected was the large number of qualitative studies, in which data were typically collected and analysed from interviews with research participants, as well as several instances of a case study approach. Questionnaires were administered as surveys in all three quantitative studies. However, all three treated the positional concerns of research participants as a core concept rather than the researcher's positionality in the research process. One mixed-method design combined document analyses and interviews, while the second adopted a qualitative-quantitative sequential design using focus group interviews and a questionnaire.

5.2 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

In addition to the research design, the articles were analysed according to the research topic. Many of the articles address various topics related to DEI. It is not possible in this article to provide a comprehensive overview of all these articles, but as expected, there has been interest in various DEI-related characteristics of research participants, including their gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and social class. Furthermore, studies have focused on social inequalities, including those of vulnerable groups such as migrant workers (Ağar & Manolchev, 2020; Cruz-García & Villares-Varela, 2023), marginalised communities (Azungah, 2019), and people with disabilities (Brown & Ciciurkaite, 2023). Studies have investigated issues such as the influence of the cultural context, particularly of cross-cultural research settings (Abalkhail, 2018), discrimination (Stone et al., 2021), and sexual harassment (Adikaram, Weerakotuwa & Liyanage, 2022). Finally, there have also been some studies concerned about the design of the research methodologies to promote more equitable knowledge production, including considerations about representation and voice (Duffy, Fernandez & Senè-Harper, 2021), power relations (Xian et al., 2024), decolonisation and democratisation (Lambrechts et al., 2025).

5.3 Positionality in Other Topics

Of the remaining papers, some investigate positional concerns of research participants, but not in relation to the researchers. For example, Barbara et al. (2021) analysed unethical behaviour, noting individuals made a distinction between “selective” and “ego” positionality in relation to their peers. In another study, international educational travellers’ cross-cultural transformative experiences were explored, comparing and contrasting those of European descent with those of Asian and Hispanic backgrounds (Teoh, Wang & Kwek, 2024).

A few studies were also related to tourism. Palladino (2020) collected data through interviews to explore the associations among people, places and traditional foods, and used storytelling to convey the findings. She describes how positionality was critical to appreciating the people and their stories behind a traditional food product, highlighting the importance of cultural traditions and a “sense of place”. A second study investigates dark tourism, which “allows tourists to come into close proximity with death, atrocity, and the macabre, and therefore has the potential to be an emotional and even traumatic encounter for tourists” (Sharma & Rickly 2018, p. 41). Here, positionality was explored to address the emotional and psychological consequences researchers may face when conducting fieldwork, to maintain their own sense of well-being. A third tourism study adopted an interesting set of high engagement data collection techniques, including an Accompanied Walk

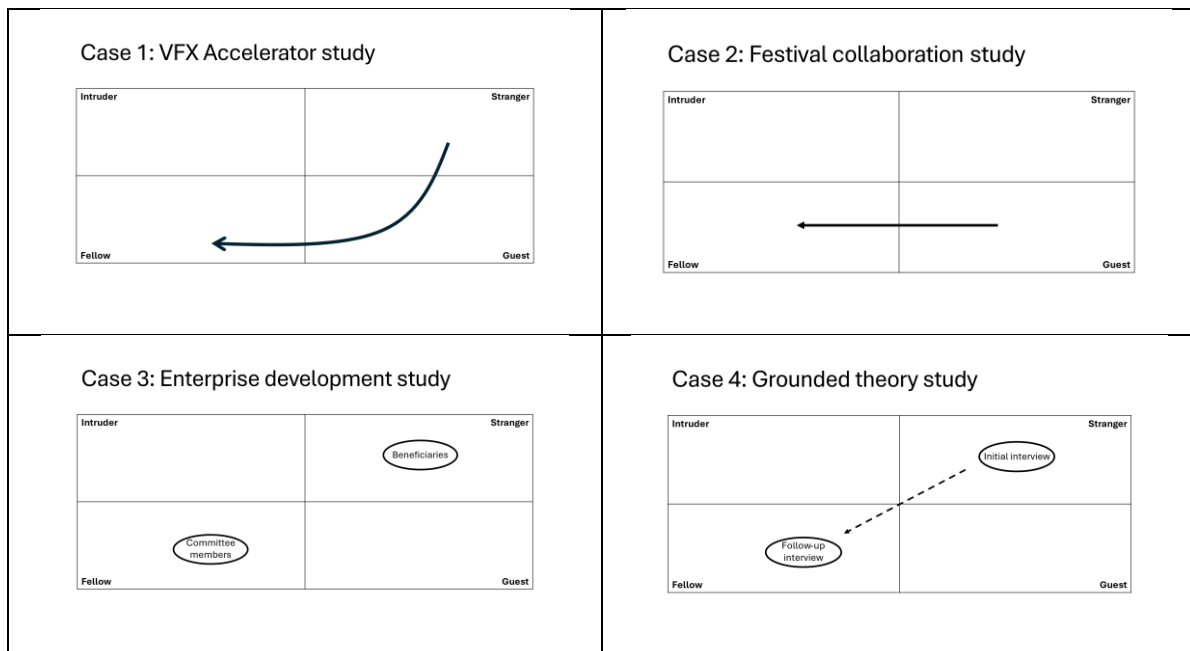
(i.e. where the researcher walks with the tourist and asks them questions), Visitor Employed Photography (VEP) (i.e. photographs that tourists take), which is later the topic of a semi-structured interview with the insider researcher (Ye et al., 2020).

Other articles have focused on the influence of positionality on data collection and its analysis. In one study, interviews were conducted twice, first by an outsider and thereafter by an insider, and illustrate how participants' responses changed based on their perceptions of the researcher's positionality (Sposato & Jeffrey, 2020). While researcher positionality is often considered in relation to a vulnerable or less powerful research participant, another study explores the unique challenges related to conducting interviews with powerful "elites", where there is a power asymmetry between the researcher and the elite, access is often difficult, and there is also a risk of obtaining biased information (Vaagland, 2024). A fourth study investigates how cultural identity and positionality are negotiated through the politics of language during qualitative interviews in multinational corporations, recognising the dynamic nature of positionality (Xian et al., 2024).

The objective of the systematic review was to describe the practice of positionality in the economics and management disciplines, and of its use across different research approaches and topics. In summary, the systematic literature review has shown that positionality considerations are present in qualitative articles and in those that discuss researchers' reflexivity. Furthermore, positionality considerations are emphasised when dealing with more sensitive topics, when cultural and other differences between the researcher and research participants are recognised, and when power relations exist. The illustrative cases that follow complement the findings from the systematic review by highlighting other considerations that inform positionality. In particular, the personae framework (Collins & McNulty, 2020) is applied to the four illustrative case study vignettes.

6. The Illustrative Case Studies

The first case study is the VFX pilot study being run by the South African Creative Industries Incubator (SACII) (Snowball, Pearse & Drummond, 2025). The programme uses an innovative "learn and earn" model in which trainees initially receive a stipend that gradually reduces over time as their skills develop, and their earnings from work replace the lost income from the stipend. From the start, an open and collaborative relationship was established between SACII and the researchers. SACII was involved in the pre-research phase of the work, providing feedback on the research design. In addition, the research team was invited to attend weekly SACII meetings for the VFX incubator project, enabling real-time tracking of the pilot project. This level of access was not anticipated when the research project was first conceived, but it reflected SACII's transparency and the nature of the collaborative relationship established. During the early stages of data collection, one of the researchers who had been attending the meetings described how SACII discussed how to manage expectations regarding the phasing out of the stipend. Due to a downturn in the creative economy, trainees' earnings were lower than anticipated, leaving them highly reliant on the stipend. SACII was also considering how to manage future expectations about the programme in general, and the stipend in particular. Upon further investigation and discussion among the researchers, they identified several concepts in the literature that offered different perspectives on the problem the NPO was trying to solve. They considered whether to intervene by providing the NPO with these insights and, if so, when and how. Once the research team agreed that the intervention was appropriate, they considered the intervention's format. Several possibilities were examined, and ultimately, the intervention occurred in two stages. Initially, articles introducing the concepts identified by the researchers were shared with SACII's CEO. Shortly thereafter, these concepts were applied to draft a sample communication brief on stipends, which was also sent to SACII's CEO. The NPO appreciated the timely and relevant intervention by the research team, who could still maintain an observer status at these meetings. As illustrated in Figure 1, using the four researcher personae of Collins and McNulty (2020), researcher positionality quickly shifted from being a *stranger* to a *guest* because of the transparency and generosity of SACII, both in sharing data and in inviting the researchers to meetings where they discussed the challenges of the incubator in real time. Furthermore, the researchers moved from *guests* to *fellows* when they offered advice, and moved out of a purely researcher role, but afterwards repositioned themselves as *guests*.



Source: Adapted from Collins and McNulty (2020)

Figure 1: The dynamics of researcher personae

The second case concerns a collaborative research project amongst festivals during COVID-19: Future Festivals South Africa (Snowball, Drummond and Tarentaal, 2024). From the start, the project was designed to co-produce immediately useful and practical strategies for festivals that had to quickly adapt to the lockdown restrictions imposed during COVID-19. Part of the research funding was paid to selected festivals to run part of the research programme, which included a variety of methods, such as the production of digital artworks, the collection of audience data, and chairing of online focus groups where ongoing festival experiences were discussed. Some members of the research team had established relationships with festival managers, so they started the project in a *guest* collaborative position. As the project developed, considerable trust and rapport were quickly built up between the research team and festival managers, repositioning the research team as *fellows*. The insider position of the research team enabled timely discussion of possible responses to the crisis situation that many festivals faced, as well as the sharing of knowledge and experiences among festival participants. A deliberate part of the research design was to consider how to reduce the power differential that often forms between research teams and the “subjects.” This was done by framing the research as collaborative, providing funding to support festivals' research-related work, and establishing engagements in which powerful positions (such as the convenor, chair, and presenters) were shared between the research team and the festivals. Over the 15 months of the project, the Future Festivals project became an embedded part of the South African festival ecosystem, offering timely data and analysis that was of practical value to festivals and mutually beneficial to all parties.

The third case involves a formative evaluation of a research project, conducted by two members of a committee responsible for an enterprise development project (Pearse & Matyobeni, 2025). The research participants interviewed were fellow committee members and programme beneficiaries. As illustrated in Figure 1, when committee members were interviewed, the researchers' positionality was recognised as *fellows*, whereas to the beneficiaries, they were mostly *strangers*. The interviews with committee members gathered data on the project's origins, decisions on the committee's structure, and its agenda, functioning, record-keeping, and future plans. The two researchers were somewhat familiar with some of this information, but not all of it, and the insights they already had served as a common point of reference to build rapport and a common understanding of the project's origins, membership, and functioning. For beneficiaries, the interviews focused on the history of the businesses, the challenges they had encountered, the needs identified, the support and resources received through the project, and the project's impact on the enterprises. Here too, the researchers had some background knowledge of the support given to the enterprises, which served as a common point of reference. The researchers had also met most of the beneficiaries on at least one prior occasion. The researchers recognised that their relationship with beneficiaries differed markedly from that with committee members. As a result, when the researchers introduced themselves at the start of the interview, they informed or reminded the interviewees that they were members of the project committee. Power relations were therefore in the open

and evident, as the beneficiaries were informed that the researchers had been involved as committee members in making decisions about the allocation of project resources and support to them. The researchers, therefore, carefully explained that, while they were there to evaluate the project's impact on the beneficiary, the support they received would not be prejudiced by the findings. Equally, the researchers were cautious not to set any expectations of future direct benefits from participating in the research, and explained that the findings focused on identifying ways to improve the project overall and did not constitute an analysis of the enterprises' future needs. Nevertheless, they undertook to convey any specific feedback the beneficiaries wanted to highlight to the committee. While most of the enterprises reported positive gains from the project's intervention, a key finding of the research was that the challenges of running an enterprise were numerous, and therefore, the enterprises would need further support in the future to maintain the progress that had been made, to ensure the future viability of the enterprises. Therefore, when reporting their findings to the committee, the researchers recommended that enterprises receive longer-term support rather than just one-off support.

The fourth case described here is a grounded theory study investigating leaders' change management practices, which culminated in a social capital theory explanation of resistance to change (Pearse, 2010). Grounded theory follows an iterative process of data collection and analysis and aims to develop a theory of practical value to research participants. Consequently, it is common for the researcher to return to at least some of the research participants for a follow-up interview to collect additional data. Simultaneously, this interview can provide the researcher with an opportunity to share preliminary findings, which serves as member checking, and to begin verifying the theory being developed. An explanation of the preliminary findings was therefore mutually beneficial, allowing the researcher to apply quality assurance processes to the research and test the theory's utility. It also benefited the research participants, who were given a reflective tool and space to reflect on their practice from a new perspective. Some interviewees reported that they could "see themselves" in the preliminary findings, while others commented on fresh insights that they had gained from the theory being presented. As illustrated in Figure 1, from the first to the second interview, the researcher's positionality shifted from being a *stranger* towards being a *fellow*, as the researcher enters into and becomes more familiar with the world of the research participant, and when sharing the developing theory, may even be able to provide the participant with new ways of making sense of their world, or with insights into how to tackle particular challenges they faced.

In summary, the four case studies show how researcher roles can change over time as research progresses through different phases, or the quality of the relationship with research participants changes. They also highlight the importance of reflexivity in managing ethical issues, power relations, and research quality. Furthermore, they encourage all researchers to reflect on their positionality, even in studies that assume a more objective epistemology.

7. Discussion

7.1 Discussion of the Systematic Review

The findings of the systematic review confirm that positionality has received relatively little attention in economics and management studies. Positionality is most likely to be considered in qualitative research, particularly when methods such as action or ethnographic research are employed. Furthermore, positionality has received attention in studies of diversity, equity and inclusion. A set of three articles focused on the influence of positionality on data collection and analysis, raising a range of issues in cross-cultural research settings, including cultural identity, as well as the challenges posed by power asymmetry between the researcher and an elite research participant. Three studies of tourism were also reported. The reasons for their consideration of positionality were quite diverse, but they shared a focus on tourists' experiences.

Overall, the findings suggest that economics and management researchers are considering matters related to positionality when they recognise that the research participants may be more vulnerable, the topic of research is of a more sensitive nature, the research focuses on the experiences of research participants, where power asymmetries exist, or when the research techniques are more intrusive or personal. In arguing for more consideration of positionality by quantitative researchers in psychology, Jamieson, Govaart and Pownall (2023) have referred to studies that highlight the value of reflexivity when, for example, (1) considering the emotional cost of researching sensitive topics, or (2) investigating sensitive, political, or complex issues. However, in the absence of these considerations, there is little indication that economics and management researchers are reflexive in considering their positionality. Jamieson, Govaart and Pownall (2023) agree that most quantitative research has overlooked this aspect of the research process and argue that considering positionality can aid in

understanding data analysis, surface possible researcher bias, and conflicts of interest. Reflexivity throughout the research process has been recommended (Råheim et al., 2016), and when applied, it challenges the often-held, but misplaced, assumption of objectivity in quantitative research (Jamieson, Govaart & Pownall, 2023). To begin with, researchers should acknowledge the personal preferences they have already exercised when choosing a specific research topic and methodology.

7.2 Discussion of the Case Studies

As noted above, in the systematic literature review, there was relatively little reporting on positionality. It could be that positionality is considered far more than it is reported, particularly from a positivist standpoint, where a discussion of positionality may be interpreted as “owning up” to potential bias, which is contrary to the objectivist research position adopted. However, the need for and value of deliberate researcher reflexivity in economics and management studies are evident, and particularly in relation to their positionality. The case studies raise several important ideas about reflexivity and positionality in economics and management studies. Firstly, the cases illustrate how the multiple identities of the researchers were socially constructed and influenced their positions and perspectives (Kezar & Lester, 2010; Bruskin, 2019). That is, the interaction between the researchers and research participants before, during and after the research contributed to the creation of a shared understanding of the positionality, roles and perspectives of researchers and research participants. The cases have shown how useful the personae described by Collins and McNulty (2020) are as a reflexive tool to articulate positionality as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between the researcher and research participants. The cases also highlight the importance of the quality of the relationship that develops between researchers and research participants, and how this can influence the outcomes and mutual benefits of research activities.

Secondly, the importance of reflexivity in guiding the researcher's positionality (Råheim et al., 2016; Jamieson, Govaart & Pownall, 2023), individually and as part of a research team, has been emphasised. In this paper, reflexivity has largely been demonstrated through a thinking task (Guttormsen & Moore, 2023), by applying the personae of Collins and McNulty (2020) to the four cases. Exercising reflexivity in these cases also highlighted how researchers were responsive to changing research conditions and the dynamics of the relationship between researchers and research participants, ensuring that valuable, meaningful research of mutual benefit was carried out.

Finally, the cases suggest that the research paradigm is central in sensitising the researcher to issues of positionality. A substantial portion of economics and management research is quantitative in nature (Tacconi, 1998; Bryman, 2004; Fischer, Dietz, and Antonakis, 2017; Pearse, 2019; Crick, 2020), with a more positivist research orientation (Primecz, 2020; Lu & Taghipour, 2025). Positivist-inclined researchers typically assume their epistemology is that of an objective outsider and that they are dealing with facts (Reiss, 2017; Jamieson, Govaart & Pownall, 2023). Reiss (2017) cautions the positivist researcher about fact-value entanglement. Furthermore, as the cases illustrate, in at least three instances, the researchers' positionality was dynamic, and through their interactions with the research participants, they ended up as fellows, often unintentionally. Positivist researchers are likely to be uncomfortable with this positionality and resistant to this shift. However, the research process can naturally lead there, and from the research participants' perspective, in some cases, it may seem like a more valuable relationship for them to have with researchers. Once the researcher recognises their insider status, the question arises of whether they should remain there or reposition themselves. If repositioning is desired or needed, questions arise of how this can be done and what the implications are for the research study, the research relationship, and the research paradigm. Resolving these questions requires reflexivity on their part.

8. Conclusion

Positionality is related to what topics researchers choose to investigate (Dallyn 2014; Ađar & Manolchev 2020, Duffy, Fernandez & Senè-Harper, 2021; Adikaram, Weerakotuwa & Liyanage, 2022), and how they produce, access, and interpret knowledge (Collins & McNulty, 2020; Kipnis, Bebek and Bröckerhoff, 2021; Jimenez, Abbott and Dasuki, 2022). However, the results of the systematic review suggest that relatively little attention has been given to issues of positionality in economics and management research.

This paper has emphasised that positionality can arise in any research study, not only those dealing with sensitive topics or asymmetrical power relations, and deserves more attention from researchers. This includes those researchers who may view their research as objective. As recommended by Milner (2007), researchers should consider their positionality at four levels: researching the self, researching the self in relation to others, engaged

reflection and representation, and shifting from self to system. As a practical starting point, when planning their research, researchers can more deliberate in thinking about: (1) Why they have chosen a particular research topic and methodology, (2) How they intend to access and interpret the data, and the influence of their own background on this knowledge production process, (3) The role of research participants in all phases of the research, (4) What the implications could be of the knowledge they produce and who could be affected by it. In addition, thinking tasks can help researchers consider positionality and be reflexive. The illustrative case studies demonstrated the practical use and value of the personae framework of Collins and McNulty (2020) as a thinking task for researchers to articulate their positionality and its implications, and to clarify what they should do as the research unfolds and relationships develop. The case studies also illustrated how the personae framework was a constructive thinking task for a team of researchers to articulate and debate their positionalities.

The study also has practical implications for how research is taught and supervised in economics and management. Educators and supervisors should sensitise students to the concept of positionality, teach them to critique its role in published research, and encourage them to reflect on it in their own research.

A limitation of the systematic review is that only the “Business, Management and Accounting” and “Economics, Econometrics and Finance” subject areas of Scopus were selected. Further research is recommended to confirm that this is a neglected area, using other databases and Scopus subject area options. Further research is also needed to investigate when economics and management researchers actively engage reflexively with their positionality in their current research practice, and when they should be doing so. More work is also needed to identify the advantages and disadvantages of reflexivity and to determine how the researcher can know that there has been sufficient reflexivity.

AI declaration: Rayyan and NotebookLM were used to assist in selecting and analysing the documents included in the systematic review. Grammarly was used to check and edit the spelling and grammar during the paper’s development.

Ethics declaration: Permission was granted by Rhodes University’s Human Research Ethics Committee for the case studies referred to in the paper, which involved human participants. The Review References are 2024-7965-8911 and 2024-8114-9176.

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