



Portfolio

“A journey into the wilderness”

A reflexive work

Executive summary

This reflexive paper explores the key stages of my doctoral journey, emphasising the development of myself as a researcher, particularly through the elaboration of my skills and deepening my understanding of critical academic concepts such as positionality, reflexivity and research paradigms. As a researcher with a background in business and a passion for psychology, I have encountered a variety of challenges and learning opportunities that have shaped my approach to inquiry.

Throughout my research, I have navigated between emic and etic stances, recognising that my positionality is fluid and can shift depending on the context and the relationship with my participants. This awareness of my positionality has informed the methodological decisions I have made, particularly in my pilot study on “xxx”, where my dual perspective allowed me to examine career trajectories across psychology graduates, where my dual perspective allowed me to examine career trajectories across psychology and business with a nuanced understanding.

Another key aspect of this journey has been the incorporation of mixed-methods research, which I identified as the most suitable approach for investigating the role of emotional intelligence in leadership. By combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques, I aim to capture both the measurable impacts of emotional intelligence and the deeper, more subjective human experiences that influence effective leadership.

In addition, this paper has critically appraised the ethical and methodological dimensions of my research, highlighting the importance of aligning data collection and analysis with ethical standards while acknowledging social and ideological factors. My reflection concludes with a commitment to remaining reflexive and open to continuous learning, ensuring that my research is rigorous, inclusive and relevant.

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Background context and relevance

As a doctoral candidate, I frequently reflect with pride on the progress I have made so far throughout my academic journey. Initially, my understanding of the rigorous demands of doctoral study was limited, yet I was firm in my aspiration to achieve this significant milestone. From the outset, I was committed to pursuing this goal, and I have continually strived to realise this ambition, demonstrating perseverance and dedication in the face of challenges.

Thinking about the initial stages of my doctoral journey, I remember feeling privileged and excited – now I can add a little bit of naivety to the list, as me personally did not have a grasp of what was actually waiting for us around the corner. In order to depict a true reflection of my doctoral path, it is crucial to consider how my understanding surrounding the new realm I stepped in has evolved, how all the new knowledge about paradigms – concept that was very alien to me when I was first introduced to them – fell into each of the right drawers in my mind; the truth is, many of the new notions presented during the first part of the doctorate still remained strangers to my mind initially and I can say I almost felt a little bit of an impostor syndrome at times – and this is normal. However, as more and more ideas and different perspectives were presented during Dr Caroline Jawad’s classes, things started to take shape and make sense, and more and more “aha, now I see” moments happened and I started to feel a sense of belonging.

My journey to pursuing a doctorate in business has been shaped by my academic background and personal interests. Having built a solid foundation in business, I found myself increasingly drawn to the psychological aspects that influence leadership, decision-making, and organisational behaviour. Over time, this passion for psychology deepened, inspiring me to explore how these two fields intersect and complement one another. This blend of business expertise and psychological curiosity naturally led me to pursue a doctoral programme in business administration, where I could merge these disciplines and investigate areas such as leadership, employability, and the dynamics between personal traits and professional outcomes. Ultimately, this path allows me to bring together my academic strengths and my enthusiasm for understanding the human behaviour in professional contexts.

Looking back at my academic evolution, it is particularly important to consider the lenses of positionality, reflecting writing, and reflexivity, as well as my emic/etic stances in my research.

This portfolio aims to explore these concepts and their influence on my developments as a researcher, focusing on how they have shaped my comprehension of the research process, ethics and the role of the researcher. The portfolio will not be limited to these concepts, but aim to depict a true reflection of all the essential knowledge gathered during the first part of my doctoral journey.

I have structured the paper into smaller sections to present the information in a more structured and coherent manner. This approach allows for a clearer progression of ideas, making it easier to follow my reflections and the connections between the different concepts and ideas discussed.

The role of reflection in research

Reflection in the journey of a researcher is an essential tool, involving the process of critically examining one's experiences, thoughts and decisions. It is a key aspect of developing self-awareness as a researcher and ensuring that methodological and theoretical choices made thoughtfully. Schon (1983) describes reflection as a deliberate practice that allows individuals to think deeply about their experiences and learn from them, particularly in complex or uncertain situations. Likewise, Moon (1999) emphasises that reflection helps researchers engage with the broader context of their work, encouraging them to connect personal insights with professional practice.

By engaging in reflective practices, a researcher does not only improve the quality of their work, but also ensure that they are aware of their own positionality, biases and the impact these may have on the research process and outcomes.

Reflection can be practiced in various ways, depending on the context, resources available, preferred practices, etc. For example, reflective writing has been an essential tool in my journey towards becoming a more aware and conscientious researcher. One of the main tools that researchers use and find extremely beneficial during research times are reflective journals, which mainly help the researcher stay on the right track – considering that research is a tumultuous and sometimes very long process, personal biases and other diversions can easily detour a researcher from their aim, if the risks are not acknowledged and mitigated (Bassot, 2020). Through reflective journals and discussions, I have been able to critically assess my own learning and development. This practice has allowed me to engage with my experiences on the doctoral programme at a deeper level, enabling me to identify and address areas of uncertainty or challenge.

The existing body of literature also acknowledges the effectiveness and advantages of reflective writing in shaping socially and morally right researchers, by allowing us to analyse previous aspects that we might have missed during the research process or could have done better, and create a project checklist, which acts similar to a reflective journal (Bell and Waters, 2014).

For example, one particular instance where reflective writing proved invaluable was during the research methods module. Initially, I struggled with the ethical considerations surrounding qualitative research, particularly concerning issues of consent and anonymity. Through reflecting writing, I was able to articulate my concerns and fears, and by doing so, I began to unpack the complexities of ethical research practice. This process not only clarified my understanding, but also reinforced the importance of maintaining an ongoing dialogue with oneself about the ethical dimensions of research.

Reflective writing has also been a space for me to explore the emotional aspects of research. The pressures of academia, the challenges of balancing research with other responsibilities, and the inevitable self-doubt are all aspects that emerged in my reflections. By acknowledging and writing about these emotions, I have been able to develop strategies for resilience and self-care, which are essential for sustaining long-term research endeavours.

However, reflection as a researcher extends far beyond reflective writing; it also occurs in lived experiences and professional interactions. For instance, attending my first doctoral conference was a pivotal moment of reflection, even though it was not in the form of writing. Engaging in discussions with peers, listening to presentations and observing diverse approaches to research sparked critical thinking about my own research and methodologies.

Furthermore, I felt a sense of belongingness from being amongst people who are going through the same experience as myself. This shared understanding of challenges and milestones of the doctoral journey fostered a supportive environment that further deepened my reflective practice. These moments of informal reflection, triggered by both intellectual engagement and emotional connections, allowed me to reassess my research trajectory, consider new perspectives and refine my approach.

Thus, reflection in research is an ongoing, multifaced process that happens in various settings, not solely through writing, but also through active participation and shared experiences within the academic community.

The role of positionality in research

Positionality is a concept which acknowledges that researchers are neither fully insiders nor outsiders throughout their research process, fact that is influenced by the circumstances and nature of the research which dictate the researcher's position (Milligan, 2016). Holmes (2020) and van Manen (1997) define positionality as a subjective process, where the researcher is the prime tool for collecting and interpreting the data.

Positionality refers to the social and political context that shapes one's identity, experiences and perspectives (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013).

In the context of my doctoral studies, understanding my positionality has been fundamental. I initially viewed research as a structured and somewhat detached process. However, as I engaged with the programme's content and discussions, I realised that my own positionality – shaped by my academic background in business and a rooted passion for psychology, as well as my own social context – inevitably influences the research questions I find compelling, the methodologies I am drawn to and the interpretations I make.

One example of how my positionality has influenced my choice of research is reflected in my pilot study on “The Perceived Employability of Psychology Students and Graduates”, where I explored their career trajectories within psychology and other sectors, particularly business. Given my academic background – which extends between business and a deep passion for psychology – I occupy a unique intersection between these two fields. This positionality offers me a distinctive lens through which to view the career trajectories of psychology graduates, especially when they transition into sectors like business, which may initially seem unrelated to their academic knowledge.

My dual stance provided a reflexive lens through which I could critically examine the assumptions in both fields, allowing me to bridge gaps in understanding about employability and career transitions. By leveraging my insights from both domains, I was able to explore these career pathways with a depth that would be more difficult for someone with a singular academic focus.

My positionality not only guided my choice of topic, but also deepened my analysis by allowing me to recognise and reflect on themes that might otherwise be overlooked.

This realisation led to a deeper awareness of the importance of acknowledging and critically examining my positionality throughout the research process. For instance, in considering biases or preconceptions I may bring to my research, I began to understand how these could impact not only my interactions with research participants, but also the data I collect and the conclusions I draw.

Another instance of realisation I can recall is during the literature module during the early stages of my doctoral journey when I naively assumed that I already had a solid comprehension of what literature review implied. Having completed many reviews throughout my academic career, I expected it to be a straightforward process of synthesising existing research. However, as I delved deeper into the module, I quickly realised that my knowledge was only scraping the surface. The complexity of conducting a thorough, critical literature review became evident. Hart (1998) describes a literature review not only as a summary, but as an analytical process of identifying gaps, evaluating sources and situating one's research within broader academic discourse. Thus, what I once saw as a relatively easy task had transformed into something far more intellectually demanding.

This process was complicated further by the realisation that research paradigms play a crucial role in shaping how we interpret the literature. As I engaged with readings on ontology and epistemology, I found myself re-evaluating how I had approached the literature in my previous work. It became clear that my assumptions about knowledge – whether I viewed it as objective and measurable or constructed through human experience – directly influenced how I read and interpreted studies. Boote and Beile (2005) highlight that a strong literature review not only summarises the field, but critically engages with it, identifying the assumptions underlying different studies and their methodological choices.

Ridley (2012) emphasises that conducting a literature review required a depth of engagement that challenges researchers to not only identify gaps but also align their own research with the paradigms and philosophical assumptions that govern the field. This particular idea was very relevant, particularly as I explored the philosophical foundations of the studies in my own research areas. What initially seemed like a task of collecting sources turned into a reflective exercise in understanding my own positionality and how I stood within the broader academic conversation.

Through this whole process, I realised how much I previously underestimated the importance of critical analysis. Fink (2014) argues that a comprehensive literature review requires not just synthesis, but active engagement with the assumptions, methods and conclusions of prior research.

This module has fundamentally changed how I view academic work, helping me to appreciate the intellectual depth required to produce truly critical, insightful research.

The role of reflexivity in research

Reflexivity has been a crucial tool for me throughout my research journey, which allowed me to put empirical research and interpretation in perspective.

Reflexivity extends beyond the acknowledgement of positionality; it involves a continuous process of reflecting on how one's positionality affects the research process and outcomes (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010).

Engaging in reflecting practice has required me to consistently question how my assumptions and decisions influence my research. This has been particularly relevant to the research topics I was drawn to during the first part of the doctorate – for example my papers on “The causal link between self-esteem and leadership”, “The correlation between self-esteem and role stress and consequently job performance in hotel industry” and “A pilot study on the perceived employability of Psychology students and graduates in their career trajectories”, where my personal connection to the subject matter could easily lead to unconscious bias. By adopting a reflexive stance, I have become more aware of the need to actively mitigate such biases, for instance, by seeking out diverse perspectives and critically evaluating my own interpretations.

Reflexivity has also influenced the way I approach the relationship between the researcher and the researched. I have come to understand that this relationship is not one of hierarchical distance, but rather one of mutual influence. Recognising this led me to adopt more

participatory and collaborative methods in my research, where the voices of research participants are not only heard, but actively shape the research process.

The development of my understanding of research throughout the first part of the doctoral programme has been profoundly influenced by the concepts of positionality, reflection and reflexivity. These concepts have not only deepened my awareness of the complexities and ethical dimensions of research, but have also equipped me with the tools to navigate these challenges with greater confidence and integrity.

As I continue on this journey, I am committed to maintaining a reflexive practice, continually interrogating my own positionality, and using reflective writing as a means of fostering both personal and professional growth. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the development of knowledge in a manner that is both ethically sound and intellectually rigorous.

Emic and etic stances

Morris et al., (1999) explains that emic and etic stances represent two complimentary approaches to understanding social and cultural phenomena. The emic view involves adopting an insider's perspective, where the researcher seeks to interpret behaviours, beliefs and practices from within the cultural or social group being studied. This approach prioritises the subjective meanings and experiences of the participants, focusing on culturally specific knowledge and interpretations (Geertz, 1982; Kondo, 1990), and therefore following a qualitative methodology. In contrast, the etic stance represents an outsider's viewpoint, where the researcher analyses and interprets several groups. This approach emphasises objectivity and seeks to uncover patterns or generalisations that are applicable beyond the specific cultural context (Morris et al., 1999).

As I navigate the complex landscape of research, I often find myself engaging in various dynamics and adopting different stances, all of which are shaped by the nature of my inquiry, the subjects of my research and my positionality as a researcher. This concept of positionality is not just an abstract idea; it plays a critical role in determining how I interact with the world around me and the individuals I study. Within the existing literature, positionality is often discussed in terms of dichotomy between insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives, a distinction highlighted by scholars like Huberman and Miles (2002).

This concept invites me to reflect on how my own experiences and identities influence the way I interpret data, engage with participants, and ultimately shape the findings of my research. Moreover, I recognise that researcher's positionality is not static, and can evolve throughout the research. This characteristic which was referred to as "identity fluid" by Eppeley (2006) and Katyal and King (2014), grants me to navigate between emic and etic stances as circumstances demand.

For instance, when I am deeply immersed in discussions with a participant about their experience and feelings, I may adopt an emic stance, prioritising their insights and allowing their voices to guide the research narrative. During those moments, I tend to connect with their lived realities, understanding through their perspective their experiences. On the other hand, there are times when I need to be objective and adopt an etic perspective, viewing the research through a more analytical lens, in order to identify broader themes and patterns.

This ability to fluidly switch between these perspectives is key, as it enables me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research context. By being aware of my positionality and the dynamic interplay between insider and outsider stances, I can approach my research with greater sensitivity and depth, ensuring that the voices of my participants are not only heard, but also authentically represented in the final outcomes of my work.

Research Paradigms

For a considerable amount of time from the inception of the course, I found the concepts of research paradigms to be incredibly challenging. The sheer complexity of the philosophical assumptions underlying these paradigms felt overwhelming, and I often struggled to grasp their significance in shaping research approaches. At first, terms like ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology seemed abstract and disconnected from the practical aspects of research I was more familiar with. Kuhn's (1962) work on the structure of scientific revolutions, which emphasises how paradigms shape our worldview and the way we approach knowledge, played an immense role in my understanding that paradigms are not just academic constructs, but foundational to how we interpret reality and truth in research.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) further helped clarify the importance of understanding the philosophical assumptions behind paradigms, as they explained how each paradigm offers a different worldview, shaping the researcher's approach to reality and truth. Their work made me appreciate that choosing a paradigm is not a minor decision; it has profound implications for every aspect of the research process, from the formulation of research questions to the interpretation of the results. I began to understand that positivism, for instance, with its focus on objectivity and measurable reality, was vastly different from constructivism, which acknowledges the subjective nature of knowledge creation through human experiences.

As I navigated these ideas, I found Crotty's (1998) explanation of paradigms particularly helpful, as he linked philosophical assumptions to concrete research methods. He stressed that understanding the assumptions behind a paradigm is essential to ensuring methodological coherence throughout the research process. Slowly, the overwhelming weight of abstract theories began to take shape as a structured framework that would guide my decisions as a researcher.

This foundational understanding has enriched my ability to approach my work with intellectual rigour and with a greater philosophical grounding and clarity.

Mixed methods

After experiencing the first part of my doctoral journey, being a researcher with a passion for psychology and a background in business, and finally with a comprehensive foundation about the philosophical assumptions and foundations of the six research paradigms, all these helped me to narrow down my interest to the role that emotional intelligence plays in leadership. These new perspectives enabled me to understand how I stood different stances during my research over the years, and how my interest naturally gravitated towards the role of emotional intelligence in effective leadership; this perspective allowing me to focus and highlight the importance of human emotions, but also contributing to practical recommendations on leadership effectiveness.

By immersing myself into the study of different research paradigms and their associated methodologies, I gradually came to recognise how the ontology of pragmatism offered the most suitable framework for addressing my research question – as of identifying the key emotional intelligence factors that influence leadership, as well as understanding how these factors impact leadership effectiveness. The pragmatic paradigm is concerned with practical outcomes and solutions, making it ideal for research questions that are both theoretical and applied. As Morgan (2004) explains, pragmatism allows for flexibility in methodological choices, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the research subject. In the case of emotional intelligence in leadership, this flexibility was essential, as the phenomenon itself is multifaceted, merged of both measurable factors and subjective experiences.

The pragmatic paradigm aligns perfectly with a mixed methods approach, which became the most appropriate strategy for examining the complex interplay between EI and leadership effectiveness. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) emphasise that mixed methods research provides a balance between numerical data and rich, in-depth qualitative insights, allowing researchers to explore both the extent of an issue and its underlying intricacies. In this context, the quantitative approach – such as surveys or questionnaires – can measure the degree to

which particular EI factors, such as self-awareness or empathy, affect leadership outcomes like employee satisfaction or productivity. This numerical data provides a clear, objective view of which emotional intelligence traits are the most strongly correlated with leadership success.

However, quantitative methods alone are not sufficient to fully capture the human experience of leadership, which is deeply rooted in emotions, interpersonal relationships and subjective perceptions. This is where the qualitative component of the mixed methods approach becomes invaluable. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) suggest, qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, allow researchers to explore the deeper, more complex dimensions of emotional intelligence, including how these traits are perceived by leaders and their teams. By engaging with participants on a more personal level, I am able to understand not just which EI factors are important, but how these factors manifest in real-world leadership situations and how they are endorsed or applied in different organisational contexts. Denscombe (2009) supports this approach, noting that qualitative research helps in understanding the lived experiences behind the data, giving researchers insight into the subjective and often nuanced ways in which leadership and emotional intelligence intersect.

Through this mixed methods approach, I am able to integrate both broad, measurable insights and rich, contextualised understandings of leadership and emotional intelligence. The quantitative data provides a clear overview of which EI factors most significantly influence leadership outcomes, offering actionable insights that can inform organisational practices. At the same time, the qualitative data allows me to dive deeper into the emotional and psychological dimensions of leadership, exploring how leaders understand and employ emotional intelligence in their day-to-day interactions with employees. This dual approach ensures that my research not only identifies the key EI factors that contribute to leadership success, but also provides a nuanced understanding of how these factors are experienced and perceived by leaders and their teams. By doing this, I can offer both theoretical contributions to the field and practical recommendations for improving leadership effectiveness through emotional intelligence.

Choosing the appropriate methodology for data collection and analysis in my research involved more than just technical decisions – it required consideration of social, ethical and ideological factors. My choice to adopt a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, was aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of how emotional intelligence impacts leadership. However, as I reflected on these choices, I began to question the limitations (Morgan, 2014).

While the quantitative method offers objectivity, it risks underestimating human experiences, reducing emotions to data points (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). This led me to integrate qualitative methods to explore deeper insights into leadership dynamics (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Denscombe, 2009).

My methodology is also shaped by ethical considerations, particularly regarding power dynamics between the researcher and the participants. Therefore, I pay particular attention to ensure confidentiality, anonymity and to receive informed (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), in order to confirm that participants feel safe and autonomous in sharing their insights on sensitive topics like emotional intelligence and leadership (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Moreover, my methods intersect with the social context of leadership and emotional intelligence, which are influenced by broader societal inequalities. I reflected on whether my research tools sufficiently account for diverse socio-cultural experiences of leadership, recognising that even validated instruments might not capture this complexity (Bryman, 2016; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Ultimately, by appraising my methodological choices, I came to understand that technical procedures in research are not neutral. They are shaped by social, ethical and ideological dimensions that must be continuously reflected upon to ensure a balanced, rigorous study (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010; Mertens, 2015).

Conclusion

Reflecting on my doctoral journey has allowed me to deeply examine not only the development of my research skills, but also my growth as a researcher. Throughout this process, I have gained invaluable insights into the complexities of research paradigms, positionality, emic and etic stances and the importance of reflexivity. In the beginning, concepts such as ontology, epistemology and axiology felt overwhelming. However, by critically engaging with these ideas, I have come to appreciate how they shape the methodological choices I make and the lens through which I view my research.

One of the most significant lessons has been understanding how my own positionality – being neither an entirely insider nor an outsider- directly impacts my approach to research. This awareness has allowed me to navigate the boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity, particularly where my academic background and personal interests meet. Additionally, my exploration of data collection methods has highlighted the importance of methodological flexibility, as it enables me to capture both the quantitative and qualitative nuances of emotional intelligence in leadership.

As I move forward in my journey as a doctoral researcher, I am committed to maintaining a reflexive mindset, ensuring that I continuously question and re-evaluate my assumptions, methodologies and ethical considerations. This ongoing reflection will not only enhance the rigour of my research, but also contribute to its broader relevance and impact.

Reference list