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Power and Positionality: Negotiating Insider/Outsider Status in Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Research

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What does it mean to be an insider or an outsider to a particular group under study? Can women study men? Whites study Blacks? Hispanics study North Americans? Early discussions in anthropology and sociology of insider/outsider status assumed that the researcher was *either* an insider or an outsider and that each status carried with it certain advantages and disadvantages. More recent discussions of insider/outsider status have unveiled the complexity inherent in either status and have acknowledged that the boundaries between the two positions are not all that clearly delineated. In the real world of data collection, there is a good bit of slippage and fluidity between these two statuses. Critical and feminist theory, postmodernism, multiculturalism, participatory, action and teacher research are now framing our understanding of insider/outsider issues. In particular, the reconstruing of insider/outsider status in terms of positionality, power, and knowledge construction allow us to explore the dynamics of researching within or across one's culture.

Drawing from actual research experiences, participants in this symposium explore insider/outsider issues in terms of positionality, power, and knowledge construction. Each research experience represents a different combination of insider/outsider status vis-à-vis the culture under study.

The Ties That Bind and the Shackles That Separate: Race, Gender, Class, and Color in a Research Process Juanita Johnson-Bailey

Within qualitative research there is a significant body of feminist literature that addresses the inti-

macy that occurs when women interview women (Coterrill, 1992; Minister, 1991; Ribbens, 1989). Yet another body of writings assumes that when Blacks interview other Blacks an empathetic understanding will be accorded across racial lines (Collins, 1989). And the synergistic extrapolation of each of these conclusions would be that when Black women interview other Black women there exists an immediate perceptive bond of sisterhood ideal for research (Etter-Lewis & Foster, 1996; Nelson, 1996; Vaz, 1997). However, all three deductions discount the intersections of societal barriers omnipresent in a hierarchal world.

The data used herein was situated in a larger study that examined the educational narratives of reentry Black women (Johnson-Bailey, 1994) and found that issues of race, gender, class, and color dominated the participants' narratives. These same dynamics also surfaced as factors that affected the research process. The study used narrative, biographic, and linguistic analyses as methodological tools (Alexander, 1988; Denzin, 1989; Etter-Lewis, 1991).

It is my position that the issues of race and gender were uniting forces during the interview segment of the study. The participants and researcher held similar views on race and gender issues. There were silent understandings, culture-bound phrases that did not need interpretation, and non-verbalized answers conveyed with hand gestures and facial expressions. At times these shared understandings necessitated stepping back and asking for clarification because the dialogue was not to remain private.

Race – All of the women in the study possessed an understanding of societal hierarchal forces that shaped and determined their existences. They identified racism as the specific dominating factor, and

they used an oppositional world view to frame their stories. Although race was never raised as an issue in the interview process, race and the knowledge of living in a race-conscious society was a factor that the participants and I shared. Two areas of unanimous commonality for the women and the researcher were accounts of painful classroom episodes and an early childhood awareness of racial difference. This understanding of race, albeit through different means, unified us and provided a common ground of understanding.

Gender – The participants painted pictures of existences configured by gender subordination. They perceived a common understanding of gender with the researcher and spoke freely of how the researcher as a woman understood concerns around issues of child care, household chores, and family relationships. During the interviews, the women in the study communicated gender-bound assumptive connections when they discussed children, husbands, household responsibilities, doubts, and fears.

Much of the feminist literature presents all women as the same, using a White middle-class norm, and all people of color as similar. When specific racial groups are presented, the suggestion is its membership is monolithic in nature. The dilemmas that transpired during this research relative to class and color proved such conclusions imprudent.

Class – Disproportionately more Black women and their children are below and slightly above the poverty level (Hacker, 1992; Williams, 1988). Class is inextricably tied to the situations of Black women and their families, and class became an inevitable component in the investigative process. Several respondents related growing up poor and when the researcher related similar circumstances, the accounts were not taken at face value as the race and gender stories had been. Instead the women responded with, “Well you wouldn’t know it to look at you now,” or “Really?”

Color – As an issue of concern amongst Blacks, colorism is examined and debated in Black communities in a less than open manner. This intra-racial discrimination among Blacks gives preferential treatment to those who have lighter skin shades, thin facial features, and straight hair texture. Colorism is a vestige from slavery much like class is a function of a hierarchial capitalistic society, and sexism, evidentiary of a patriarchal system. Colorism is a complicating consideration in the interview process. It can never be assumed to be present

in the process simply because a participant is a person of color or because there are skin color differences between the researcher and the participants. Only three of the eight women in the study spoke of colorism. Each raised the issue in an effort to determine its importance in the researcher’s life. In analysis it was noted that the remaining women in the study who did not speak of intra-racial discrimination unknowingly related instances of how they had benefited from colorism.

Summary – The interviewing phase of qualitative research is dynamic and ever changing. Although there are power issues that a researcher must remain cognizant of, such as balance of dialogue, research agendas, and societal hierarchies (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Coterrill, 1992), basically each interview is a special unit of work unto itself. This does not change when women interview women, when Blacks interview Blacks, or when Black women interview Black women.

Interviewing Within Your Own Culture Away From Home:

Its Effect on Insider/Outsider Status

Ming-yeh Lee

It is generally assumed that a common culture between interviewers and interviewees can provide a fertile ground for gaining access, nurturing rapport, asking meaningful questions and reaching empathetic understanding. In particular, when these interviews are conducted “away from home,” the mutually perceived homogeneity can create a sense of community, which further enhances trust and openness throughout the research process. In 1997, I conducted a study to explore the relationship between Chinese cultural values and the meaning-making process. This project provided me the challenges and opportunity of interviewing “my people” – other Taiwanese Chinese, who were in the U.S. during the course of my study. This valuable research experience shed light into my insider/outsider status and illuminated the multidimensional power relations that shaped the interviewing process. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss how the positionality of the researcher and the power dynamics of the interview process are negotiated by the interviewer, the interviewees, and the culturally embedded interview context constructed by both.

My insider status was an advantage when I

started my research – easy access to the community, knowing the nuances of the language and how to ask critical questions while remaining sensitive. The experience of “being away from home,” in particular, strongly enhanced the cultural bond shared between the interviewees and me. As a result, I had an endless list of potential interviewees referred by acquaintances. Many told me that “It’s my pleasure to help out another person from the homeland,” or “This is the least I can do for a fellow Taiwanese Chinese.” Another prevailing cultural value that often shaped the interview content is valuing education and degrees. Many, when asked to share a significant life event, chose to talk about education-related events they encountered in the past (Lee, 1999). One middle-aged woman told me how she had worked her way through junior college. She stressed, with a sense of pride in her tone, “[the degree of junior college] is equal to a doctoral degree in my generation.” Four men told me that since childhood their families have found them the best schools and they were truly “the best.” It happened so frequently that I pondered whether the educational event indeed meant a great deal to them because of the education-focused nature of Chinese culture. Or was it that when interviewed by a highly educated woman from the native culture, the emphasis on their own degrees and education would add more weight to their side of the power equation?

While my insider status somehow promised rapport and easy access, it also put me in the less powerful position, parallel to my social status as a young woman in the Taiwanese Chinese society. One of my “older” interviewees said many times at different points in the interview: “Only people of my age could understand this...young people like you have no idea....” Another participant insisted on sharing her current luxury life style at length because “this is important for you to tell the Americans about our life now.” Did they try to show me their expertise based on seniority? Or perhaps, like many from third world countries, did they tend to ensure the presentation of a less-distorted picture of their reality? Or did they overemphasize the part that seemed irrelevant to their story just because of the strong impact of the cultural value of saving face? Situated in the culturally constructed interview setting, I came to realize that I had oversimplified the binary power relationship between the researcher and the researched, and overlooked the

multi-dimensional power relationship shaped by the prevailing cultural values, gender, educational background and seniority (Hsiung, 1996).

During the interview process, I became aware that my insider/outsider status was simultaneously perceived by my interviewees. My years of overseas experience and my feminist identity contributed to compromise my insider status. Some of my female participants, especially when explaining the events of gender discrimination that happened in their past, often started their stories with sentences like, “You may not see this, but in the isolated village I used to live” or “You may not understand but many families in my community...” It seemed that due to my identity and years of overseas residence, I was excluded from that part of their experience and hence additional persuasion/instruction was needed to assure my understanding.

As a result of interviewing “my people,” I came to realize the shifting nature of my positionality. The power relationship embedded in the interview context is culturally constructed and hence subject to the influences of gender, educational background, and seniority – the same elements that structure Taiwanese Chinese society. All in all, interviewing with other Taiwanese Chinese in the U.S. created an interesting and challenging research context, which, to a great degree, is permeated by the prevailing cultural values and reproduces power relations.

Conflicts of Insider /Outsider Status in Research with Korean Americans Youngwha Kee

It is often recommended that research with ethnic groups be qualitative to get more meaningful data. My study was with Korean Americans in the United States trying to understand their reasons for *not* participating in adult education. Fifteen interviewees were selected from different age groups using the snowballing method. Five households (20’s, 30’s, 40’s, 50’s, 60’s) and three divorced (40’s and 50’s) women were included for the interview (total 5 men and 10 women). Their educational backgrounds ranged from no school experience to graduate school. The interviewees earned \$150 to \$7,000 monthly. Most of them had been living in the U.S. since 1983.

Because the researcher was a Korean living in the United States, she expected to access the sample

easily. Korean American respondents proved to be friendly during the research. But the researcher faced some difficulties during the interview. Some of interviewees had negative feelings about the researcher. In a severe case, an interviewee felt some anger towards the researcher, because the person considered the researcher's status as a foreign student in the U. S. to be more prestigious than his status.

The researcher considered herself an insider in the research with Korean Americans. The researcher could easily access Korean Americans in United States because of the sameness of the researcher's ethnic and cultural background. And the researcher did understand their traditional culture. Also, the researcher's language background allowed them to feel free to speak their own language, Korean rather than English.

However, in conducting the interview, the researcher had some difficulties. The study population didn't cooperate with the researcher because of the social status of the researcher. The interviewees of the study had low economic status and low educational background. So, the interviewees felt the researcher was totally different from them. They had some anger and treated the researcher as an outsider to their community.

First, the researcher's status is different from Korean immigrants, especially those who do not participate in adult education programs. Secondly, they were afraid to speak in English. But since the researcher spoke in English, she could not understand their not wanting to speak in English. Thirdly, there were illegal immigrants among the interviewees. They were concerned about revealing their situation. It made them consider the researcher as different from them and thus treated her as an outsider of the study.

The status of the researcher, whether insider or not, relates to accessibility, establishing rapport, and asking meaningful questions to get data. In terms of accessibility, the researcher is an insider in talking to Koreans in American society. However, sub-cultural factors in the background of the researcher such as religion, educational background, and economic status within a same ethnic background were different from the interviewees. The researcher was considered an outsider of Korean immigrant society. Relating to religion, the researcher as a Christian had difficulties gaining access to non-Christians, especially Buddhists who

represent Korean traditional religion. The researcher's higher educational background blocked communication with some of interviewees. They assumed the researcher, because of her status, could ignore them. Treated as an outsider in Korean immigrant society, the researcher was denied access to some potential interviewees.

The researcher didn't expect to be treated like an outsider of the research. To get access, the researcher visited several potential interviewees who managed Korean restaurants or Korean shops. The researcher became a regular customer to those restaurants and shops in the hopes of getting cooperation. When they considered the researcher as one of their clients rather than a researcher, then they permitted an interview; subsequently, some were overly helpful in the interview itself.

Based on this experience with a particular cultural group, the researcher recommends several things. First, study the backgrounds of the study sample and identify the similarities and differences. This will result in insights on how to access the sample and prevent resistance to the researcher by the study sample. Secondly, a researcher who might be considered an outsider by the study sample might try to find a mediator who has a background similar to the study sample and who also understands the researcher. It will decrease the sample's hostility to the study and increase the quality of data.

The Insider/Outsider Dilemma in Researching Other Women in Botswana Gabo Ntseane

The purpose of the study was to understand how semi-literate women learned how to move from unemployment and poverty in the rural areas of Botswana to owning and managing successful small businesses in an urban setting. Reflecting on this study's fieldwork, this paper describes how I switched back and forth between the insider and outsider positions in an attempt to not only address the unanticipated insider problems, but even more importantly, to maximize the quality of the data collected.

As an insider (local and female), I had no problem with establishing rapport and being accepted by the women I interviewed. Comments from the women are testimony to this. "I am really happy to see our own children showing interest in what we

do.... As my daughter you will understand our situation better," said to me by one of the elderly businesswomen. Statements like these helped me see how feminist research situates the researcher's subjective experience as part of the text. In many cases, I was given information that was not part of the study. For instance, another said, "switch off the tape because what I am going to say is just woman to woman talk." According to Reinharz (1992) feminist researchers note that "being an insider of the experience enabled them to understand what some women have to say in a way that no outsider could" (p. 261).

The advantages of being an insider – namely, easy entry and access to all sorts of information – was not without problems because of the interlocking nature of culture, gender and power. For example, the use of cultural understandings such as language, proverbs and non-verbal expressions to explain new (business) concepts in a shared culture by participants with the assumption that the researcher who is an insider will understand can pose interactive and interpretive problems. As Kondo (1990) observed, "these cultural meanings are themselves multiple and contradictory... they cannot be understood without reference to historical, political and economic discourses" (p. 300-301). Being the same gender as the respondents proved to be a limiting factor in that women felt that in addition to the research purpose, I also needed to know what will sustain my family. As one put it, "when you finish writing our book at the university, you should come back here to learn how to manage a business." Statements like this demonstrate conflicting interests. The fact that I was doing research was not important but what I will do with the information as a female insider was. No wonder my respondents preferred to use the opportunity to teach and advise me on survival skills in our context. Another lesson is the issue of power in research. During fieldwork the researcher's power is negotiated, not given. For example, my academic status was not a threat to the women with comparatively low levels of education. My being at the university was perceived as less rewarding than being a small businesswoman. If gender had nothing to do with this behavior other cultural factors such as age definitely came into play. For example, older businesswomen often offered suggestions on how I could best talk to the younger ones and what information was important for the book about their sto-

ries. Similarly, those younger than me expected me to spend more time giving them advice on unrelated topics.

In the Setwana culture, the credibility of the interview is based on how many people approved of it with convincing comments and not on the individual who brought the idea. As an insider I was expected to accept group interviews. As one sewing businesswoman stressed, "I can not answer questions for the other person when they are here. I am the owner of the business and general manager but other people are responsible for other things in this business." But group interviews could have had a direct impact on translation. With group interviews, does the researcher consider responses from other people as part of the interview?

My not being a businesswoman and being at the university made me an outsider in some respects. For example, to get the businesswomen to provide information that they thought was trivial to be given to a middle-aged woman in their culture, I had to step out of the insider's boots. It was necessary for me to emphasize that professors at the university did not know many things about our culture and would like me to demonstrate that I spoke to small businesswomen in Botswana. By choosing to ally myself with academia, I became what Chaudhry (1997) calls the "objective feminist" (p. 447).

In conclusion, my field experience on the insider/outsider dilemma demonstrates the influence of context upon research activities. As researchers we could not and should not attempt to remove ourselves from this dilemma. This is crucial for both self-reflection and informed research.

On Dealing with Insider/Outsider Issues in a Cross-Cultural Team

Sharan Merriam and Mazanah Muhamad

Reading about methodological issues and actually encountering them in the field are two different things. In doing fieldwork in Malaysia, we experienced the advantages and disadvantages of being both insider and outsider; we also realized how an insider/outsider stance was an interactive phenomenon with the culture being studied. In this presentation we reflect upon our experiences as a research team against contemporary understandings of insider/outsider status.

Positionality – The notion of positionality rests on two interrelated assumptions. First, it is assumed

that a culture is not a monolithic entity to which one belongs or not. Second, one's positions vis-à-vis the culture can change. With regard to the first assumption, Aguilar (1981) asks what it is that an insider is insider of? "All cultures (including subcultures)," he notes, "are characterized by internal variation" (p. 25). As the collective nature of Malaysian culture characterized nearly all of our interviewing sessions, Sharan's "positionality" as an uncomfortable outsider shifted. She began to expect others to be present and activities to be going on simultaneously with the interview. Malaysians find the communal atmosphere natural, normal, and comforting.

Shifting positionality characterized Mazanah's experience more so than Sharan's. Being Malaysian afforded Mazanah a general insider status, but unless one actually lives in a particular village or town, one is somewhat of an outsider to the community. This was even true when we went to the state where she was born and raised. Because she has left her village and moved to the capital, she is in a peripheral position to the "true" insiders who remained. Her position as an insider was most clear when interviewing Malay Moslem women. However, her education and social class rendered her more or less of an insider, depending on the interviewee. By virtue of her Western education and university affiliation, Mazanah was something of an "outsider-within," a position Collins (1990) has identified with regard to Afro-American academic women who make creative use of the marginality as intellectuals to study their culture. Gender, especially as it plays out in a highly patriarchal, Islamic culture was another factor that affected Mazanah's positionality. And though she had the Malay culture in common with other Malaysians, and understood much of the customs and religions of Chinese and Indian Malays, for these groups, her insider status was decentralized even more.

Power – Power was a factor in our negotiation of many aspects of the research process. As a team, Sharan's methodological knowledge was balanced with Mazanah's cultural knowledge. And as a team we could maximize the advantages of our insider/outsider roles. Some agreed to be interviewed so they could have a close encounter with a "white lady." In a status-conscious society like Malaysia, we had to negotiate access through gatekeepers such as village elders, work supervisors, and revered family members. The power of our position

as "professors" at the university facilitated connecting with gatekeepers in the first place. On the other hand, those we interviewed also subtly negotiated our power as researchers.

The power inherent in Sharan's outsider status became an asset with regard to eliciting fuller explanations than would have been given to Mazanah, the insider, who was assumed to already "know." Mazanah's efforts to get respondents to elaborate their answers were met with comments such as "Why do you ask this? You should know!" or "You're one of us. You know." Mazanah pointed out that of course *she* knew, but Sharan didn't. As a result, Sharan took a more active role in asking questions in English, whether or not respondents knew any English, so that it was clear that she, rather than Mazanah, was wanting to know.

Knowledge Construction – Constructivist and postmodern notions of truth and reality make for a much more complex understanding of the "truths" insiders and outsiders uncover. Since we were studying developmental tasks and aging, a topic somewhat foreign in this culture, we were continually challenged by how to ask questions to elicit the "knowledge" of our respondents. Further, multiple levels of translation (Malay, English, Tamil and Chinese) in some situations complicated the entire process. With regard to the construction of knowledge, what an insider understands will be different from, but as valid as what an outsider understands. By extension then, it can be argued that a richer, fuller picture of a phenomenon can be gained by incorporating both insider and outsider perspectives.

In summary, our interaction as an insider/outsider team created what Bartunek and Lewis (1996, p. 61) call "a kind of marginal lens through which to examine subject matter. Crossing experientially and cognitively different standpoints creates this lens. It requires maintaining tension and distinctness among the standpoints." They go on to point out that "in insider/outsider pairings, the outsider's assumptions, language, and cognitive frames are made explicit in the insider's questions and vice versa. The parties, in a colloquial sense, keep each other honest" (p. 62).

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