Positionality refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group. The position adopted by a researcher affects every phase of the research process, from the way the question or problem is initially constructed, designed and conducted to how others are invited to participate, the ways in which knowledge is constructed and acted on and, finally, the ways in which outcomes are disseminated and published. Following is a description of the outsider and insider roles of researchers and a discussion of the multiple dimensions influencing how researchers may relate to the action research participants.

### Insider or Outsider Role

In action research, the concept of positionality is referenced in terms of the researcher's insider or outsider relationship to the community engaged in the inquiry. Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson in their book on action research dissertations provide extensive discussion on the continuum of insider and outsider relationships. An insider is a researcher or participant who works for or is a member of the participant community, while an outsider (e.g. an academic researcher) is seen as a non-member. Herr and Anderson describe six positions along a continuum:

- 1. Insider (researcher studies own practice)
- 2. Insider in collaboration with other insiders
- 3. Insider(s) in collaboration with outsider(s)
- 4. Reciprocal collaboration (equal insider and outsider teams)
- 5. Outsider(s) in collaboration with insider(s) (non-equivalent relationships)
- 6. Outsider(s) studies

The first five ‘positions’ are consistent with the foundational principles of action research as a participatory and reflexive practice that involves researchers and participants in a process of co-inquiry to address identified problems, create change or explore opportunities. Researchers as outsiders (the sixth position) involves gathering data about others as objectified research subjects, a position more typical of traditional research.

### Dimensions of Relatedness

Feminist ethnographers are particularly sensitive to the issues of positionality, defined in terms of the
degree of relatedness of the researcher to the study participants along dimensions of culture, class, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, childhood lived experiences and so on. Insider researchers generally have more in common with participants than outsiders along many of these dimensions. Implicit in these conceptualizations of positionality is the notion of power and intentions. The closer the researcher is positioned to the participants, the more likely that there are common expectations, intentions and power equity.

Positionality is multidimensional, and it is not uncommon for the researcher(s) to be closely positioned to the participants on some dimensions and not on others. These disparities can create conflict, changing the process and outcomes of the study. Kimberly Huisman eloquently describes these tensions in her ethnographic study with Bosnian women. She closely identified with her participants as a woman, friend and confidante but found that they were on different platforms in terms of life experience, culture and goals (she was a graduate student completing her dissertation, while her participants were a part of refugee families struggling to create new lives). While Huisman was acutely aware of her outsider privileged status and the multitude of different values and world experiences, she strived to build a collaborative relationship with her participants as insiders—joining culturally where she had values in common as women. In the end, she completed her dissertation work and moved away, further accentuating the differences.

Not only do dimensions of culture, class, gender, age and political or social identity define the degree of commonality between researcher(s) and participants, but these dimensions extend into the values and world view that one brings to the research enterprise, thus influencing what is perceived and understood as knowledge. Accepting that what is perceived in the workplace or social community as reality is socially constructed, positionality will significantly influence the decisions made during each cycle of the research process. An interesting variation on this concept of perspective or world view is offered by Patricia Hill Collins, who describes ‘the outsider-within’. She suggests that one’s location within the organization creates different lenses of reality. For example, a small subgroup (e.g. women in a male-dominated workplace) may take on the role of marginalized or expert observers who shape their reality as outsiders (with an outsider's world view) and also their experience as insiders who have a common stake in the outcomes.

**Evolving Nature of Researcher Positionality**

In action research, positionality frequently changes over time through different phases of the inquiry process. Sonia Ospina and her colleagues drew on Herr and Anderson’s typology of positionality to describe their hybrid research design exploring the development of leadership across 92 social change organizations. As the action research project evolved, the researchers discovered that their positionality varied from an ‘insider in collaboration with outsiders’ to ‘reciprocal collaboration’, to ‘outsiders in collaboration with insiders’. The research team found that positionality varied with regard to control over the research process, the action orientation of the research and the voice represented in the production of knowledge. Despite the best of intentions to achieve reciprocal collaboration, constraints were imposed by external funder requirements, the
difficulty involved in negotiating collaborative roles and the localized focus of participants.

Positionality is an important consideration in action research because it not only directly influences how the research is carried out but also determines the prevailing outcomes and results—whose voice(s) will be represented in the final reports or decisions. Ospina, Dodge, Foldy, and Hofmann-Pinilla (2008) noted that the funder’s power elevated the position and perspective of the outsiders while minimizing or ignoring the interests of some community participants. In conclusion, researchers must be acutely conscious of the positionality issues and how they will influence the course and reported outcomes of an action research project, continually bringing them to the forefront for discussion with participants and seeking to redress power imbalances that disenfranchise or minimize the voice of key participant groups.

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See also

- ethnography
- Feminist Participatory Action Research
- insider action research
- social constructionism
- voice

Further Readings


