

# Transform

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## **Researcher identity: critical ethnographic reflections on locating myself in the field**

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## **Researcher identity: critical ethnographic reflections on locating myself in the field**

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### **Introduction**

In this paper, I reflect on 18 months of my part-time doctoral studies to consider the shifting nature of my position as a researcher: in, between and outside of the context of my study. Through questioning researcher identity and reflexivity, I discuss (1) the context of my research and my research design (2) my relationship with the research participants and the problem that I theorise (3) how and why I navigate my role as a researcher in the way that I do. I make a case for a fluid researcher identity, which is informed through critical ethnography. In doing so, I share my experiences of navigating this within the context of my research, and how this has challenged the ways that I position myself alongside those who take part in my study. Through drawing from literature in education, cultural and critical theory, and methodological design, I will discuss the possibilities and implications of a continuum approach to my researcher location in the field. Within the context of community music research - where practitioners are often researchers and researchers are often practitioners – questions of researcher identity and connectedness with research participants could be useful to explore.

### **Where and why my research takes place**

My research seeks to understand how a community music organisation in the North-West of England has adapted and developed in the eco-system of arts and cultural funding in the UK. From this perspective, I theorise the ways this influences how the organisation work as a cultural leader in their local area, and what this can tell us about being a community music organisation today. There are three strands within my research: a historical analysis of

the organisation's development; field work exploring the organisation in the present day; and, semi-structured interviews with cultural partners and members of the organisation's staff.

Working from Bourdieu's assertion that 'the social world is accumulated history' (1986, p. 81) I am exploring how the organisation has informed the ecology of their local area.

Through a critical ethnographic case study, I am questioning the ways that this may impact their role as a publicly-funded cultural leader.

### **Who do I research with?**

Participants in this study volunteer to take part and relationships with participants have been carefully developed over the course of my research. Due to the political and dynamic nature of the relationships and structures at play within this community, managing participants' engagement is complex. As such, care must be given to the expectations of those taking part. This is particularly important for me because early field work indicated that both the organisation and local people they work with had been subject to much short-term research which produced very few outcomes for them in reality. An implication of this is that they are at risk of being over researched (Clark, 2008).

### **How is my research positioned?**

I combine critical ethnography and case study as a methodology. I position my research, politically, within critical theory whilst narrating a very specific story of a particular group of people and the context of their work, through a case study. I am concerned with both the 'bigger' and 'zoomed in' picture of the conditions of community music in the UK. The 'bigger' picture is the publicly-funded arts and cultural sector in the UK; the 'zoomed in' is a

case study of how a specific organisation works within this ecology. As such, how and why I interact with participants in the research can, at times, be tricky to navigate. This is because I have been invited into the local context by the organisation, to support them to understand their work from a different perspective, whilst also theorising a wider political question through the context of their work. From my position as a critical researcher (exploring the bigger picture), my study poses questions of cultural leadership, democracy and power. At the same time, my work is located in real people's everyday encounters. It is my responsibility as a researcher to safeguard and be open with those within the research, including being clear about the ways their work is represented within the study.

Critical ethnology considers researcher positionality and reflexivity explicitly within its core principles of research design. It is a methodology that values research as social change, where the purpose of research is action to disrupt inequality (Soyini Maison, 2012). Through being within the contexts they are researching, critical ethnographers make sense of behaviours and how these behaviours are located within the social and political conditions of specific inequality. Critical ethnographers see specific contexts as ways to make sense of social problems whilst also contributing to action within the contexts of their research. This study aims to be an illustration of what it might mean to be a community music organisation in the UK. In doing so, the study supports those within the organisation to understand what they do (the rationale for case study) whilst also articulating a narrative of the social and political conditions within which it is situated (the rationale for critical ethnography).

**Positionality: what's the problem?**

While theorising what it might mean to be a cultural leader for a community music organisation through the generosity of one organisation and its experience, I struggle at times with my identity as a researcher in the field. Specifically, when managing complex relationships, I often find the expectations of my presence as a researcher can be problematic. It can be tricky to manage the need for ‘outcomes’ within the context of a study which is both part-time and longitudinal. This is particularly the case given the bigger-picture context of the arts and cultural sector that both I and the organisation operate, where outcomes drive policy and reporting (Merli, 2002; Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). As I believe that the people and place I work with in the research are at possible risk of being over-researched, I am very aware of the longitudinal nature of my inquiry and also the expectations of the research process. One of the implications of being over-researched discussed by Clark (2008) is ‘research fatigue’ - an apathy or indifference to what can be achieved through research. In particular, where people have seen few results for their emotional or economic investment. Navigating the problematics of being a researcher in a possibly over-researched community requires me to be extremely reflexive and responsive to the people and places in the study. Soyini Maison (2012) suggests that positionality goes beyond acknowledging the subjectivity of the researcher and their worldview. Critical ethnographers have a fluid approach to their position; being subjective but malleable in their position held, through reflexive interaction with participants. It is important to acknowledge that researchers themselves are an integral part of the study and that how they construct the narrative of their research holds a great deal of power in the way people and places are represented (Brewer, 2005; Davis, 1999; Richardson, 1990; Van Maanen, 1995; White et al., 2009; Whitehall, 2004). Furthermore, that researchers are clear in their communication with participants about how representation is influenced by the researcher’s position.

When asking myself who I am as a researcher in the field, I am often drawn back to Van Mannen's (1995) assertion that as observers, we are 'part spy, part voyeur, part fan, part member', an uncomfortable notion that reinforces the need for transparency in communication with those whom we work with. This feels particularly pertinent to those engaged in critical ethnography, where research is viewed as an action towards addressing inequality. This is relevant also for community music, where we often work alongside people experiencing wide-ranging inequality, encompassing multiple socio-economic factors. I must ask myself not only 'who am I as a researcher?' but 'how am I a researcher, and how am I embedded within the research?'. How I traverse the boundaries of my research to be somewhere in-between, as Van Mannen suggests, can be a problematic but necessary in navigating who I need to be as a researcher in the field.

### **Fluid researcher identity**

The traditional binary of 'etic' (outside) and 'emic' (inside) first articulated by Pike (1967) is useful in recognising that the context of your research has conditions: cultures, and normative values that inform behaviour. It also reminds us of the disruption brought about through the presence of the researcher, including the ways that our interruption of the everyday can influence the behaviours of those who we research with. However, although useful in this sense, this binary concept is limited in helping me, as a researcher, to navigate the contexts and politics of both the 'zoomed-in' and 'bigger-picture' of my research. Breen (2007) offers a continuum as a response to the binary of inside/outside, which has possibilities to support navigation, fluidly, between bias and the needs of participants. She suggests that to be reflexive in our research we shift from being inside, outside, and in-between as critical inquirers. Acknowledging that bias is implicit in the positions taken

(Griffiths, 1998), as researchers, we need to not only recognise this bias, but navigate and utilise it to help us make sense of the problems we theorise in our work (Soyini Maison, 2012). For this purpose, the binary of inside/outside does not provide the space I need to traverse the complexities of my researcher identity. The binary nature of inside/outside has been widely discussed in methodological discourse. Specifically, the binary is often marked as unhelpful and the possible space between these binaries has been the topic of much discussion (Breen, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kerstetter, 2012; Morris et al, 1999; Thompson & Gunter, 2011). Therefore, locating myself between the possible extremes of inside/outside, and recognising that this position may shift in response to the needs of participants and the researcher, may be a useful tool. Further to the specific context of researcher identity, Bauman (2012) suggests that there is fluidity in our identities. That our everyday ways of interacting and living in the world are responsive to our contexts, and conditions of these contexts. He suggests notions of identity are ‘fantasy’, stating that ‘Identities seem fixed and solid only when seen, in a flash, from outside’ (2012, p. 19). It is in the spirit of this fluidity that I navigate my position as a researcher within and around the context of my research – to be ethical and supportive with research participants, as well as to create space for myself to make sense of the data I collect and who I am in relation to research participants.

### **The problem of position, in action**

Thompson & Gunter (2011) shed light on the specific nature of the problem I encounter in my positionality: being a professional peer in the ‘bigger picture’ whilst also being an outsider to the specific case being explored. Through their discussion of this multi-

modal positioning, they explore the possibilities of a fluid researcher identity, guided by Bauman (2012). They suggest that the reflexive researcher recognises the ways that they are inside the research's ecosystem whilst also constructing parameters that locate themselves outside of the specifics of the research context. The active construction of a case study with specific parameters, enables them as researchers to be in-between the research: in, through the broader context of the problem they are theorising and the relationships they have; out, in the locatedness of the case study context itself.

### **Being in and out: a peer (the bigger picture) and an observer (the zoomed-in picture)**

Outside of my doctoral study, I am a project manager and evaluator within participatory music settings in the UK. These are predominantly publicly funded. In this identity, I intercept participants in my study, in contexts outside of my role as a researcher. In instances where we don't encounter each other, our reference points and networks are often congruent. This can position me as a peer, an empathetic 'other' who has some broader contextual awareness of the conditions of the organisation's work. In this sense, I am within the bigger picture of the problem I theorise within my research. In the research context itself, I observe and take-part in the day-to-day experience of the organisation in their local community. Observing the challenges they encounter increases my empathy for their situation. Those who take part in the research are open and share the complexity of their context. I form strong relationships and a sense of care for those that take part in the research; through being there and listening, I am increasingly accepted in the context of the research. Without the rationale of being present as a researcher, as a peer from this wider cultural ecosystem, I would not have such a nuanced and first-hand perspective of the work of the



organisation. I'm 'in' because of my first-hand experience in both the "bigger" and "zoomed in" contexts.

Despite being 'in' through field work, exploring the everyday and specific instances first hand, my presence disrupts; as we all do as researchers. I too, as the researcher, am disrupted. I am disrupted because the problems I theorise through the lived experience of research participants can reflect my own complicity within my professional practice, and my subjectivity as a researcher requires constant negotiation to make sense of this. For example, how I see my work outside of the research is informed because I engage at the intersection of this community's lived experience and my own. It is this disruption which most vividly reinforces my identity as a researcher. It shifts, depending on the interactions with the people, places and politics I encounter within and around the 'zoomed-in' case of my research. It reinforces that, as a researcher I need to be fluid, malleable to the needs and conditions of the research participants within the study. My position is informed through the bigger-picture context that we share, but also through my theoretical perspective as a researcher. I am guided by my research question of what it means to be a cultural leader in this community; from this, theorising what we can learn about being a community music organisation in the UK. My critical gaze positions me on the peripheries and reinforces the case study nature of my inquiry.

### **Being in-between: being a critical friend**

Critical ethnographers adjust their methods to accommodate the conditions and contexts of the people within their study (Soyini Maison, 2012). Through observations and

being in the research context regularly, I develop an ‘inside’ sense of participants lives and them of mine. I observe, first hand, the complex relationships they are part of, which again reinforces the power inequalities that as a researcher I must address through the ways that participants are represented within the study. Although I’m ‘in’, I’m also ‘out’, as some of the information I observe is new, or retold in my absence from the field. Participants explain to me how this information has come to pass within their context, in-between my visits. The notion of visiting reinforces the transient nature of my engagement in this context; I am someone who has been invited into the community and it is at their continued invitation and generosity that my research takes place. By recounting their experiences, participants review what has taken place in my absence. I become an ear, a critical friend. My presence in these instances make me want to help and be useful in the moment; offer my own professional opinion, informed through, but not part of the research. As a researcher, I do not offer these opinions, and I understand that it is not my role within the study to do so. This causes tension in how I feel about my researcher identity. However, employing critical ethnography supports my awareness of my position in relation to those I work with. It is in grappling with where and when I locate myself along a continuum of in/between/out, that I am at my most reflexive, reflective and theoretically alert; despite the cognitive dissonance this can present for my conceptualisation of my researcher identity. As such, I recognise how I can use my bias (in this instance, an empathy for the context research participants are in) to inform the theorisation of my research problem (the role of a community music organisation as a cultural leader). Although it does not afford me the opportunity to engage in the role of an active critical friend through the data collection stage of my study, it does provide an opportunity for me to theorise towards useful research outcomes in the long term. Navigating the tension of the in-between and recognising where this is located, supports me to be critically aware and, in the long-term, useful as an ‘other’ in the research context.

## **Why I question where I am as a researcher, revisited**

Navigating everyday life often requires us to be fluid, negotiating our identities depending on people, places, and different contexts we find ourselves within (Bauman, 2012). As a researcher, I strive to be a trusted and trusting other in an already over-researched research population (Clark, 2008). It requires me to be sensitive whilst critical within the research (Griffiths, 1998); sensitive in my navigation of complex relationships within a community who have invited me in as an outsider, and trusted with the outcomes of the research (Ohmer & DeMasi, 2008); and, critical in my theorisation of the behaviours I observe as a researcher, articulating a specific case study of cultural leadership, cultural democracy and power. Further to this, critical towards my role as a researcher. I recognise that in specific encounters, who I am as a researcher could seem to an observer to be fixed – someone ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the research context. However, the bigger and zoomed-in nature of my inquiry relies on my ability to operate at the intersections of these contexts and to be open to the shifting nature of who I need to be as a researcher in the field.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has suggested that being within, or outside of, particular groups is an approach informed by the position(s) adopted within particular contexts. Acknowledging that bias is implicit in the positions taken, as researchers, we need to not only recognise this bias, but also navigate it. Navigating this bias presents not only awareness of where this position is located, but can also be utilised as a tool to navigate the continuum that my researcher

identity moves between. I am most alert as a critical researcher when at the often-uncomfortable intersections of the case study context and my own experience.

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