
Article

**The Space Between:
On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research**

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Abstract

Should qualitative researchers be members of the population they are studying, or should they not? Although this issue has been explored within the context of qualitative research, it has generally been reserved for discussions of observation, field research, and ethnography. The authors expand that discussion and explore membership roles by illustrating the insider status of one author and the outsider status of the other when conducting research with specific parent groups. The strengths and challenges of conducting qualitative research from each membership status are examined. Rather than consider this issue from a dichotomous perspective, the authors explore the notion of the space between that allows researchers to occupy the position of both insider and outsider rather than insider or outsider.

Keywords: membership roles, insider status, outsider status, qualitative research

Author's note: Dr. Sonya Corbin Dwyer's preferred research methodology is hermeneutic phenomenology. Dr. Jennifer Buckle conducts research using grounded theory.

Introduction

The qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others—to indwell—and at the same time to be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand. (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 123)

Much of the discussion of researchers' membership roles in qualitative research is in the areas of observation, field research, and ethnography. This discussion requires expansion to other qualitative methods. The issue of researcher membership in the group or area being studied is relevant to all approaches of qualitative methodology as the researcher plays such a direct and intimate role in both data collection and analysis. Whether the researcher is an insider, sharing the characteristic, role, or experience under study with the participants, or an outsider to the commonality shared by participants, the personhood of the researcher, including her or his membership status in relation to those participating in the research, is an essential and ever-present aspect of the investigation.

The impact of insider epistemology has been considered by qualitative researchers who are insiders to the population of study and by those who are outsiders. In examining staff development research, Asselin (2003) has suggested that it is best for the insider researcher to gather data with her or his "eyes open" but assuming that she or he knows nothing about the phenomenon being studied. She pointed out that although the researcher might be part of the culture under study, he or she might not understand the subculture, which points to the need for bracketing assumptions. Rose (1985) concurred, "There is no neutrality. There is only greater or less awareness of one's biases. And if you do not appreciate the force of what you're leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you're doing" (p. 77).

Adler and Adler (1987) identified three "membership roles" of qualitative researchers engaged in observational methods: (a) peripheral member researchers, who do not participate in the core activities of group members; (b) active member researchers, who become involved with the central activities of the group without fully committing themselves to the members' values and goals; and (c) complete member researchers, who are already members of the group or who become fully affiliated during the course of the research.

A critique of researchers' roles has developed "in response to a greater consciousness of situational identities and to the perception of relative power" (Angrosino, 2005, p. 734). Postmodernism emphasizes the importance of understanding the researcher's context (gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) as part of narrative interpretation (Angrosino, 2005). By extension, researchers are increasingly making known their membership identity in the communities they study.

In this paper we describe our experiences as qualitative researchers. After much time as an outsider researcher, Sonya became an insider researcher when she first decided to conduct research with other White parents of children adopted from Asia. This fact is revealed in all of her recruitment advertisements. Jennifer is an outsider researcher with respect to her research with bereaved parents. Although she considered this fact before engaging in her research with this group, she became much more aware of her status as an outsider researcher when she was asked pointedly by some of her participants whether she belonged to their group.

Being an Insider

David Kirk (1984) is the author of *Shared Fate: A Theory and Method of Adoptive Relationships*. Inside the front cover of this revised edition, it is stated:

Shared Fate has become a classic. When it appeared in 1964 it sent a shock wave through the adoption mystique . . . by showing that “difference” could serve the adoptive family as an asset . . . This discovery derived from ten years of meticulous research involving some 2,000 adoptive families in Canada and the United States.

A colleague of mine who studied with Kirk lent me a copy of the 1984 edition. I perused the book, reading some sections closely, and was quite intrigued by what it had to offer on the topic of relationships between adoptive parents and their children. Then I got to the postscript written in 1983. When I read it, it made me go back and read the sections again because of the information I learned about the author.

As the preface to this new edition has noted, *Shared Fate* was originally written in the impersonal style then expected of social science monographs. As a result, a number of events that happened in my personal life and the life in my family were camouflaged and made anonymous. Today, two decades later, I am at liberty to speak more personally. (p. 175)

Kirk (1984) went on to describe bringing his daughter home when she was 4 months old after she had been living in foster care. I was struck by how affected I was by this knowledge that Kirk created his own family through adoption. Did I feel it gave him more credibility? Did I feel that he “got” the adoptive parent-child relationship beyond what he found out from his research participants? Did I feel he was more sympathetic towards the adoptive parent-child relationship instead of trying to look for the negative aspects? Did I feel that he was one of “us”? I think the answer was yes to all of these questions, but the most important thing I discovered was that the fact that he is an adoptive father mattered to me as an adoptive mother. Obviously I had read the book not only in my role as an academic and researcher but also in my role as a mother.

In my research with White parents of Asian children, I develop knowledge that not only will enhance understanding of the experience but also will assist me personally and help my children as it could help me become a better parent. However, when I was conducting my data analysis, I found myself writing both “we” and “us,” and “they” and “them.” Sometimes I wrote myself into my research, and other times I did not. On further reflection, I realized I sometimes shared experiences, opinions, and perspectives with my participants, and at other times I did not. It is not that I sometimes saw myself as an outsider instead of an insider. Rather, not all populations are homogeneous, so differences are to be expected.

In grant applications I state that I belong to the community in which I hope to conduct the study as it is important for qualitative researchers to situate themselves in the research (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991). I leave it up to the reader to decide if my insider status would improve or impede my ability to carry out the study. I think it helps me although I do not explicitly discuss how.

As a qualitative researcher I do not think being an insider makes me a better or worse researcher; it just makes me a different type of researcher. Perhaps because of my background in counseling, I have always engaged in much self-reflection, and I continue to do so in my research (as this paper demonstrates). Perhaps, at least for me, being an insider limits the type of research in which I would engage. The whole concept of insider researcher struck me when, after talking to Jennifer about her research, with my eyes filling up with tears each time, I asked her if she thought she would be able to do her research if she was a parent. Because of my strong emotional response, I felt that I would not be able to engage in talking to these parents about their experiences of losing a child. Perhaps the issue of being an insider or outsider

conducting research with parents has to do with the emotional aspect of parenting. Parenting is pervasive, affecting (almost) every decision I make. I do realize and enjoy the privilege of conducting research on adoptive parenting, a topic that is so personal and important for me.

Being an outsider

The issue of the researcher as an outsider or an insider to the group studied is an important one that has received increasing exploration by social scientists, often because they find themselves studying a group to which they are not a member. In the case of my research with bereaved mothers and fathers, I have not experienced the death of a child. The majority of the participants in my research do not seem to perceive this as an impediment to the research process. Two bereaved fathers, however, did express concern about my outsider status and questioned my capacity to appreciate their experience. The first father stated,

Because I know where you're sitting that you're interviewing from the glass house, cause when I said, "Has she ever had a personal loss, like a sibling?" and they [organization staff] said, "Well, not that we're aware of." And I said, "That's fine, it doesn't bother me, but, it's different if you're a member of the club." And I never want you to be a member of the club, don't get me wrong, but you talk differently to people who have lost somebody.

The second father, who seemed to have a similar concern, stated,

So, you don't understand, if your boyfriend leaves you, you are going to have a broken heart, right? You lose a child it's like ripping the total insides out of you. Absolutely everything is gone.

In both cases I acknowledged that I was not a bereaved parent, as I did in each interview, and could not claim to "understand" the experience of losing a child but that it was my hope to learn from them and their experience so that I and others might gain insight into their loss and its impact. It was also my impression that the second comment might have been a reaction to my age and gender (with the "boyfriend" example) and from that maybe an assumption of lack of life experience. Nevertheless, this concern by these two fathers did not appear to impede unduly either interview. Each was handled with honesty and openness, and I noted the same in their reaction. Both interviews proceeded, and much meaningful information was shared. In the end, both fathers were very positive about the process in their feedback.

Although my membership status in relation to the participants did not seem to affect the interviews negatively, it raised an important point that must be considered in all research endeavors with participants who identify with a group based on shared experience, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and so on. This issue confronts both researchers who are members of the group they are studying and those who are not, for there are costs and benefits to each status.

Insider or outsider: To be or not to be

There appear to be as many arguments for outsider research as against, with the same issues able to be raised in support of outsider research, as against it. (Serrant-Green, 2002, p. 38)

For each of the ways that being an insider researcher enhances the depth and breadth of understanding a population that may not be accessible to a nonnative scientist, questions about objectivity, reflexivity, and authenticity of a research project are raised because perhaps one knows too much or is too close to the project and may be too similar to those being studied. (Kanuha, 2000, p. 444)

Insider research refers to when researchers conduct research with populations of which they are also members (Kanuha, 2000) so that the researcher shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants (Asselin, 2003). The complete membership role gives researchers a certain amount of legitimacy and/or stigma (Adler & Adler, 1987). This insider role status frequently allows researchers more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants. Therefore, participants are typically more open with researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered. Talbot (1998-99) noted this phenomenon in her study of mothers who had experienced the death of an only child. She wrote, "At the end of their interviews, several mothers said they would never have shared certain aspects of their experience if I had not been a bereaved mother also" (Talbot, 1998-99, p. 172). The stigma refers to the view of outsiders, who might see this role as creating a heightened level of researcher subjectivity that might be detrimental to data analysis and even collection. Adler and Adler asserted that the distinction between researcher and participant has "traditionally existed more strongly in theory than in practice" and that "objectification of the self has occurred in the analysis rather than the fieldwork" (p. 85).

Although emphasis on "objective" data has been replaced with focusing on the advantages of subjective aspects of the research process (Adler, 1990), being an insider is not without its potential problems. In Adler and Adler's (1987) discussion of complete member researchers, they suggest that in this "ultimate existential dual role" (p. 73), researchers might struggle with role conflict if they find themselves caught between "loyalty tugs" and "behavioral claims" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 70). Asselin (2003) has pointed out that the dual role can also result in role confusion when the researcher responds to the participants or analyses the data from a perspective other than that of researcher. She observed that role confusion can occur in any research study but noted that there is a higher risk when the researcher is familiar with the research setting or participants through a role other than that of researcher.

The benefit to being a member of the group one is studying is acceptance. One's membership automatically provides a level of trust and openness in your participants that would likely not have been present otherwise. One has a starting point (the commonality) that affords access into groups that might otherwise be closed to "outsiders." Participants might be more willing to share their experiences because there is an assumption of understanding and an assumption of shared distinctiveness; it is as if they feel, "You are one of us and it is us versus them (those on the outside who don't understand)."

Although this shared status can be very beneficial as it affords access, entry, and a common ground from which to begin the research, it has the potential to impede the research process as it progresses. It is possible that the participant will make assumptions of similarity and therefore fail to explain their individual experience fully. It is also possible that the researcher's perceptions might be clouded by his or her personal experience and that as a member of the group he or she will have difficulty separating it from that of the participants. This might result in an interview that is shaped and guided by the core aspects of the researcher's experience and not the participant's. Furthermore, its undue influence might affect the analysis, leading to an emphasis on shared factors between the researcher and the participants and a de-emphasis on factors that are discrepant, or vice versa.

These very issues were addressed by Watson (1999) and Armstrong (2001). In both instances, the researcher was a member of the group studied. First, Watson, a qualitative researcher, conducted a study of the subjective experiences of qualitative researchers. She commented that, despite the commonality, she had difficulty gaining access to qualitative research participants. Had she been a researcher with a positivistic, quantitative bent, her access to the qualitative researchers she required would likely have been dramatically reduced if not denied. Her membership in the group she was studying likely provided a level of safety and comfort for the participants she solicited. Likewise, Armstrong is also a member of the group that she studied. Her participants were women who left heterosexuality at midlife. Again, access to these individuals would likely have been problematic, if not impossible, had she not been a member of the group she was researching.

Despite this important benefit of being a member of the group studied, there are also drawbacks that both Watson (1999) and Armstrong (2001) acknowledged. Watson addressed this issue in relation to her interpretation of the text and analysis. She stated, "I still remain unclear whether this is my interpretation of an actual phenomenon, or if I am projecting my own need . . . onto my participants." (p. 98). Armstrong also addressed her concern about being a member of the group studied when she commented on the possible impact that her insider status may have had on the interviews. She stated, "At the same time, my empathy and enthusiasm for a subject dear to my own heart may have kept them from considering certain aspects of their experience." (p. 243).

As is clear, there are costs and benefits to be weighed regarding the insider versus outsider status of the researcher. Being an insider might raise issues of undue influence of the researcher's perspective, but being an outsider does not create immunity to the influence of personal perspective. Furthermore, although there might be caveats to being a member of the group studied, for many access to the group would not be possible if the researcher was not a member of that group. The positive and negative elements of each must therefore be carefully assessed.

Being a member of the group under investigation does not unduly influence the process in a negative way. Disciplined bracketing and detailed reflection on the subjective research process, with a close awareness of one's own personal biases and perspectives, might well reduce the potential concerns associated with insider membership. Furthermore, one does not have to be a member of the group being studied to appreciate and adequately represent the experience of the participants. Instead, we posit that the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience.

This approach is similar to that of Fay (1996), who addressed the question, "Do you have to be one to know one?" (p. 9). He stated that being a member of the group being studied is neither necessary nor sufficient to being able to "know" the experience of that group. He explained, "Knowing an experience requires more than simply having it; knowing implies being able to identify, describe, and explain." (p. 20). Furthermore, he posited that sometimes not being a member of the group can facilitate the knowing of the group and outlined four reasons to support this view. First, individuals are often so enmeshed in their own experience that the adequate distance required to know their experience is not available; therefore, someone from the outside might more adequately conceptualize the experience. Second, people are full of overlapping, confusing, ambivalent, mixed, and sometimes contradictory goals, motives, desires, thoughts, and feelings. Because of these features of the human experience, another might sometimes be able to see through the complexity in ways the individual cannot. Third, often others external to the experience might be able to appreciate the wider perspective, with its connections, causal patterns, and influences, than one also internal to the experience. Finally, Fay proposed that we hide ourselves from ourselves out of fear, self-protection, and guilt, from which it might be extremely difficult to disentangle. It might be those external to the experience that more clearly see what is occurring and can override the self-deception. From this discussion, it is clear that there are both positive and negative aspects of insider and outsider status. A prudent researcher must be aware of these aspects in relation to his or her particular status to the group under study.

Furthermore, engaging in research from a feminist perspective also means not intentionally drawing boundaries between those doing the research and those being researched, although each person has a different relationship to the work being done (Lloyd, Ennis, & Alkinson, 1994). This issue has been indirectly explored using the terms *rappport* and *friendship* when referring to the relationship between qualitative researchers and participants. Researchers have been warned about overidentification, over-

rapport, and “going native” (Glesne, 1999). Although relevant to the broader issue, the focus of this paper is not researchers’ relationship(s) with individual participants but researchers’ identification with the participant population.

There are multiple kinds of relationships that might enter into qualitative research; therefore, it is important to not hide behind the mask of rapport or the wall of professional distancing (Glesne, 1999). As qualitative researchers we must be fully authentic in our interactions with our participants and “honour the consequences of acting with genuineness” (p. 105), highlighting the necessity of remaining reflexive. Adler and Adler (1987) identified three membership roles, but perhaps there are more.

The space between

The notion of the space between challenges the dichotomy of insider versus outsider status. To present these concepts in a dualistic manner is overly simplistic. It is restrictive to lock into a notion that emphasizes either/or, one or the other, you are in or you are out. Rather, a dialectical approach allows the preservation of the complexity of similarities and differences. “In a dialectical approach, differences are not conceived as absolute, and consequently the relation between them is not one of utter antagonism” (Fay, 1996, p. 224). Although a researcher’s knowledge is always based on his or her positionality (Mullings, 1999), as qualitative researchers we have an appreciation for the fluidity and multilayered complexity of human experience. Holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group. Likewise, not being a member of a group does not denote complete difference. It seems paradoxical, then, that we would endorse binary alternatives that unduly narrow the range of understanding and experience.

To be considered the same or different requires reference to another person or group. Fay (1996) noted that each requires the other: “There is no self-understanding without other-understanding” (p. 241). Accepting this notion requires that noting the ways in which we are different from others requires that we also note the ways in which we are similar. This is the origin of the space between. It is this foundation that allows the position of both insider and outsider.

As Adler and Adler (1994) have pointed out, prior to postmodernism, complete member researchers were to avoid using their insider status so as not to “unnaturally” alter the interaction between the researcher and participants. In Adler and Adler’s (1987) discussion of complete member researchers, they described researchers having to accept a new role: becoming immersed in their membership roles or becoming immersed in their researcher roles (if they already belong to the group with whom they want to research). Conducting her research from an insider position, Kanuha (2000) became aware of and started to understand tensions inherent in conducting research “within the cultural context of one’s own people” so that she wanted to expand the definitions of the “researcher-researched relationship” (p. 444) and develop “strategies for researching at the hyphen of insider-outsider” (p. 443).

Drawing on Aoki’s (1996) work, *insider* and *outsider* are understood as a binary of two separate preexisting entities, which can be bridged or brought together to conjoin with a hyphen. This hyphen can be viewed not as a path but as a dwelling place for people. This hyphen acts as a third space, a space between, a space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction. Hall (1990) stated that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within” (p. 223). Our position as qualitative researchers is from the standpoint of being “with” our participants. The “with” is in “relation to” our participants and can suggest a tensioned space. Sonya found herself writing both “we” and “us,” and “they” and “them” during data analysis. It is not that she sometimes saw herself as an outsider instead of an insider; rather, it acknowledges that not all experiences can be shared by everyone in any given population. Jennifer, on the other hand, always wrote “they” and “them,” “the parents” and “the mothers and fathers,” both to respectfully acknowledge her

outsider status in relation to the participants' insider status and to avoid leaving the impression of fully understanding or speaking from the experience of surviving the death of a child. Having said this, however, there certainly was content and experiences shared by participants in her research that she could relate to at a deep, personal level. As a human being faced with mortality, can one ever truly be an outsider when researching death, dying, loss, and grieving?

There are complexities inherent in occupying the space between. Perhaps, as researchers we can only ever occupy the space between. We may be closer to the insider position or closer to the outsider position, but because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher (which includes having read much literature on the research topic), we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions. Parenting is a developmental, dynamic process. Who one is as a parent and how one parents changes over time.

The parent Sonya was at the beginning of her research is not the parent she is today. Her experiences with her children, her interactions with her research participants (that is, conducting the study), and the knowledge gained from other research, which is not readily accessible to people outside of academia (including reading the literature and attending academic conferences), continues to inform her parenting approach. This might partially explain why she shared opinions with certain participants and not others. Sonya, on the other hand, continues to see herself as a parent first, then as an adoptive parent, and finally as a researcher, which, depending on one's perspective, seems to place her in the space between.

For Jennifer, although an outsider to the bereaved parent status, she, like all of us, cannot be a true outsider to the experience of loss. Although she could not directly relate to the full experience of bereaved parents, she could certainly relate to the pain of the death of a loved one. Further, her access to the literature on parenting, bereavement, and the impact of the death of a child put her in a position that no longer could be truly considered outsider. It is her experience that she occupies the space between. Occupying this space between the two perspectives affords her a deeper knowledge of the experience she studies (although not complete understanding). The impact of occupying this third space extends beyond her role as a researcher. She is more acutely aware of the potential for loss. The consequences of this awareness are manifested in a deeper appreciation of the present moment and shape decisions regarding priorities. The downside of occupying this third space is a heightened sense of vulnerability.

The process of qualitative research is very different from that of quantitative research. As qualitative researchers we are not separate from the study, with limited contact with our participants. Instead, we are firmly in all aspects of the research process and essential to it. The stories of participants are immediate and real to us; individual voices are not lost in a pool of numbers. We carry these individuals with us as we work with the transcripts. The words, representing experiences, are clear and lasting. We cannot retreat to a distant "researcher" role. Just as our personhood affects the analysis, so, too, the analysis affects our personhood. Within this circle of impact is the space between. The intimacy of qualitative research no longer allows us to remain true outsiders to the experience under study and, because of our role as researchers, it does not qualify us as complete insiders. We now occupy the space between, with the costs and benefits this status affords.

As Sidebotham (2003) reflected, his personal and professional roles added to his research, and through his research he learned what he might never have through his personal and professional experience. Serrant-Green (2002) also emphasized the contradictions of being a researcher working in her own community. She pointed out that qualitative researchers share many tensions, but certain issues are magnified or different for researchers who are of ethnic (and we would add racial) minorities. She also notes that historically professionals working within their own communities have been accused of bias in their approach to their work. The same suggestions have not been made toward White professionals working with White populations, nor of White professionals working with racial and ethnic minority populations. Therefore, it is the perception of the researcher's social position relative to the participant group from the

point of view of the observed as well as the observer that can raise objections or concerns (Serrant-Green, 2002). The tidy categories and clarity about the effects rarely hold. It is important to embrace “broader ways of knowing and ways of being to understand peoples, cultures, and practices so different from and increasingly so similar to who we are” (Kanuha, 2000, p. 445-446).

Many feminist researchers have advocated for a participatory model (Reinharz, 1983, cited in Cotterill, 1992) that aims to produce “non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationships which have the potential to over-come the separation between the researcher and the researched” (p. 594). To make interviewing an interactive experience, researchers are invited to bring their personal role into the research relationship by answering participants’ questions, sharing knowledge and experience, and giving support when asked (Oakley, 1981, cited in Cotterill, 1992). One does not need to be either an insider or an outsider to do this.

In her discussion on positioning the researcher, Acker (2000) questioned when we know we are inside or outside or somewhere in between (§ 1). She concluded that the insider-outsider question cannot be fully resolved and that perhaps it is necessary not to bring this issue to a close but to find a way to work creatively within the tensions created by the debate. She suggested that we follow the lead of other researchers and attempt to find a way to be both.

A theme throughout human history is our powerful and persistent tendency to frame complex issues as a struggle between two opposing sides (Gould, 2003). Surely the time has come to abandon these constructed dichotomies and embrace and explore the complexity and richness of the space between entrenched perspectives. As qualitative researchers we are uniquely equipped for the challenge.

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