

## Researchers' Positioning: Insider or Outsider?

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The researcher's role as an insider or outsider has been a controversial issue over the last few decades. There has been a heated debate about how researchers position themselves in the relationship to the groups they are studying. Taking an outsider position is believed to be able to offer a more objective view of the realities, while a researcher with insider insight may better understand a group of people that may not be accessible to an outsider. Post-structuralists and post-modernists, however, argue that researchers are never fully outside or inside the studied community, but rather hold ever-shifting positions. Since the theoretical and empirical perspectives on the insider/outsider issue are closely intertwined, this paper examines the issue by presenting some key theoretical concerns regarding the insider/outsider status and illustrating some of the methodological and ethical issues facing insider and outsider researchers.

How to understand the terms *insider* and *outsider* is a key issue. Gair (2012) suggests that the notion of insider/outsider status can be "understood to mean the degree to which a researcher is located either within or outside a group being researched" (p. 137). In terms of the knowledge that insiders and outsiders have, the insider researchers tend to have an intimate knowledge of the group being studied, while the outsider researchers do not have an intimate knowledge of the group being studied before entry into the research site (Griffith, 1998). In 1972, American sociologist Robert Merton adopted a structural conception of insider/outsider status, defining insiders as "the members of specified groups and collectivities or occupants of specified social statuses" and outsiders as "the nonmembers" (p. 21). Building on Merton's (1972) conceptualizations, Banks (1998) developed a typology of researchers that conceptualized researchers' positioning "along a continuum of closeness to, or distance from, the indigenous community" (as cited in Chavez, 2008, p. 476). In this conception, the insider/outsider status is classified into four types, including Indigenous—insider, Indigenous—outsider, External—insider, and External—outsider. According to this typology, it is possible for the researcher to be an insider as long as they share the same knowledge, values and attitudes of the studied community, no matter whether they have been socialized inside or outside the community. Also, the researchers who have been socialized in the studied community can possibly be "perceived by indigenous people in the community as an outsider" since they might have "experienced high levels of cultural assimilation into an outsider or oppositional culture" (Banks, 1998, p. 8).

Two key questions raised in the theoretical discussion about the insider/outsider status are whether the insider status privileges or disqualifies our knowledge claims (Griffith, 1998), and whether the outsider status allows us to understand a person or group whose experience is greatly different than our own. Scholars have been seeking an answer to "whose knowledge is authentic, who can know what, and who speaks for whom" (Banks, 1998, p. 7). Two opposing perspectives in this debate are the insider doctrine and the outsider doctrine (Merton, 1972). The strong form of the insider doctrine claimed that "particular groups in each moment of history have monopolistic access to particular kinds of knowledge" (Merton, 1972, p.11). In other words, only those who have been socialized in the studied group are able to be "fully aware of its symbolisms and socially shared realities,"

while those who are outside the group have “a structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups, statuses, cultures, and societies” (Merton, 1972, p. 15). From this point of view, only women can understand women; only teenagers can understand teenagers; only Asian Americans can understand Asian Americans. Does one have to be gay or lesbian to understand gay/lesbian issues?

There has been criticism against the extreme insider doctrine, and the insider research has frequently been questioned for its validity. The outsider doctrine claims that the insider’s familiarity with the studied group can prevent the insiders from gaining authentic knowledge and “[lead] into error which [they] parochially mistake for the truth” (Merton, 1927, p. 30-31). According to Simmel’s (1950) theory of the stranger, a stranger “surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more general and more objective ideals; he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety, and precedent” compared to insiders (as cited in Merton, 1927, p. 33). The critics of insider research also argued that “insiders’ closeness to their research community clouds their views and leads to biased research findings” (Innes, 2009, p. 440). In addition, they pointed out that insider researchers may “fail to approach research situations in a critical manner” because of the “over-rapport” that occurs when researchers are over-engaged with research participants (Innes, 2009, p. 442). In the outsider doctrine, the objectivity and the emotional distance from the studied group are highly valued, and they assume that the outsider status can better equip researchers to provide an “objective” and “accurate” view of the research field (Chavez, 2008).

Although the outsider doctrine challenges the insiders’ ability to view things in an objective and unbiased way, it does not mean that we should embrace the extreme outsider doctrine. Merton (1972) highlighted that the founding fathers of sociology argued against the extreme insider doctrine but they did not turn to the “the equal and opposite error of advocating the strong form of the Outsider doctrine” (p. 31). Merton (1972) rejected the extreme versions of both the insider and outsider doctrine, and he argued that “we no longer ask whether it is the insider or the outsider who has monopolistic or privileged access to social truth; instead we begin to consider their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of truth seeking” (p. 36).

From an empirical view of the insider/outsider positionality, both insider and outsider research projects demonstrate their advantages and limitations. In terms of the insider research, whether one’s insider status is advantageous or disadvantageous to one’s research has been widely discussed. As an insider researcher, DeLyser (2001) studied a ghost town called Bodie where she had worked as a maintenance staff member for fourteen summers and critically reflected on her research experience of being an insider. In her article, she suggested that one of the ethical dilemmas facing her was how to “recast relationships with friends and coworkers, shifting from being one of the gang to being a researcher” (p. 444). She went from having a high-school degree to a doctorate over her fourteen summers working in Bodie, while most of her coworkers only had high-school or undergraduate degrees. Thus, DeLyser (2001) noted, “slowly I went from one of the crowd to the most educated member of the staff, a transition not without tension—and teasing” (p. 445). In an attempt to release the tension, she did the least-desired jobs, such as cleaning the public toilets, to show that she was still one of the staff members instead of being privileged.

One methodological problem facing many insider researchers is that insider researchers inevitably communicated with their participants based on “an assumed shared knowledge” (DeLyser, 2001, p. 444). DeLyser (2001) mentioned that some follow-up questions used in qualitative research, such as “can you explain that?” and “what do you mean by...”, are not

helpful to her. Some of her staff members even felt that she was testing their knowledge of Bodie history. She explained, “when someone knows that you already know an answer, any probing for details may just aggravate the interviewee” (p. 444). Therefore, she did not pretend that she did not know anything about the community and its history; rather, she conducted conversational interviews and contributed her own knowledge to the interviews. Despite the methodological and ethical problems she experienced in her research process, DeLyser (2001) believed that her insider knowledge and experiences did play an important part in her research because her insider status allowed her to gain deep insight into the mythic West in Bodie’s landscape and into how staff members shape visitors’ understanding of Bodie’s past and its present, aspects which might not be accessible to outsiders.

Chavez (2008), who conducted a study on her own five-generation Mexican American family, experienced a similar situation. She suggested that her insider status was beneficial in some aspects, but also it complicated the implementation of her research to a certain degree. In terms of the advantages of insider positioning, Chavez (2008) indicated that insiders can “understand the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts of participants as well as possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field” (p. 481). Moreover, her family membership enabled her to easily gain access to her research field and especially her family events. However, her insider status was “neither an unfettered nor absolute advantage” to her research (Chavez, 2008, p. 480). As a member of the younger generation, Chavez’s membership did not serve as an advantage due to the family hierarchy, but rather the interview questions she asked were sometimes constrained by her relationship with elders. Other complications of the insider status include the over-identification of the researcher and “[overloading] with exchange or reciprocity requests from participants” (Chavez, 2008, p. 479). Additionally, she noted that the interview process might conflict with the conversational style of the studied community. Chavez had a similar experience to DeLyser (2001), in which her family members always assumed that she knew the answers in their interviews. However, Chavez used a different technique to deal with it. She requested her family members to pretend as if they were talking about certain topics for the first time so that she could gain detailed information. Chavez also began to realize that the household activities that interrupted their interviews were actually unavoidable since they are part of “the social expectation that comes from being home” (Chavez, 2008, p. 484). At the end of her article, Chavez (2008) suggested that it is important for insider researchers to use “critical reflection to navigate and negotiate insider positionality” (p. 490).

However, for the two cases above, we assume that DeLyser (2011) and Chavez (2008) are both insider researchers without questioning their “insider” status. How can we tell if someone is an insider researcher or an outsider researcher? Innes (2009) suggested that being a member of the studied group or community does not necessarily guarantee an insider status. Like outsider researchers, insider researchers may also be treated with suspicion and distrust, and they may also have to spend a relatively long period of time to gain the trust of their participants and look credible. Insider researchers assume that they know the insider knowledge, but they may misinterpret the stories of other community members. Therefore, to what degree the so-called “insiders” are truly insiders becomes extremely problematic (Innes, 2009). According to Merton (1972), individuals possess a set of social statuses instead of a single status; therefore, we cannot permanently locate individuals based on a single status. For example, two individuals may have a few statuses in common, but they may be different in terms of other statuses. Accordingly, people can never be complete insiders or outsiders. The concept of status sets raises “severe theoretical

problems for total Insider (and Outsider) doctrines of social epistemology” (Merton, 1972, p. 22).

Merton (1972) suggested that “there is nothing fixed about the boundaries separating Insiders from Outsiders” (p. 28). According to his structural conception of insider/outsider status, people are both insiders and outsiders, since we are always “members of some groups and, sometimes derivatively, not of others; occupants of certain statuses which thereby exclude us from occupying other cognate statuses” (Merton, 1972, p. 22). This point of view was echoed by many studies that moved beyond a strict insider/outsider dichotomy, claiming that researchers are both insiders and outsiders simultaneously (e.g., Naples, 1996; Griffith, 1998; Rabe, 2003; Wilkinso & Kitzinger, 2013). For instance, Griffith (1998) pointed out that researchers are “both insiders and outsiders to the stories we explore” (p. 362). Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013) also argued that researchers are always already “insider” to their research in a broad sense because they can always relate to their research participants as human beings; however, no matter how familiar researchers are with their research participants and field, they are always “outsiders” because everyone is an individual.

Based on this understanding, many researchers have taken a fresh look at their research positioning. Innes (2009), for example, considered himself to be both an insider and outsider when he conducted his research to examine kinship relations among the members of Cowessess First Nation. As a member of Cowessess First Nation who was not raised on the reserve, his insider status enabled him to “develop research questions that provided a new view of contemporary kinship relations, but [his] outsider status as a researcher meant that [he] still had to negotiate with the participant to gain their trust” (p. 441). He did not know many of his research participants prior to the research, but he found that his participants’ interest in his research largely increased when he explained his background and connections to Cowessess band members. His “insider” background helped him to gain access to the participants and build rapport with them. From another perspective, researchers can never be a full insider or outsider. Breen (2007) positioned herself as neither an insider researcher nor an outsider researcher; instead, she considered herself to be “in the middle,” and she believed this unique researcher positioning helped researchers to maximize the advantages and minimize the potential disadvantages while doing research.

The ever-shifting nature of insider/outsider status has also been highlighted in the literature. Naples (1996) explored the insider/outsider issue through conducting an ethnographic study of two rural Iowa towns. Surprisingly, she found that many residents of the rural towns “experienced the feelings of alienation from the perceived community,” and she called it “the outsider phenomenon” (p. 84). Residents who were born in the two areas and left before returning as adults to raise their children in these towns felt that they were “outsiders” to the community, as did those who lived in the towns for their entire life but grew up in poverty, or were divorced women. They all had feelings of being “outsiders” although they were regarded as insiders by others. The “outsider phenomenon” demonstrates the inequality existing in the two rural towns, and illustrates that a specific social identity is constantly influenced by “ongoing social, demographic, and political changes” (p. 83). According to Naples (1996), the outsider and insider status are “not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed by community members” (p. 84). We cannot define someone as insider or outsider simply based on their locations or their familiarity with the community, since those who have lived in the community for their entire life may feel they are “outsiders” due to their low social statuses. The insider/outsider status is never fixed or one-dimensional but fluid and multi-dimensional, and researchers’ positioning is always

being negotiated and renegotiated during the research process (Naples, 1996; Rabe, 2003). Smith and Griffith's (1990, 1998) research on mothering for schooling is an example of how the insider/outsider status can change at different points in the research timeline. Smith and Griffith (1990, 1998) started their research with a concept of themselves as "insiders" to mothering since they are both mothers. However, they found that they were outside "proper" mothering to some extent since they had both been single parents. In addition, as they proceeded through their research, they found that their insider knowledge was not enough. There are complex social relations that are present in mothers' work, and they had to step back to address the issue.

Researchers can make their own decision on whether to position themselves as insiders or outsiders, as both insiders and outsiders, or as insiders first and then outsiders. They can also make use of their insider and outsider experiences to "achieve the desired level of familiarity with, and distance from, participants" (Burns, Fenwick, Schmied, & Sheehan, 2012, p. 59). As Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013) suggested, we "cannot escape being both insiders and outsiders," so it is important for us to make good use of these positions (p. 254). Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013) also provided four strategies for managing our insider experience. The first approach is to minimize the researcher's insider experience, which "fits neatly into logical positivist research paradigm, which strives to achieve the goal of objectivity" (p. 252), and is an effective strategy to maintain the researcher's privacy. The second approach is to utilize the insider experience, which means that the research takes advantage of the insider status to gain access to the studied group, to build trust and rapport with the participants, and to display empathy to them. The third approach is to maximize the insider experience, which is commonly used in autoethnography and memory work, making researcher's own experience central. The last approach is to incorporate the insider experience, which means to include "the researcher as one of the participants and treating her as having the same status as any other participant" so that the researcher's voice can be heard while also being protected from over-identification (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013, p. 253). These four approaches give researchers a general idea of how they deal with their insider experience while conducting research. However, in their own research, researchers are free to choose how to position themselves in the relationship to the studied group based on their own research purposes and particular circumstances.

Overall, this paper has discussed some of the theoretical and methodological issues regarding researchers' insider/outsider status. Theoretically, scholars have challenged the traditional insider/outsider doctrines, which claim that insiders or outsiders have monopolistic access to particular kinds of knowledge. They argue that there are no fixed boundaries between the insiders and outsiders, and the insider/outsider status is a fluid and ever-shifting status, rather than a fixed or static status. Therefore, researchers' positioning is better conceptualized on a continuum instead of as a strict insider/outsider dichotomy. From the examples of DeLyser (2001) and Chavez (2008), we can see that their insider status demonstrates both methodological advantages and complications to their research; the example of Innes (2009) indicates that researchers can take advantage of both their insider and outsider experiences to conduct their research; and the example of Smith and Griffith (1990, 1998) suggests that the researchers can even shift their positions from an insider to an outsider or from an outsider to an insider during the research process if needed. Researchers should be aware of their insider/outsider statuses, and be critical of how they navigate and negotiate their research positioning during the research process. No matter how they position themselves in the relationship to the studied group, it is vital for them to make good use of their positions to achieve their research goals.

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