

Interactive reflexivity: a means to addressing methodological challenges in international research in management

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Abstract

Purpose – The non-academic impact of management research is increasing in importance, albeit at different rates between European countries. Management research – like the organizations studied – is increasingly international. If non-academic impact from academic research is to be realised in different countries, it is important that there are shared understandings of the meaning of impact and its realisation in different contexts. The authors established an international team to conduct a research programme to understand different meanings, obstacles and facilitators of non-academic impact in six different European countries. This “In Motion” article develops the concept of interactive reflexivity for the purpose of explaining the key problems encountered in this programme of research and how those problems were addressed when establishing such a team.

Design/methodology/approach – The article uses an emergent case study that is adaptable to new and changing circumstances to report and reflect on the challenges associated with developing an international team.

Findings – Various substantive challenges – including language to be used, targeted academic population, strategies to reach respondents and key concepts such as “engagement” – were addressed and resolved when they emerged through the team’s interactive reflexivity.

Practical implications – Interactive reflexivity is a useful concept for finding solutions in both management practice and international research.

Originality/value – This article’s unique contribution is how the concept of interactive reflexivity facilitated solutions to challenges encountered when establishing a truly multinational, European-wide team to investigate the non-academic impact of management research in different countries.

Keywords Interactive reflexivity, Impact, Management, International research, Emergent case study

Paper type In Motion

1. Introduction

There are longstanding aspirations to make management research more impactful (Aguinis *et al.*, 2012; Anderson *et al.*, 2017). Incentives for academics to embrace the non-academic impact of their work have increased as different European funding regimes have linked research funding to impact realisation (Haley and Jack, 2023; Leemann and Kanbach, 2023). The international character of many organizations necessitates that understandings of non-academic impact and its realisation are shared across national boundaries. There is an emergent literature on how impact may be achieved (e.g. Aguinis and Gabriel, 2022). Hitherto, with a few exceptions (e.g. Beech *et al.*, 2022), there is little empirical illustration demonstrating that realisation. The authors sought to address that empirical gap by forming an international team to conduct research in six different European territories. The contribution of



this “In Motion” article (Drake and Chen, 2023) is the development and illustration of the concept of interactive reflexivity to show how it allowed the international research team to address the challenges of conducting an international research study. We use an emergent case study that is adaptable to new and changing circumstances to reflect on the team’s development and research.

The article proceeds as follows: Section two introduces the idea of interactive reflexivity. Section three outlines the method of an emergent case study of challenges faced when forming an international team to conduct international research. Section four provides illustrations of how those challenges were addressed by interactive reflexivity. Section five concludes by reporting on the implications of interactive reflexivity for both research and management innovations that involve international teams.

2. Reflexivity in management and research

Reflexivity is required to understand the influence of one’s values, beliefs and actions on the phenomena in which one is engaged. Reflexivity has been discussed as an aspect of management education (Cunliffe, 2004; Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015), management practice (e.g. Li *et al.*, 2018; Greco *et al.*, 2021; Zammel and Najar, 2021) and academic research (Cunliffe, 2003). Although studies of management practice often present reflexivity as a collective or organizational phenomenon, reflexivity in management education and academic research is perceived predominantly as an individual activity. Researcher reflexivity may be difficult to define (Cunliffe, 2003), but the definition adopted here is researchers’ awareness of the influence of their actions, values and beliefs on their construction of knowledge (e.g. Anderson, 2008; Corlett and Mavin, 2018). As Alvesson and Sandberg (2021) report, reflexivity encompasses “alternative ways of considering what the research process and its various parts are about” (2021, p. 21).

Different authors offer different classifications of types of reflexivity. For example, Anderson (2008) discusses introspective reflexivity of consideration of the researcher’s identity on the research, methodological reflexivity of the influence of the methods on the findings and epistemological reflexivity of the researcher’s view of science or knowledge on the outcome of the research. There is also contextual reflexivity, that involves questioning a researcher’s relationship with the research context, including positionality and respective levels of power of participants (Corlett and Mavin, 2018), and linguistic reflexivity of how a specific usage of a particular language has helped to construct and interpret the empirical reality (e.g. Cunliffe, 2003; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017). We use these distinctions of types of reflexivity below.

In management practice, Li *et al.* (2018) recognise the importance that the composition of a diverse team can have on team-level ambidexterity, although too much diversity militates against this. In Li *et al.*’s research, prior meta-knowledge permitted a collective team reflexivity. This raises the question of how to overcome the absence of meta-knowledge, especially in a context where a team comprises academics of different nationalities in different domiciles. There has to be a means to recognise the strengths in the differences. Such recognition may be achieved through asking questions of each other to seek to articulate those differences and address any tensions between them. We call this process interactive reflexivity. Illustrations of interactive reflexivity will follow our account of our methodology.

3. Methodology

The evidence provided below is of an emergent case study of interactive reflexivity in an international research team. Case study research aims to study a phenomenon in its own right, rather than as a representative of other units (Stake, 1995). Lee and Saunders (2017) distinguish between orthodox and emergent case studies. Orthodox case studies are associated with the work of Yin (2017) and adopt a quasi-experimental logic: research is designed

according to the findings of previous literature, and the researcher seeks to exercise as much control as possible over the case studied from conception through to completion. The objective of the research is to provide a theoretical generalization. Emergent case studies, by contrast, are consistent with an ethnographic logic, where the emphasis is on understanding the culture and meanings of events to the research participants. Emergent case studies do not necessarily follow a predefined linear process. An emergent case study approach was chosen to explain how our research team developed and addressed the new challenges that it faced to complement the preparation of an “In Motion” article (Drake and Chen, 2023). As in orthodox case studies, different sources of evidence are used in emergent case studies. In this instance, evidence has been collected through participatory experience, observations, conversations and artefacts.

The research team was formed from members of the Research Methods and Research Practice (RM&RP) Strategic Interest Group (SIG) of the European Academy of Management (EURAM). Team members were drawn from Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Poland to enable coverage of Western Europe’s Eastern, Northern, Southern and Central parts to capture a wide range of views on impact. The number of countries was limited to six because of practicalities of coordination and difficulties when administering research tools simultaneously in a greater number of countries. Such difficulties could undermine the validity of comparisons made. In addition to differences in nationality and domicile, team members varied in their epistemological stance, academic seniority – i.e. from tenured full professors to researchers on fixed-term contracts – gender and bilingual capabilities; variations that enhanced their capacity for interactive reflexivity.

The incidents reported below are self-selecting in the sense that they prompted discussions of different understandings by the authors. In some instances, these issues were highlighted in meetings. Other issues were highlighted by templates being prepared for individual reflection. Each author then took responsibility for writing an account of a different issue included in the template. Authors of the accounts were not restricted in how they presented the issues, so different forms of conceptual and sometimes numerical classifications were used to help articulate differences. Other team members then critiqued and added to the accounts to bring further clarification. These issues are reported next through the lens of interactive reflexivity.

4. Instances of interactive reflexivity in resolving research challenges

This section provides the emergent case study of the challenges faced and their solutions at the following stages of the programme of research, namely: (1) initial research design; (2) preparation of a questionnaire survey and (3) conduct of subsequent case studies.

4.1 Research design

The first issue that demanded methodological reflexivity at the design stage was to decide the exact research focus and define the key concept of “impact” and whether it was separate from “engagement” (Aguinis *et al.*, 2014). Some countries – particularly Britain and, likewise, France and Italy – differentiate between impact as outcome and engagement as interaction. In Poland, while the terms are distinct, measurement of their attainment may be simultaneous as the evaluation system prioritizes impact rather than engagement. In Germany, while the impact of research is well-discussed, the debate on engagement is emergent. In Denmark, there is limited discussion of both terms. The team’s discussion of this issue was interlaced with interactive epistemological reflexivity. While some viewpoints expressed impact as a definite, measurable output, others perceived the engagement process as an integral part of meaning construction and realisation of impact. The team thus decided to use a flexible approach, recognizing the terms as analytically separable for interpreting different national experiences, but acknowledging that this distinction might not be evident in all countries because of the coexisting and intertwined nature of engagement and impact.

A second issue requiring interactive methodological reflexivity regarded the target population. The team's shared background in EURAM's RM&RP SIG, institutional affiliations and national academy memberships led to the decision to only study the academic management community. Extending this research to a broader spectrum of disciplines would have raised issues of whether they had different meanings of impact and engagement. Interactive methodological reflexivity enabled the research team to delineate management researchers from other academics. This was not a straightforward task because of the six countries' contrasting institutional environments. For example, when the research project started, the Italian system allowed identifying management scholars because "management" corresponded precisely to a specific scientific sector, with substantive boundaries from other disciplines (e.g. accounting, finance or organizational behaviour). Similarly, in Poland, institutional changes enforce the strict assignment of researchers to scientific disciplines, among which "management and quality studies" links to the OECD's "Business and Management" category. Yet, these regulatory changes have also led to combining management with commodity sciences, resulting in the addition of the term "quality", which complicates international comparison.

In other countries, identifying "management scholars" proved more difficult. For example, some management and business schools in Britain have assimilated departments of economics, while others have not. Moreover, some institutions have staff with titles/backgrounds not exclusive to the business and management disciplines. Elsewhere, in Germany, the traditional distinction of the economics and business sciences, *Wirtschaftswissenschaften*, also blurs boundaries since there is no specific field of "management". In the German taxonomy, many subjects of *Betriebswirtschaftslehre* relate to management issues. Our interactive methodological reflexivity allowed the team's members to contact colleagues in different countries with comparable academic backgrounds.

A further design issue required interactive linguistic reflexivity by considering what language to use to collect empirical evidence. One option was to use only English, in which all the team members are competent. The team thought that most academic respondents in most of the target countries have high English proficiency. Thus, using a single language reduces the researchers' workload when creating the research instruments by negating the need for multiple (back)-translations to promote language accuracy. However, administering research instruments in a single language across countries restricts the ideas expressed to those that may be articulated in the language used, and it creates the risk of excluding participants who are less fluent in English. Moreover, it introduces problems of translation to the research process. While acknowledging that positivists assume language equivalence so *accuracy, validity, reliability and quality* may be realised through back-translation techniques (Chidlow *et al.*, 2014), Xian (2008) points out that translation inevitably involves the translator's interpretation and sense-making. Consequently, the use of translators could make the meanings intended by research participants more remote to the researchers. Thus, while acknowledging the limitations of a single language, time and monetary constraints contributed to only English being used in research instruments after the employment of additional clarity checks.

4.2 Survey

Time and monetary constraints led the team to employ email to conduct a questionnaire survey before seeking funds to conduct more detailed case studies of instances of successful non-academic impact of academic research. Interactive methodological reflexivity led the team to decide that the different composition of the academic management community in the six countries and the unavailability of a single sampling frame meant that a flexible approach to finding respondents should be adopted. Team members were free to decide the best approach for their respective countries. Rather than seeking a statistically representative sample per country, the researchers sought to access the broad range of understandings of impact through a heterogeneous sample by including academics across various management subdisciplines, career stages, genders and ethnicities.

Preparing the questionnaire's content was challenging and required some interactive epistemological reflexivity. Initially, some team members more accustomed to positivist quantitative research suggested constructing a theoretical model to test via the survey. Others thought this was inappropriate given the research's exploratory objective, the hitherto limited evidence of academic impact and engagement and the potential problems of interpretation of key terms across different national contexts. The questionnaire comprised multiple-choice options to facilitate international comparisons and open-ended questions to help confirm comparability of meanings. The survey and the subsequent case studies aimed to collect comparable knowledge on key issues, such as (1) What parties do scholars consider when designing their research projects to realise non-academic impact? (2) How do the national/institutional setting and culture influence it? (3) What important measures are used to define and assess its success? (4) What role do its intended beneficiaries play in operationalising academic research, and what support do scholars and their institutions provide in that operationalisation? (5) Have researchers in successful cases of non-academic impact received support from national governmental bodies?

In addition to interactive methodological reflexivity about questionnaire content to ensure structure and wording were appropriate for all countries, linguistic reflexivity was employed. Consequently, our choice of English as the working language required additional checks to ensure that the items' meaning was well understood across the selected countries when piloting the questionnaire. There were at least two broad areas on which the group intended to gather feedback. The first was on wording and phrasing. Choosing words in individual items, sentences, introductions, etc. required scrutiny by all of the team to minimize misunderstandings. The second was on conceptual transfers. This point slightly differs from the previous, since it refers to the cross-country compatibility of labels, notations and titles. For example, some countries have a relatively small number of academic positions, while others have many. Additionally, the English denomination of a role could fit some academic positions well, but not others. A small number of participants were selected to read the entire questionnaire and provide feedback on wording/phrasing and conceptual transfers. This was unlike the typical pilot of a quantitative research design. At the bottom of each page of the questionnaire – which was distributed through an online service – there were several boxes where participants were asked to write comments about the questionnaire's design.

Feedback was received from respondents in all countries. This revealed that "Ethnicity" was not readily understood in different languages. Consequently, the question was reformulated to "What is your country of birth?", so that the researchers could understand whether that matched the country of residence as defined by respondents' institution's location. Another question where there were linguistic misunderstandings was about a respondent's academic positions, as some reported their job title when the researchers wanted to know the respondent's place in the hierarchy, so the question was adjusted slightly to capture the desired information. As might have been anticipated, some respondents in some countries did not understand the distinction between engagement and impact. Information collected in the additional comments' boxes allowed the descriptions to be modified to further clarify the distinctions.

The main survey was conducted between July 2022 and May 2023. As noted above, interactive methodological reflexivity led to flexibility in letting team members decide the best way to recruit respondents. Two general approaches were used, i.e. personal contacts and formal organizations, with each team member using one or both. The first approach was used in Britain, Denmark, Germany and Poland to obtain a wide range of views. Targeting respondents included a snowball effect since a request was made to distribute the questionnaire to other researchers. Snowballing seeds were invited to the study through channels such as e-mail, Twitter and Mastodon. The second approach entailed asking universities and learned societies (e.g. Italian Society of Management, British Academy of Management, British Accounting and Financial Association, French Finance Association, Marketing Association and HRM Association) to circulate information about the questionnaire. This approach was

attempted in all the surveyed territories, but was not successful everywhere. Consequently, the survey could only be distributed in this way in half of the countries. In some countries, invitations were sent directly to learned societies' memberships, while in others, links to the questionnaires were sent via newsletters. While both approaches involve self-selection bias, both contributed to some completed questionnaires from a wide range of respondents. However, the response rate was low, which needed improving without overly extending the deadline for the project.

How to improve the response rate also raised issues for interactive contextual reflexivity. The team had gained ethical approval for the research because it was in the public interest. Consequently, distributing the questionnaire indiscriminately and collecting evidence from people not part of the target population – i.e. outside the six countries – such as through general appeals on social platforms, would violate the principle on which ethical approval had been granted. Given this constraint, different approaches were employed to improve response rates. The first approach entailed sending reminders to those people contacted initially. This approach was relatively easy in Italy, where learned societies had written to their members, and in Germany, where reminders were targeted at people known to the researchers. Different approaches were adopted in the four other countries where organizational help had been sought previously. In Denmark, the universities that promised to distribute the questionnaire were approached to verify whether they had done so. In Poland, as the researchers knew the prospective respondents, reminders were sent from personal email accounts. In Britain and France, reminders were not sent because learned societies had only included details and the questionnaire link in their newsletters. As the approach of using learned societies to invite participation was not fully effective, it was decided not to return to the learned societies in Britain and France. Instead, in Britain and Denmark, different universities' websites were scanned to obtain academics' email addresses to send personal invitations to fill out the questionnaire. This approach was very successful but was also among the most time-consuming.

Overall, about 500 respondents completed the survey. The response rates per country differed, partly reflecting national differences in the extent to which impact had been promoted by research funding bodies. Despite its limitations, the survey confirmed different geographical understandings of engagement, impact and their relationship. It also indicated some facilitators/obstacles of impact and some suggestions of case studies of impact for more detailed scrutiny.

4.3 Case studies

The team was successful in obtaining a small grant from EURAM to conduct seven in-depth case studies of successful non-academic impact of academic research in each of the six countries. Similar challenges to those faced in the survey appeared in the case studies to varying degrees and were resolved by the team's interactive reflexivity. For example, attention had to be paid to linguistic reflexivity, and it was agreed to continue with using the single language of English to allow the interview transcripts to be analysed together. In the case studies, any difficulties of interpretation of questions by research participants were reduced because members of the research team could clarify any remaining ambiguities during the interview. There was also a need for contextual reflexivity to ensure that the research team did not violate the trust granted to them by research participants by inadvertently revealing the participants identity after anonymity had been promised. While this challenge was minimised in the survey by aggregation of responses, many of the cases were of notable impact at public organizations and provision of too much detail could reveal the identity of individuals and organizations. The research team overcame this challenge by providing only general details about the context, such as by reporting an organization as public or private. The biggest challenge to date, however, is that so far it has proved easier to get case studies to research in Britain, France and Italy, where funding/evaluation bodies have made impact part of their

criteria for support of research. Interactive methodological flexibility has enabled suggestions to be made that might lead to cases being identified, such as through part-time master's-level students' dissertations or by asking colleagues at conferences whether they are aware of cases in particular countries.

5. Discussion, implications and conclusion

This "In Motion" article (Drake and Chen, 2023) contributes to the literature by developing the concept of interactive research reflexivity. This concept has been used to explain how solutions were found to address challenges faced when establishing an international team for a research programme aimed at studying the novel topic of the non-academic impact of academic research in six European countries.

Researchers into management practice (e.g. Li *et al.*, 2018; Greco *et al.*, 2021; Zammel and Najjar, 2021) define reflexivity as a collective or organizational characteristic. By contrast, research reflexivity has been defined as an individual phenomenon by which researchers explore the impact of their beliefs, values and actions on research outcomes. In a context where the organizations that academics research are increasingly international, this article has provided an emergent case study of the challenges faced by an international team that was formed to conduct an innovative, cross-country study. The nature of the international study necessitated that individual members of the research team articulate their assumptions about the conditions existing in their respective countries. This allowed research instruments to be developed that allowed findings about non-academic impact in one country to be compared with findings from another country. In other words, interactive reflexivity was both a precondition and a consequence of the successful formation of an international research team.

This article has provided examples of where interactive contextual, epistemological, linguistic and methodological reflexivity appeared in the study. The concept of interactive reflexivity has implications for wider management practice where teams of managers from diverse backgrounds work together. If, as Li *et al.* (2018) argue, successful realisation of a project team's ambidexterity is dependent on prior, shared meta-knowledge, asking team members to articulate their assumptions in advance of an organizational change project could help develop that shared meta-knowledge. In other words, managers in an organization that are from different functional disciplines, cultural settings or national environments may benefit from explaining to one another the reasons for their aspirations and concerns about an organizational change so that they may question each other and reflect on the assumptions that underlie differences of opinion. The motivation for our research – of potential differences in understanding of non-academic impact in different national settings – also has implications for management practice. Managers may engage with academics both to find out about how the research that the latter are conducting may have practical implications for their organizations and to ascertain the possibility of such practical implications materialising in different national contexts.

In conclusion, we also acknowledge that we have excluded consideration of the findings of our survey and case studies as our focus is on methodological issues. Hitherto, we have not commented on whether non-academic impacts of academic research have positive or negative implications and whether non-academic impact advances the interests of some societal groups at the expense of others, although we did consider these issues. We are aware that these questions are significant and that the research we have conducted has many limitations. For example, in adopting English as a lingua franca for the research, we have only captured meanings facilitated by English's categorisations and assumptions and participants' competence in that language. But we feel justified in conducting the research because of the dearth of evidence of impact at the current time. Moreover, as this article has shown, we have learnt lessons about how academics may develop reflexivity in international teams and how such lessons have implications for management practitioners.

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