View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by NSU Works

The Qualitative Report

Volume 25 | Number 2

How To Article 16

2-29-2020

The Insider-Researcher Status: A Challenge for Social Work Practice Research

Grace Chammas
Université du Québec en Outaouais, grace.chammas@uqo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr

Part of the Other Arts and Humanities Commons, Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons, and the Social Statistics Commons

Recommended APA Citation

Chammas, G. (2020). The Insider-Researcher Status: A Challenge for Social Work Practice Research. *The Qualitative Report*, *25*(2), 537-552. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss2/16

This How To Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.

The Insider-Researcher Status: A Challenge for Social Work Practice Research

Abstract

For insider-researchers engaged in qualitative inquiry, positionality and researcher neutrality are major concerns. Based on a study of human rights in social work practice among asylum seekers in a public institutional setting, this article highlights the insider-researcher status where the researcher was also a practitioner in the setting. Specifically, the author discusses the insider-researcher's positionality towards knowledge of the population served, knowledge of the setting and knowledge of the research process by examining both the advantages and limitations of being an insider-researcher, as well as highlights ways to address and overcome these limitations.

Keywords

Insider-Researcher, Activism, Social Work Practice, Public Institutions, Positionality

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License.

This how to article is available in The Qualitative Report: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss2/16

The Qualitative Report 2020 Volume 25, Number 2, How To Article 7, 537-552

TQR WHERE THE WORLD COMES TO LEARN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The Insider-Researcher Status: A Challenge for Social Work Practice Research

Grace Chammas
Université du Québec en Outaouais, Gatineau, Quebec, Canada

For insider-researchers engaged in qualitative inquiry, positionality and researcher neutrality are major concerns. Based on a study of human rights in social work practice among asylum seekers in a public institutional setting, this article highlights the insider-researcher status where the researcher was also a practitioner in the setting. Specifically, the author discusses the insider-researcher's positionality towards knowledge of the population served, knowledge of the setting and knowledge of the research process by examining both the advantages and limitations of being an insider-researcher, as well as highlights ways to address and overcome these limitations. *Keywords: Insider-Researcher, Activism, Social Work Practice, Public Institutions, Positionality*

Introduction

An insider-researcher may be defined as a scholar who is native to the setting of the research and who conducts research involving populations of which s/he is also a member (Asselin, 2003; Erdal, Ezzati, & Carling, 2013; Kanuha, 2000; McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014; Merton, 1972). This individual therefore usually shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) and has insights from her own lived experience (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Among other advantages, the insider status allows a more rapid and more complete acceptance by participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Further, the personal disposition an insider brings to the field, itself a result of years of work experience in the setting under study, shapes her interactions with participants, the languages she uses, the knowledge she obtains, and how she interprets and reports her findings throughout the research process (Jankie, 2004).

This article examines the insider-researcher status based on exploratory research where the author was an insider-researcher, with deep knowledge of the population under study (asylum seekers) and an employee of the public institution providing health and social work services where the study took place. It focuses on the particularities of the status where the researcher's position is distinct in three principal ways: she works in the institution, she shares the same profession as the participants, and at the same time, she is a known activist for the rights of the population under study. I draw upon these insights in the course of my analysis by focusing specifically on the insider-researcher positionality. The first section of this article briefly establishes the study framework and context. The second section explores the insider-researcher positionality towards asylum seekers, as well as towards the institution through which they are provided services and the social workers who work with them. The third section examines positionality towards the research process and uncovers what is unique about the insider-researcher position in terms of methodological components such as the recruitment process, interview procedures, and confidentiality. The paper concludes with some recommendations for further analysis.

Study Framework

This article is based on insights gained during a study that explored the ways in which the concept of human rights is understood and practiced by social workers working with asylum seekers in Canada in a public institution for front-line health and social services. The mission of the institution is to improve the health and well-being of residents within its jurisdiction (Levine, 2007). Pursuing this objective requires the institution to coordinate and manage the health and social services available to its clients; provide optimal management of a spectrum of services; define clinical and organizational objectives for its jurisdiction; and inform and consult the target population in order to engage it and measure success (Levine, 2007). The study of this institution aimed to examine the institutional exclusion faced by asylum seekers, as well as how this exclusion is managed by social workers in their practice. Simultaneously, it also explored the values and ideas that motivate social workers to protect the human rights of asylum seekers under their care. Twelve social workers who were working with asylum seekers participated in the study. They worked in different departments of the institution. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure a distribution of demographic variables with regard to gender, age, ethnic background, first language, age, length of experience in social work, and length of employment at the institution.

As the lead researcher, I adopted a qualitative approach which is most suitable when the researcher is already involved as a practitioner in the setting where the study takes place. Additionally, it allows for opportunities to explore the deeper meanings of practitioners' practices; in case of human rights violations, it was important not to limit this exploration to specific variables, as that would have restricted the range of possible answers that social workers may have given in response to questions about how they addressed issues of human rights in their work with asylum seekers.

Insider-Researcher Positionality

The position of researcher in relation to the group under study has been a classical dilemma in qualitative research (McRae, 2007). The term positionality both "describes an individual's world-view" (Holmes, 2014, p. 2) and the position the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study (Holmes, 2014; Savin-Baden, 2012).

Acknowledging positionality may be accomplished in three primary ways: locating the researcher in relation to the subject, participants, and research context and process (Holmes, 2014; Merriam et al., 2001). Positionality in qualitative research refers to the fact that a researcher's status and knowledge affect both substantive and practical aspects of the research process—from the nature of questions that are asked, through data collection, to analysis and writing, and to how findings are received (Erdal et al., 2013, p. 37). As stated by Foote and Gau Bartell (2011): "the positionality that researchers bring to their work, and the personal experiences through which positionality is shaped, may influence what researchers may bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes" (p. 46).

As an accepted and respected member in the institution in which the study took place for over fifteen years, I had developed specialized knowledge in the field of social work practice among asylum seekers that contributed to my credibility and professional standing. I also provided training on immigration and intercultural issues to many social work practitioners at the institution and beyond, including participants in the study. I choose the qualitative methodology, the data collection, and the recruitment process each based on my knowledge of and personal involvement in the research setting. Under a quantitative methodological framework, my positionality as a longstanding employee of the institution would have been severely criticized, and perhaps even prohibited in order to ensure objectivity.

Characteristics of the Insider Status

To examine positionality, it is important to continuously interrogate one's own believes, stances, and values (Savin-Baden, 2012). In addition to being a trained social worker and practitioner, I was also well-known in the community as an activist, and was openly identified as someone who defended asylum seekers rights and argued forcefully that asylum seekers are entitled to just living standards. For fifteen years, I had been conducting psychosocial evaluations for asylum seekers and ensuring psychosocial support throughout their asylum application process. Through this work, I had become acutely aware of the injustice and the exclusion that they face in their everyday lives in the host country. I had also come to learn firsthand about the legal, social, and political limitations of Canada's asylum system, and was vocal in challenging these limitations. For these reasons, my fifteen years of experience in the field with this population served as a solid backdrop to my research, and meant that I went into the study with a reputation among my colleagues as someone who cared deeply about the rights of asylum seekers.

As scholars have pointed out previously, a researcher's involvement in the dynamic interplay of research can be extremely valuable (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Padgett, 1998; Unluer, 2012; van Heugten, 2004; Zaidalkilani, 2010). The involvement of the researcher in his/her fieldwork can take two general forms: involvement as a professional who has worked with the population; or involvement as a person who has undergone a similar experience and can thus relate to the lived experience of the research subjects. The knowledge, insights, and experience of the insider-researcher apply not only to theoretical understanding of organizational dynamics, but also to the lived experience of individuals within the researcher's own organization (Brannick & Coghlan). Writing about insider status within a cultural identity research framework, Merriam et al. (2001) emphasise the importance of personal and social factors that play out in shaping an insider status, including race, culture and age.

I conducted this study on how social workers viewed and implemented ideas of human rights in their work with asylum seekers while I myself was working with asylum seekers at the institution as a professional social worker. While planning and conducting research, the biggest challenge was to strike a balance between my two roles, as researcher and social worker. I not only aimed to avoid any opposition between the two roles, but worked to identify ways in which social work and research could be mutually beneficial without compromising the mission of either. The insider-researcher must be careful not to be seen as duplicitous, which is possible by virtue of the fact that the insider-researcher has to balance two distinct roles of being an "insider" and being a "researcher," and to walk the tightrope which is constituted by the hyphen in the term "insider-outsider" (Humphrey, 2007, 2013).

In addition to being a practitioner and an advocate for asylum seekers, the study participants (my colleagues) also saw me as a scholar who was eager to better understand social work practices, rather than as a stranger. Moreover, I had given many professional trainings focused on the asylum-seeking population and intercultural approaches and interventions. Hence, my role as a training educator facilitated my role as a researcher, as I was perceived as a professional who reflected on practices and engaged in intellectual theorization. Moreover, my role as a training educator was, in many ways, a bridge between my role as a practitioner and my role as a researcher. In short, I had the trust and confidence of other social workers working at my institution through my identity as a scholar and leader.

Positionality Towards the Setting Under Study

Going into my research, I already had a detailed understanding of the setting under study. Referring to Bonner and Tolhurst (2002), this understanding broke down into three

constituents: my knowledge of the population served (i.e., asylum seekers); my knowledge of the setting (i.e., the institution and the participants - social workers); and my knowledge of the research process (i.e., recruitment, interviewing, and confidentiality).

Positionality Towards Human Rights and the Intended Population

Fifteen-years of professional social work experience with asylum seekers has led me to develop a deep understanding of asylum issues and how asylum seekers relate to concepts and practices of human rights. Through the years, my involvement transformed into forms of activism, such as participation in awareness-raising actions about asylum seekers' rights and involvement with community organizations working to defend asylum seekers' rights. My involvement translated into both intuitive knowledge about asylum seekers and their challenges and into professional activities. Lacroix (2000) has also defended the status of insider-researcher by describing how her activism in defending the rights of the population has enriched her professional experiences and her ability to work with her vulnerable clients. By highlighting her positionality, Lacroix aimed to express the positive input that a long-developed expertise in the field of research could represent. Countering critiques of researcher subjectivity from a more identity-sensitive approach, Vatz Laaroussi (2007, p. 7) argues that neutrality—that scientific "appanage," generally occidental and academic in origin—when analyzed in contexts of intercultural and inter-disciplinary power may seem an illusion because knowledge and culture are everything but neutral. Marlowe, Lou, Osman, and Alam (2015) echo this statement in their work on refugee populations.

Building on the insights of Laaroussi and Marlowe et al., my many years of experience working with asylum seekers produced a sensitivity and an awareness of asylum seekers' challenges, obstacles, and concerns. During my career, I had witnessed the evolution of laws and policies related to asylum seeking, and responded to these changes through social work practice. This sensitivity and awareness made me capable of detecting the multiple vulnerabilities experienced by the asylum-seeking population, as well as allowed me to gain a holistic understanding of their situation, including both its psychosocial and legal-political components. This sensitivity guided my analysis and my interpretations of practices that could have been comprehended as ordinary at first reading, but which actually highlighted the subtleties of the population's experiences. My sensitivity, therefore, was more of a strength than a weakness in conducting and interpreting my research. It did not impede my intellectual judgment or lead me to privilege a single kind of interpretation. Rather, it allowed me to consider and highlight the actions and intentions the participants mentioned, and to reflect their unique perspective in my analysis.

Positionality Towards the Institution and the Participants

My insider status was shaped by both my position within the institution and my positionality vis-à-vis the participants in the study—the social workers employed at the institution. In this sense, I was what the scholarly literature refers to as an "indigenous-insider"—an individual who endorses the unique values, perspectives, behaviours, beliefs, and knowledge of his or her indigenous community and culture and is perceived by people within the community as a legitimate community member who can speak with authority about it (Banks, 1998, p. 8).

When an insider-researcher carries out qualitative research in an institutional setting, there is a need to pay attention to researcher-participant relationships and their implications for research design (Cui, 2015). Towards participants, I had an indigenous-insider status: I was seen as a member of their group who was eager to better understand social work practices; I

was not an outside academic expert being brought in to conduct a study or evaluate a situation. Towards the institution itself, I considered myself an insider: I socialized within the institutional culture and acquired its values and knowledge. Furthermore, my insider status provided me with "a certain amount of legitimacy" among my peers (i.e., the study participants) and management (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58). It gave me "a lived familiarity with the group being researched – that tacit knowledge informs her research producing a different knowledge than that available to the outsider" (Griffith, 1998, p. 362). My familiarity with the institution, its services, and its human resources facilitated my work and my acceptance as a researcher.

McDermit et al. (2014) observe that "as a member of the same organisation, the insider researcher is already immersed in its minutiae and has a developed sense of awareness and understanding of the organisation" (p. 29). Because of my personal and professional experiences and insights, I questioned managerial prerogatives and administrative constraints imposed on various professionals working in the institution and endorsed professional social work's values shared by the social workers' community inside the institution. Thus, my insider status was an advantage in developing a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of the institution and its influence on social work practice (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008, p. 19).

According to Berger (2015), a researcher's positionality includes personal characteristics, such as gender, race, affiliation, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, personal experiences, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases, and preferences. In my case, personal characteristics included my training background and professional experiences. Many scholars (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008; Cui, 2015; Edmonds-Cady, 2012; Humphrey, 2013; Leigh, 2014) have explored the advantages of an insider status for social work research, defending the unique insights that this status can offer. One of the benefits these scholars highlight is that being a member of the group tends to lead to quick acceptance: it establishes a level of trust and openness in participants that would likely not have been present otherwise. Indeed, one has a starting point (the commonality) that affords access into groups that might otherwise be closed to "outsiders." Participants might also be more willing to share their experiences because there is an assumption of understanding and an assumption of shared distinctiveness (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). A more rapid and complete acceptance than would be afforded an outsider affects the way insider-researchers construct the world, use language, pose questions, and choose the lenses through which to filter information gathered from participants and make meaning of it (Berger, 2015, p. 220).

In this study, I worked in a specialized department of the institution that exclusively provides psychosocial services to asylum seekers. The participants worked in other departments which provide front-line services to various populations, including asylum seekers. Although familiar in general with the front-line practices in the institution, I did not have specific knowledge, nor did I develop expertise regarding the institution's specific front-line services. When the researcher begins data collection, it is important to remember that although he or she may be part of the culture under study, he or she may not have knowledge of the subculture or experiences of a particular group (Asselin, 2003, p. 100). Further, it should be noted that even though I maintained social contact with many social workers, prior to the study I had had little professional contact with them. Therefore, though I conducted the study on site, I was not an integral part of the practitioners' professional teams. Further, as Leigh (2014) has noted, being an insider-researcher does not mean that all background information has been shared within the organisation prior to a study. In certain contexts, Leigh observed, there are times when the researcher may feel more like an outsider that an outsider to the organization would (p. 430). This position meant that I understood the institution's services and clientele, but that I was not so familiar with the social workers' practices as to enter into the research with existing biases.

Participants can be "more open with insider-researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered" (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58). This was true in my study. The relationship between the researcher and the participant is defined in the course of the research process based upon the interaction between the two (Merton, 1972). It also depends on the perceptions that the participant forms (and had already formed prior to the start of the study) of the researcher. In my case, some participants perceived me as a colleague, even though I worked in a different department, since I had had similar work experiences to them. Others perceived me as an expert in the challenges facing and experiences of asylum seekers, and often consulted me for complex cases or had followed training I gave related to these topics. My researcher status was therefore not one fixed rigidly as an insider. This reflects the fluctuations that characterize the insider-researcher status, "located more along a continuum rather than as discrete binaries" (Marlowe et al., 2015, p. 386; Merriam et al., 2001). On the one hand, my insider identity was more pronounced among those participants with whom I had built a professional relationship over the years. On the other hand, my insider identity was ambivalent and tended more to an outsider for those who knew I worked in the institution, but with whom I had little professional rapport. Rather, because I had an educator status, they considered me more as an academic, close to an outsider who also had some insider's characteristics. I learned that "being a native to a culture or context that is researched or studied does not guarantee that the researcher is treated as a complete insider"(Mutua Kombo, 2009, p. 315). While my academic status served as a springboard to initiate trust (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010), the considerable challenge was to stay open to all possibilities and alternatives and to conduct the research with authenticity and fairness: as Dwyer & Buckle (2009) explain, "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" (p. 59).

However, drawing upon Cui's insight that pre-existing relationships with the participants coupled with professional status determine how participants perceive researcher's research identity during an interview (2015, p. 364), I discovered that pre-existing relationships with the participants coupled with my professional status determined how participants perceived my researcher identity during interviews. My insider status and thus my researcher identity depended on whether I was perceived only as an institutional insider (professional who works in the same institution as the participants) or both as interpersonal insider (professional who has the same professional training as the participants and who works in the same field as the participants) and an institutional one. In both cases, my researcher identity raised questions with regard to power relations between participants and me. While ethical imperatives to establish clear boundaries and power relations are mandatory in conducting any research process, some characteristics can be exclusively linked to an insider-researcher's status. Methodological implications of the relationship between the insider-researcher and the research participants allude to the notion of power and "the importance of recognizing the multifaceted nature of identities" and contexts (Ibrahim, 2014; McRae, 2007, p. 54). The challenge I faced in the research process was to be aware of my position as a senior social worker, an educator, and a consultant, as well as the power attached to each position and to the power, they – all combined- reflected.

Another consideration of the insider-researcher related to her positionality vis-à-vis the participants is that the insider researcher should be aware of and assume certain commonalities with the group under study (Essid & Essid Hamas, 2017; Ibrahim, 2014). In their research about constructing religious identity among students descended from immigrants, Essid and Essid-Hamas (2017) write about the challenge of distancing themselves as immigrants researchers from the object of research where there is an implicit link of sharing same immigration background religious status between them and the researched. The challenge is

even bigger given the difficulty of maintaining professional relationships. Establishing rapport and balancing proximity and distance are essential to ensuring the cooperation of participants and the integrity of the data collected (Erdal et al., 2013, p. 48). Taking the example of migration research, where insider/outsider positions are easily assigned, the authors suggest sharing the researcher's implicit and explicit characteristics (i.e., roles and positions in the institution, professional training and experience) positions, can help build balanced professional relationships and prevent "misleading labelling" (Erdal et al., 2013, p. 48).

Positionality Towards the Research Process

The researcher's positions can affect access to and interactions with participants. Pre-existing relationships between the researcher and participants can be advantageous when undertaking research as they provide familiarity, respect and rapport" (McDermid et al., 2014, p. 29). In my study, the relationships I had built with social worker participants, as well as my ability to easily engage in social interaction with them, facilitated the research process. As Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) note, "an established intimacy between the researcher and the participants promotes both the telling and the judging of truth" (p. 9). In the following paragraphs, I demonstrate how these advantages inherent in my positionality played out in different key phases and components of my research.

The Insider-Researcher as a Recruiter

The insider status can be an asset for recruitment purposes. How smoothly the process of recruitment goes very much depends on the relationships and reputation a researcher has with specific communities (Marlowe et al., 2015). After being provided with the email contact of each practitioner employed in the institution, I sent an email to each one inviting her/him to participate in the study, specifying the voluntary nature of the project. This recruitment procedure was intentional, with the goal to get a diverse sample of participants and not just colleagues I was close to, thereby minimizing personal interference in the choice of the interviewees. I provided interviewees with a summary of the research project, a participant information sheet, an informed consent form, and copies of the two ethics approvals. The informed consent form was signed and returned to the researcher at the beginning of the interview.

The first four practitioners who responded positively, agreeing to participation in the study, were leaders within the institution. They held strategic positions in the institution based either on their roles as team leaders or their seniority. This was fortunate, since recruitment is most successful when key leaders support the project and then disseminate information about the study to their associated networks (Marlowe et al., 2015). I considered these initial participants "privileged access interviewers" (Griffiths et al., 1993). They played a double role. They were at the same time interviewee and interviewer. I followed Forsyth (1997) and McRae (2007) in relying on three key leaders who to help me recruit four participants that were missing to complete my sampling. Instead of a snowball sampling, where a chain develops from one user to the next, this action produces networks of individuals who are in 'the social orbit of some key-contact' (Forsyth, 1997). Without having the intention to, and because of my insider status, my recruitment process was completed by the involvement of key leaders and thus on networking.

Six other interviews were made with key informants working outside the institution. These interviews with informants were treated as complementary to the interviews with employees of the institution and added a different perspective for understanding practitioners'

roles and practice. Because of my professional experience as a practitioner working with asylum seekers, I had extensive knowledge of existing resources and services available to asylum seekers, whether medical, legal, or through community organizations. From my professional list of resources and services, I purposely chose three community organizations offering services to asylum seekers and asked if any representative of these groups was interested in the research. Two community organizers responded positively. I also purposely chose two doctors working in clinics offering medical services to asylum seekers, contacted them by phone, and explained my research. Both accepted my invitation to be interviewed. Similarly, I chose two lawyers practicing immigration refugee law, contacted them by phone, and explained my research. Both also accepted to be interviewed. As opposed to the recruitment of the first group of interviewees (i.e., social workers in the public institution where I was also involved), this recruitment of informants was based on my professional judgment and my previous experience where my status as an insider enabled me to identify which groups to approach... Thus, my role as a social worker strengthened my abilities in the recruitment process.

The Insider-Researcher as an Interviewer

The interview as a method of data collection is probably the most revealing component of any qualitative research project (Janesick, 2004). The primary method of data collection in this study was the semi-structured, one-on-one, in-person interview. The intention was to acquire an in-depth understanding of the social workers' practices with asylum seekers, their conceptions of human rights, and the concept's relevance to their clients' situations. Semi-structured interviews conducted about participants' experiences working with asylum seekers were used to allow participants the space to construct accounts of their own practices, rather than being constrained by a structured interview format. Semi-structured interviews therefore provided participants with the opportunity to fully elaborate on their responses to questions while also choosing which aspects of their responses to focus on.

Because of my senior position at the institution, I was often a consultant on critical cases facing other social workers. Further, because of my professional training in the field of refugees, asylum seekers, and cross-cultural approaches, I organized conferences and gave presentations on these topics that participants had attended. Interviewees were therefore willing to share information with me more than with an outsider-researcher because they knew my level of professionalism and, by extension, trusted my judgment. This is perhaps why all the interviews I conducted exceeded the hour allotted for them.

Despite my reputation and the participants' familiarity with me, I began each interview by explaining my role as a researcher, how it differed from my role as a social worker and how it was unconnected with my status as an expert within the institution. I also reiterated to participants that my role as a researcher was not to judge their work. I believe they understood this clearly, as many participants brought up during the interviews difficulties they were experiencing in intervening among asylum seekers, many of which were not related to the institutional context but to personal skills and capacities. This proved that social workers were comfortable discussing with me even negative aspects of their work.

My own understanding of the institution and its mandate, and my knowledge of international regulations and national laws and policies regarding asylum seekers, allowed me to bring together thorough data to create a targeted interview guide to be used during the study. The interviews thus involved in-depth discussions about social work approaches and interventions among asylum seekers, the role of human rights in social work, the institutional mandate and its impact on practices, ethical concerns with regard to balancing the goals of social work with managerial requirements based on statistical performance, and the personal

views of social workers on laws and social policies dealing with asylum seekers. All participants expressed their appreciation of the topics raised and the discussions that followed. Many acknowledged that the topic of human rights and its centrality to social work practice reminded them of the reasons they chose the profession in the first place, and stimulated reflection on their practice. As Asselin (2003) states a "researcher presence may also stimulate an interest in the research process and the notion of examining research for applicability in the clinical setting" (p. 103), generating positive effect on staff.

My knowledge and familiarity with the institution's mandate and each department's goals, client profile, and services, as well as my experience as a social worker within the institution's managerial and bureaucratic context, served as platforms from which to engage participants in discussion. The fact that I myself experienced bureaucratic and administrative constraints on conducting social work the way I believed was best helped facilitate my discussion of this topic with participants. Indeed, discussing the restraints I faced with someone who had experienced the same pressures was easier for participants than discussing it with an outsider who did not intuitively understand their institutional challenges.

Participants had distinctive expectations with regard to the content they disclosed. On one hand, they expected research results to convey their challenging work conditions to managers hoping to induce positive changes in such conditions; same affirmation argued by Humphrey (2013). On the other, they trusted me not to reveal sensitive content, related to their individual practice. Participants felt confident to voice out their concerns publicly concerning collectively-shared experiences. They were reluctant when findings would target issues of individual practice.

Another characteristic of the insider-researcher status explored by Merriam et al (2001) and Essid & Essid-Hamas (2017) is how interactions with participants allow the insider-researcher to be aware of his or her own values. As an insider social worker committing to values of human rights and opposing restrictive immigration laws and social policies targeting asylum seekers, interactions with participants and discussions that followed challenged my own professional values and confronted them. Although I was known as an advocate of asylum seekers rights, when policies and laws were brought up during interviews, many participants expressed views in support of restrictive immigration measures and firmer social policies towards asylum seekers.

In her study exploring what social work values meant to participants, Humphrey (2013, p. 579) stated the divergence of opinions and the fact that the researcher has an insider-status had created a diversified dialogue and debates. These situations, Humphrey notes, were difficult to manage. During my interviews, when participants gave opinions about social work values that went against my own deep beliefs, my immediate reactions were to feel uncomfortable and overwhelmed with a sense of betrayal towards my own professional values and on behalf of asylum seekers. However, I succeeded in masking these feelings and in creating a safe space for the participants to express themselves. Still, after these interviews, I would seek support from my supervisor and remind myself to consider the whole picture and understand where these points of view came from, and what professional conditions and practices might help explain them. As in insider, I learned how not to reveal my personal judgment, but to develop a rational acceptance of the difference between where I stood with regard to asylum seekers' rights and where some of the participants stood. This demonstrated a willingness among participants to share views that they knew I would personally not agree with, but which I considered objectively in my role as researcher. Other participants expressed their inclination towards more open-borders and providing more social-services to non-citizens, which are more in line with my own views. The diversity of responses suggested that I was effective in distinguishing between my role as colleague and researcher.

Limitations of Data Collection

While an insider 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" (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p.58). Some limitations to the insider-researcher status that I experienced during data collection are worth considering. Breen, for instance, (2007) notes that "the process of interviewing can be complicated by the assumption among their informants that the researcher already knows the answers" (p.164). Indeed, participants can make assumptions that the researcher, because her insider status, already has answers and conclusions in mind, and may therefore fail to elaborate or express their thoughts in-depth in response to research questions (Dwyer & Buckle, 2013). In this study, with regard to the institutional working conditions, many participants failed to explain that the conditions they raised were shared by all the social workers with whom they worked. I was very aware of this aspect and would ask the participant to express his or her personal opinion with regard to this matter, even though many participants spontaneously replied: "but you know all this. You experience these conditions every day". To counter this challenge, I would ask the participant to give very-detailed answers about every question and sub-question. Sometimes, participants would look at me shocked that I would ask a question to which I obviously knew the answer. In these cases, I would nonetheless insist that the participant provides a full answer, and ask him/her to provide the maximum details he/she could give. It is in these situations where the participant understood and acknowledged my researcher role and differentiate it from my social worker one.

Another challenge of the insider-researcher in data collection involves ways in which a researcher's perception of the information she acquires can be clouded by personal experiences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000). Specifically, scholars have expressed concerns about the insider-researcher as a member of the participants' community and not to being able to distance his or her own experiences from those 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 participants'. Personal experiences might result in instances whereby the researcher will only consider shared experiences with the participants rather than identifying and acknowledging other factors to which they do not have first-hand knowledge (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Since the very onset of the research, I exercised self-awareness of my own emotions and potential links related to the subject, using means such as keeping a personal journal and regularly consulting with my research supervisor and senior social workers on the emotions triggered through the research process.

Another danger of being an insider-researcher is expressed by Kanuha (2000, p.442) and concerns the lack of seeking to understand and clarify vague comments and generalities made by participants. While listening to the first interview I conducted with each participant, I noted incomplete sentences or unclarified statements instead of attempting to fill in the blanks myself. Asselin (2003) suggests subsequent interviews to correct or clarify data already collected, so conducted a second interview with each concerned participant to re-discuss related content.

It is well established in the literature on interviews that the presence of the researcher during an interview may influence the responses of participants. In some cases, participants may choose a response that they believe is sought by the researcher (Yegidis & Weinbach, 2009). This is particularly true when the backgrounds of researchers and participants do not align: "When interviewers and research participants are from different language, racial, cultural, or even socioeconomic groups, the possibility of flawed data due to either socially desirable responses or unwillingness or fear of providing frank answers to questions may be increased" (Yegidis & Weinbach, p. 154). In the study discussed in this article, some new

employees who participated feared that their answers—when they expressed opposition to policies and objectives outlined by the institution's administration—might jeopardize their employment status. Other participants were themselves recent immigrants and were reluctant to share certain negative experiences in the host country and the institution for fear of coming across as ungrateful.

An awareness of current issues in an organization may also lead the insider-researcher to identify a problem prematurely without delving deeper to examine all data or to fail to recognize a problem that exists (Dwyer & Buckle, 2013, pp. 100-101). This disadvantage can be applied to one aspect of my study in particular: namely, how the institutional bureaucracy and managerial constraints on social work practice impact social workers' personal well-being. To distance myself from this topic, about which I feel passionate, after every interview I would sit down with a clinical supervisor to discuss my emotions and reflections about specific issues triggered during discussions with participants. These sessions helped to distance myself from the participants' professional experience, as well as to identify and demystify emotions and feelings that would emerge after each interview. I also learned to put my own practice into perspective and to distinguish similarities from discrepancies between participants' experiences and mine.

Insider-researchers, because of their positionality, can sometimes overlook certain professional actions, and failing to note these actions can itself be significant for analysis (McDermid et al., 2014; McRae, 2007; Unluer, 2012). Moreover, the researcher also might make assumptions about participants' points of view, and thereby 'skip' asking certain questions that an outside researcher might find important. Put another way: my closeness to the setting could have prevented me from considering the wider dimensions and dynamics of the issue I was studying. Amid specific questions related to human rights and practice, I would stress during each interview that I was also looking into the mandate of each participant's department. I did this in order to highlight practice's characteristics and professional actions within the mandate and to relate them to asylum seekers' issues.

Another limitation inherent in the insider-researcher status during the data collection phase of a study needs to be highlighted. Although confusion with regard to the researcher's roles can occur in any qualitative research, the risk is much higher when the researcher is an insider and thus, during the course of the research process, holds different roles in the setting (Humphrey, 2007; Trowler, 2011). Initially, not every participant made the distinction between my role as a researcher and as a social worker. This confusion was mainly related to the other roles I played in the institution (i.e., social worker, educator, consultant). Asselin (2003) gives the example of the staff development researcher who is perceived by the staff as an educator rather than a researcher; his experience resonates with my research experience with two participants. Specifically, these participants would explain their point of view by referring to concepts I had developed in a training they had attended. Furthermore, viewed as an expert on the topic of asylum seekers, I was confronted in this study with situations where I was not seen as a researcher, but rather as an experienced professional with whom the participant would take the opportunity to discuss specific cases about specific individuals with whom they were working. As suggested by Asselin (2003), I would periodically step back from the data collection process and "observe myself" as a researcher (p. 102). In these situations, I would re-clarify my role as a researcher, and ask the participant to discuss the issue with a supervisor or another social worker.

One final limitation has to do with how the researcher reflects on interview data that speaks to his or her personal experiences. Personal life histories described by participants also experienced by the researcher might impact the interview process and cause distraction (Kanuha, 2000). It can also lead to an interview shaped accordingly to the researcher own experiences and perceptions (Dwyer & Buckle, 2013). It can lead the researcher to only

consider factors he considers or those s/he shares with participants and omit to identify others that are not explicitly present in his professional experience orbit. (Dwyer & Buckle, 2013). As explained by Asselin (2003): “researcher expectations, past experiences, beliefs, and emotions can prevent the researcher from achieving a detachment necessary for analyzing data objectively” (p. 100).

Given the impossibility of eliminating risks related to the insider-researcher status, the aim of the researcher is to become “risk-aware rather than risk-averse” (Humphrey, 2013, p. 582). Certain strategies during different phases of the research process can be adopted to circumvent risks. In order to help create and maintain distance between myself and the subjects of study, defined by Zaidalkilani (2010) as deconstructing the familiar and engaging in a continuous process of reflection and reflexivity on researcher’s actions, I employed qualitative research strategies suggested by van Heugten (2004) such as "stream of consciousness writing,” “self-interviewing" in depth and on tape, and having conversations with others such as the research supervisor and researcher colleagues about personal research experiences: “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” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 59).

I also developed a logbook for relevant thoughts regarding practice were documented and analyzed with a professional supervisor. I discussed with senior practitioners (who did not participate in the research) the professional dilemmas raised in the course of my research. Further, I added personal comments and reflections in the logbook after each interview with every participant, thus ensuring the consistent and reflective expression of my emotions and thinking throughout the research process. In summary, I took detailed records and critically revisited these records at later dates in order to ensure that my assessments were not biased.

I also was aware of the confusion that could arise from my dual role when collecting or analyzing data. Many situations occurred during the research process where I could have engaged in discussions with the participants that were broader than the research framework and thus not relevant to the research but to their work. Keeping notes on thoughts, feelings, and responses to observations and interviews helped me put each discussed idea into the research perspective.

Confidentiality

In the framework of an insider-researcher status, confidentiality and anonymity are important for two reasons: first, to maintain the integrity of the research process; and second, for my position as a social worker at the institution. Several steps were adopted to reassure participants about confidentiality and anonymity. First, my role of researcher was emphasized rather than my employment status as a social worker or an educator. Second, study participants were assured, through the informed consent, that the specific information they provide would be kept confidential. Third, I presented to participants how the study data would be used. Forth, I explained to participants that any information they provided—including whether they decided to participate in the study, not participate, or quit—would in no way affect their positions in the institution (Kaiser, 2009; Wiles, Charles, Crow, & Heath, 2006).

As a practitioner working in the same institution as the participants of the study, I had to be very vigilant regarding confidentiality and anonymity, particularly when it related to asylum seekers’ situations and personal lives, or to the actions, skills, and decisions of other social workers employed at the institution. Assuring participants of confidentiality was therefore of central important as they shared with me information related to clients who I may have had intervened with or could intervene with in the future. To try to limit my exposure to private information and to ensure anonymity, I asked every participant to give specific

examples when answering questions, but not to provide information that might enable me to identify the persons in them (such as name, age, nationality, etc.). The fact that practitioners worked in other departments than mine helped in this regard. Moreover, I decided from the beginning of the study that if I could identify a client who the participant was describing, I would transfer that client's case to another colleague, to prevent confidentiality breach. Fortunately, almost all examples that were discussed featured anonymous actors.

Establishing confidentiality was also aided by the trust I had developed through the years with participants, who because of my reputation shared information with me that they may not have shared with an outsider-researcher. When the researcher is already known in the organization, issues of trust are often based on the rapport with the study participants that the researcher had previously developed (Asselin, 2003; Trowler, 2011). Respecting what the participants shared with regards to institutional work conditions and constraints was important because, if superiors found out about some of the criticisms expressed of the institution, the participants could face negative consequences. Also, many participants employed methods and addressed issues that could be seen as falling outside of the institution's mandate and their job descriptions in order to meet their clients' needs and defend their human rights. These practices, participants told me, should not be brought to the attention of management. In these situations, I would reiterate confidentiality and data use protocols (Kaiser, 2009). The fact that participants shared such information with me revealed that a climate of trust existed between the researcher and the participants because "the study participants were comfortable sharing issues such as their frustrations" (Asselin, 2003, p.101). Ensuring data confidentiality and participant anonymity compensated for fear of reprisals.

Even with measures in place, indirect dilemmas related to consent obtained from participants in qualitative research conducted by an insider-researcher can affect confidentiality and anonymity. Humphrey (2013) asked the question "do qualitative researchers in the areas of education, health and social care routinely if inadvertently invite participants to breach agency-based norms around confidentiality?" In her study, she discusses how data content revealed confidential matters presented by participants involving people working in the agency that distinguished these individuals and other actors. An insider-researcher cannot guarantee confidentiality and anonymity in research involving agency's own actors, unless specific means are adopted, such as access to a support network of researchers within and beyond the institution or access to a consultant (Humphrey, 2013). Following Humphrey's suggestion, Confidentiality and anonymity challenges triggered in the course of the research were also addressed during consultancy sessions with my research supervisor.

Conclusion

Insider research is a growth industry in the caring professions across America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK (Sikes & Potts, 2008, p. 3). Through qualitative design, insider research can be helpful for developing and expanding knowledge both of and within these professions. This article contributes to the developing theoretical understandings of social work practice in general and to providing valuable data applicable to specific settings. It highlighted the insider-researcher status through research conducted with participants that explored social work practice among asylum seekers in an institutional setting. The particularity of my status resides in a tripartite triangulation shaped by positions towards the human rights, the institution and the participants. I described some advantages inherent in the insider-researcher status, as well as some of its limitations. As an insider-researcher, I also demonstrated how my understanding of the population and my knowledge of the setting were major assets to my study. My position as an expert senior social worker and the trust built over the years among my colleagues also facilitated my insider-status position. While

acknowledging the complexity of this positionality, I have highlighted what Cui (2015) refers to as "the constant negotiation and re-negotiation between the researcher and research participants as the research proceeds" (p. 367).

To mitigate negative situations arising from insider-researchers' positionality they "must be mindful of their dual roles and make appropriate plans and decisions about how best to manage these when designing the research" (McDermid et al., 2014, p. 33), as well as be aware of pitfalls that can threaten the credibility or trustworthiness of the study (Asselin, 2003, p.103). In recognition of this, Asselin observes that "building techniques into the study design and analysis is required to avoid issues of bias associated with insider research and enhance the credibility of the study" (Asselin, 2003, p. 103). Supervision, consciousness-writing, self-interviewing, and clarification of the insider-researcher role were all means I employed to circumvent or overcome potential limitations during various phases of the research project.

An exploration of the insider-researcher status always needs to be contextualized within the field it refers to, as well as the organization it operates within. In social work, the insider-researcher status follows from two sources. The first emanates from the institutional mandate in which social work is practiced. The second stems from the conceptual framework of social work as a discipline, practice, and, most importantly, its values. This article has aimed to demonstrate how the status of a researcher who is a social worker is influenced by these values which are circumscribed in a human rights framework. As social worker, in daily practice, one has to defend rights and promote social change. These are cornerstone values of the profession. In this sense, neutrality and objectiveness towards human rights, are not desirable premises for research, since adopting these positions when researching situations and controversies involving rights violations would mean abandoning professional values.

References

Al-Makhamreh, S. S., & Lewando-Hundt, G. (2008). Researching 'at Home' as an Insider/Outsider: Gender and culture in an ethnographic study of social work practice in an Arab society. *Qualitative Social Work, 7*(1), 9-23. doi:10.1177/1473325007086413

Asselin, M. E. (2003). Insider research: Issues to consider when doing qualitative research in your own setting. *Journal for Nurses in Staff Development, 19*(2), 99-103.

Banks, J. A. (1998). The lives and values of researchers: Implications for educating citizens in a multicultural society. *Educational Researcher, 27*(7), 4-17.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 15*(2), 219-234.

Bonner, A., & Tolhurst, G. (2002). Insider-outsider perspectives of participant observation. *Nurse Researcher, 9*(4), 7-19.

Brannick, T., & Coghlan, D. (2007). In defense of being "Native": The case for insider academic research. *Organizational Research Methods, 10*(1), 59-74.

Cui, K. (2015). The insider–outsider role of a Chinese researcher doing fieldwork in China: The implications of cultural context. *Qualitative Social Work, 14*(3), 356-369.

Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 8*(1), 54-63.

Edmonds-Cady, C. (2012). A view from the bridge: Insider/outsider perspective in a study of the Welfare Rights Movement. *Qualitative Social Work, 11*(2), 174-190.

Erdal, M. B., Ezzati, R., & Carling, J. (2013). Beyond the insider–outsider divide in migration research. *Migration Studies, 2*(1), 36-54.

Ergun, A., & Erdemir, A. (2010). Negotiating insider and outsider identities in the field: "Insider" in a foreign land; "outsider" in one's own land. *Field Methods, 22*(1), 16-38.

Essid, S., & Essid Hamas, Y. (2017). De la désaffiliation du chercheur pour l'élaboration des connaissances: Comment se positionner en tant que chercheur et acteur dans une école ethno-religieuse? *Nouvelles Perspectives en Sciences Sociales, 13*(1), 117-148.

Foote, M. Q., & Gau Bartell, T. (2011). Pathways to equity in mathematics education: How life experiences impact researcher positionality. *Educational Studies in Mathematics, 78*(1), 45-68.

Griffith, A. I. (1998). Insider/outsider: Epistemological privilege and mothering work. *Human Studies, 21*(4), 361-376.

Holmes, A. (2014). *Researcher positionality – A consideration of its influence and place in research*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260421552_Researcher_positionality_-_a_consideration_of_its

Humphrey, C. (2007). Insider-outsider: Activating the hyphen. *Action Research, 5*(1), 11-26.

Humphrey, C. (2013). Dilemmas in doing insider research in professional education. *Qualitative Social Work, 12*(5), 572-586.

Ibrahim, A. (2014). Research as an act of love: Ethics, émigrés, and the praxis of becoming human. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, 8*(1), 7-20.

Janesick, V. J. (2004). *"Stretching" exercises for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Jankie, D. (2004). 'Tell me who you are': Problematizing the construction and positionalities of 'insider'/'outsider' of a 'native' ethnographer in a postcolonial context. In K. Mutua & B. B. Swadener (Eds.), *Decolonizing research in cross-cultural contexts: Critical personal narratives* (pp. 87-105). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Kaiser, K. (2009). Protecting respondent confidentiality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research, 19*(11), 1632-1641.

Kanuha, V. K. (2000). 'Being' native versus 'going native': Conducting social work research as an insider. *Social Work, 45*(5), 439-447.

Lacroix, M. (2000). *The road to asylum: Between fortress Europe and Canadian refugee policy: The social construction of the refugee claimant subjectivity* (Doctoral thesis). McGill, Montréal, Canada.

Leigh, J. (2014). A tale of the unexpected: Managing an insider dilemma by adopting the role of outsider in another setting. *Qualitative Research, 14*(4), 428-441. doi:10.1177/1468794113481794

Levine, D. (2007). The reform of health and social services in Quebec. *HealthcarePapers, 8*, 46.

Marlowe, J. M., Lou, L., Osman, M., & Alam, Z. Z. (2015). Conducting post-disaster research with refugee background peer researchers and their communities. *Qualitative Social Work, 14*(3), 383-398.

McDermid, F., Peters, K., Jackson, D., & Daly, J. (2014). Conducting qualitative research in the context of pre-existing peer and collegial relationships. *Nurse Researcher, 21*(5), 28-33.

McRae, R. (2007). 'Insider' and 'outsider' issues in youth research. In P. Hodkinson & W. Deicke (Eds.), *Youth cultures: Scenes, subcultures and tribes* (pp. 51-62). New York, NY: Routledge.

Merriam, S. B., Johnson-Bailey, J., Lee, M.-Y., Kee, Y., Ntseane, G., & Muhamad, M. (2001). Power and positionality: Negotiating insider/outsider status within and across cultures. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 20*(5), 405-416.

Merton, R. K. (1972). Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. *The American Journal of Sociology, 78*(1), 9-47.

Mutua Kombo, E. (2009). Their words, actions, and meaning: A researcher's reflection on Rwandan women's experience of genocide. *Qualitative Inquiry, 15*(2), 308-323.

Padgett, D. (1998). *Qualitative methods in social work research: Challenges and rewards*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Savin-Baden, M. (2012). *Qualitative research the essential guide to theory and practice*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Sikes, P. J., & Potts, A. (2008). *Researching education from the inside: Investigations from within*. New York: Routledge.

Trowler, P. (2011). *Researching your own institution, British Educational Research Association on-line resource.* Retrieved from https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/researching-your-own-institution-higher-education

Unluer, S. (2012). Being an insider researcher while conducting case study research. *The Qualitative Report, 17*(29), 1-14. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol17/iss29/2/

van Heugten, K. (2004). Managing insider research: Learning from experience. *Qualitative Social Work, 3*(2), 203-219.

Vatz Laaroussi, M. (2007). La recherche qualitative interculturelle: Une recherche engagée? *Hors Série, 4*, 2-13.

Wiles, R., Charles, V., Crow, G., & Heath, S. (2006). Researching researchers: Lessons for research ethics. *Qualitative Research, 6*(3), 283-299. doi:10.1177/1468794106065004

Yegidis, B. L., & Weinbach, R. W. (2009). *Research methods for social workers*. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.

Zaidalkilani, S. (2010). *Adopting rights-based approach to community practice the experience of the Community Service Center, Nablus, Palestine - A case study*. Montreal, Canada: McGill University Library.

Author Note

Grace Chammas is a professor in social work at the Université du Québec in Outaouais. Her research focuses on public institutional social work practice among asylum seekers. Correspondence can be addressed directly to: grace.chammas@uqo.ca.

Copyright 2020: Grace Chammas and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Chammas, G. (2020). The insider-researcher status: A challenge for social work practice research. *The Qualitative Report, 25*(2), 537-552. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss2/16