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Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
10.1080/03057925.2013.854616

Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research
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'Ethnographic dazzle' and the Construction of the 'Other': revisiting dimensions of insider and outsider research for international and comparative education

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(currently awaiting publication in a peer-reviewed journal – not to be quoted without reference to the corresponding author)

Abstract: This paper presents some initial ideas on how the theoretical concepts of the 'insider' and the 'outsider' might be re-examined in an era where advances in comparative, qualitative research methodologies seek to be more inclusive, collaborative, participatory, reflexive and nuanced. Earlier essentialist definitions of the outsider as detached and objective, and the insider as culturally-embedded and subjective, are re-examined and set within an international research and teaching context which recognises the increased migration of people, ideas and educational policies. It is argued that, in the context of such change, it has become more difficult to categorise and label groups and individuals as being 'inside' or 'outside' systems, professional communities, or research environments. Such essentialist notions, which often underpin the production of large-scale, international datasets of pupil achievement, need to be challenged so that more complex understandings can inform, not only new methods of research design, research ethics, data collection and analysis, but also the creation of new knowledge, giving more validity to related education policymaking. We recognise that individual and group identities can be multiple, flexible and changing such that the boundary between the inside and the outside is permeable, less stable and less easy to draw. The concept of a 'third', liminal space may have the potential to encourage new meaning which is constructed on the boundary between worlds where historical, social, cultural, political, ethical and individual understandings meet.

Key words: insider/outsider, comparative methodology, intercultural communication, cross-cultural understanding, the third space

Introduction

The internationalisation of educational ideas, brought about by the increasing mobility of

researchers and learners, has brought new opportunities, as well as new challenges, to all

those interested in investigating educational quality, improvement and equity through high

quality international and comparative studies. In this complex world of shifting identities and

competing global economies, policymakers and educational managers are coming under increasing pressure to compare educational outcomes, internationally, in order to seek solutions or 'best practice' from elsewhere. This has placed renewed emphasis on the potential for international and comparative studies of educational effectiveness, often in the form of large international data sets such as PISA[1] and TIMSS[2], to produce 'evidence' in support of policy change in national contexts. Such comparison has led to a phenomenon known as 'PISA shock' where countries, for example Germany, Denmark and Japan, have engaged in extensive national system change in response to disappointing test results (Ertl 2006; Egelund 2008; Takayama 2008). In a recent limited, but informative, survey of representatives from the PISA Governing Board, Breakspear (2012) explores the normative effects of such international benchmaking in school system performance and finds national effects in the areas of assessment and evaluation, curriculum standards and performance targets. Such standardisation has led to disquiet and a growing body of literature that challenges the decontextualised nature of such comparative evidence and the selective way in which it is used by policy makers to justify change (Morris 2012; BERA 2012; Meyer & Benavot 2013). Sahlberg (2007), for instance, draws attention to the underlying historical and cultural influences which have enabled Finland to perform well in international tests without recourse to market-orientated reform strategies or high-stakes testing and externally determined learning standards, so commonly championed in other contexts. Alexander (2000, 2010) also regrets the current funding focus on large-scale surveys which compare pupil attainment across countries in an aggregated, decontextualised way, and draws attention

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[1] Programme for International Student Assessment – Launched by the OECD in 1997 it aims to evaluate education systems worldwide every three years by assessing 15-year-olds' competencies in reading, mathematics and science. To date over 79 countries and economies have taken part.

[2] Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)

to the value of more context specific studies which can uncover the culturally determined links between discourse, pedagogy and practice.

Such developments are also in contrast to a long held, Sadlerian tradition of international and comparative research which sees education as contextually situated and a product of social systems which are culturally, historically and politically determined by 'forgotten struggles and difficulties' and 'battles long ago'. For this reason, it is argued, the theoretical, epistemological and methodological underpinning of large scale studies need to be explored in order to support increased contextual and cultural sensitivity in educational policy, practice and research to avoid the drawing of simplistic causal conclusions from aggregated data (Vulliamy 2004; Crossley and Watson 2003; Crossley and Sprague 2012). Much has been achieved in challenging both the unit of analysis (Bray and Thomas 1995; Dale 1999) and the uncritical transfer, or 'travelling', of ideas and policy from one context to another (Crossley 1999; Phillips and Ochs 2004; Steiner-Khamsi 2012), together with the use and misuse of international datasets (Goldstein 2004; Grek 2009). However, there has been less emphasis in the international and comparative literature on the relative positioning of the researcher within the research activity, and how this might be changing at a time of increasing actual, and virtual, mobility.

Attention to such theoretical and methodological issues informs our collective thinking which has inspired our interest in revisiting notions of 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' in relation to cross-cultural comparative studies in education. We see this as especially pertinent in rapidly changing times where traditional conceptualisations of 'national identity' (Hans 1949; Mallinson 1975) and essentialist constructions of the 'other' are being questioned. As Bhabha maintains:

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> The very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities – *as the grounds of cultural comparativism* – are in a profound process of redefinition.
>
> (Bhabha 1994:7)

The paper thus draws on the work of a group of researchers involved in the first BAICE sponsored Thematic Forum (BTF): *Revisiting Insider/Outsider Perspectives in International and Comparative Education.* Our analysis challenges the existing methodological literature by developing a number of critical arguments and issues that were first explored in the BTF Workshops held at the Research Centre for International and Comparative Studies, University of Bristol, in February 2012, and at the Annual BAICE Conference held in Cambridge in September 2012. (For related work see Al-Youssef, J. et al.; Kelly, P; and Milligan, E.)[3].

Why revisit the concepts of the insider/outsider?

Increasing access to real time communication technologies, new understandings of identity and community, changing modalities for collaborative work, and increasing global mobility for researchers and students all call for a more complex understanding of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and the ways in which all involved might situate themselves as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' – or both. On the one hand, the increasing internationalisation of higher education has facilitated the mobility and collaboration of both researchers and students, both actual and virtual. While, at the same time, research funders have placed greater emphasis on the value of international teams of researchers working across national boundaries in cross-disciplinary groups. Such circumstances, we argue, contribute to the need for an updating and re-envisioning of the way in which we conceptualise being an insider or an outsider in the research process. Not only should this include a better understanding of the way in which more traditional boundaries, such as

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[3] For more details about the BAICE Thematic Forum see the BAICE website: baice.ac.uk

nationality, language, ethnicity, culture, gender and age, interact, but also a recognition and understanding of various ontological, epistemological and disciplinary boundaries which might be encountered, and the way in which these might impact on the generation of new knowledge. Social constructivist epistemologies, for example, regard identity as multiple, shifting and constantly in the process of formation. This challenges essentialist dualisms such as the insider/outsider, the researcher/researched, and questions the distinctions that have been drawn between the ethnographical 'emic', which seeks to understand a culture from the inside, and the comparative 'etic', which seeks to compare across different cultures (Pike 1967; Morris *et al*. 1999).

A predisposition to accept such dualisms, and position ourselves as outsiders can entice us to place more emphasis on that which is unfamiliar, rather than that which is similar. The American ethnographer Fox (1989,18) has referred to this tendency as 'ethnographic dazzle', which can distract us from more subtle comparisons and meaning making and lead us to draw simplistic causal relationships, for instance between student outcome and classroom practice, as demonstrated in much media and policy reaction to the publication of international league tables (Rautalin & Alasuutari 2009; Ringarp & Rothland 2010). Thus, it is important to avoid polarisation: of the insider or the outsider, the 'social constructionist' versus the overly fixed 'essentialist' in terms of different societies and communities. But, instead to recognise that neither the researcher, nor the subjects of analysis are fixed, stable and coherent but constantly shifting, incomplete, fragmented, and contradictory in relation to both collective and personal existence (Calhouhn, 1995). Thomson and Gunter (2011,26) have used Bauman's notion of 'liquid identities' to recognise how boundaries in the research process can be 'messily blurred in particular places and times'. Other researchers have sought to resolve insider/outsider tensions, relating to the place of outsider judgement, by developing research

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procedures that ask insiders to verify such judgements before finalising conclusions (Tobin *et.al* 1989).

Within the field of international and comparative education studies, new methodologies have been employed to develop more contextually relevant understandings when working cross-culturally. The active development of collaborative and inter-disciplinary international research teams has sought to harness the strengths of combining multiple linguistic and cultural perspectives, not only in the collection and analysis of data, but also, importantly, in identifying key issues and appropriate research designs. Such collaborations make it possible to investigate phenomena across national and cultural boundaries, addressing issues of conceptual and linguistic significance from both the inside and the outside and, in so doing, seek to enhance contextual relevance. Arthur (*et al.* 2007), for example, has undertaken a number of studies where her German background, native language competence and bi-culturalism did much to strengthen the depth of understanding. As a member of a European-wide higher education project involving several countries and a variety of languages, the REFLEX study (which is discussed in more detail later), she was at times an insider as well as an outsider, with shifting perceptions and understandings. Similarly, the ENCOMPASS project, which looked at pupils' experience of schooling in England, France and Denmark (Osborn *et al.* 2003; McNess 200), involved researchers from all three countries who each wrote about their initial reactions when visiting project schools in a different national context. The result was illuminating, producing not only an informative outsider's perspective of a different national system, but also an insider's re-evaluation of those 'taken for granted' elements in the researcher's own national context. The way in which the researchers described practices within a different national context gave a clear indication of the underlying

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assumptions which operated within their own context, as this extract from a Danish researcher describing a French school shows:

> What first strikes a Danish visitor to a French school is its clinical and strictly functional environment, which seems to have little connection with young people's lives and their learning…..Pupils do not have the opportunity to create their own physical space where they can express and stamp their individuality.
>
> (Osborn, et al. 2003:51)

It is clear that the researcher recognises the contrast with the collaborative and community-based assumptions of schooling within Denmark. Similarly, the French researcher drew attention to the 'branding' evident in English secondary schools with their uniforms, and entrance hall displays of sporting and creative arts achievements. This was seen in opposition to the French ideal of a common and equitable school experience for all. The English researcher drew attention to the relatively small, unhurried and less fragmented nature of the Danish *folkskole,* in contrast to the larger comprehensive schools in England where curriculum subject boundaries and academic/pastoral boundaries are more clearly drawn. Such observations, when discussed within international teams of researchers, can enable a more contextualised and nuanced way of understanding the influence and consequences of such difference in terms of policy and practice.

Meanwhile, North/South collaborative research has drawn upon post-colonial perspectives and critical theory to create more equitable and participatory approaches to comparative research that highlight local voice, as well as the increased recognition and inclusion of indigenous knowledge (Bainton and Crossley 2009; Tikly and Barrett 2011). This can present problems and Louisy (1997) describes tensions in relation to being an inside researcher working within a small island state where communities are close-knit and where 'everybody knows everyone'. Other researchers, having begun work as total outsiders, have then been drawn into insider positions making it increasingly difficult to maintain a degree of

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intellectual distance. Crossley and Vulliamy (1997, 1984, 2006) have written extensively about such dilemmas with reference to their own fieldwork in Papua New Guinea. They demonstrate the strengths of well grounded, multi-level case studies that combine both insider and outsider perspectives. They argue that this can facilitate research that is more sensitive to local context, while retaining systematic rigour and an important degree of detachment from the culture and world view being studied. Such work is seen as holding the potential for improvement in the impact of research upon policy and practice within diverse cultural contexts, and for stimulating local research capacity building in ways that do much to challenge traditional insider/outsider relationships (Barrett *et al.* 2011).

In recognising these and other contemporary methodological trends we accept that, in practice, insider-outsider boundaries can and do occur, sometimes as fixed, immoveable entities with obstacles to overcome, and at other times as something more fluid, almost invisible, but nevertheless difficult to penetrate or negotiate. The following section thus draws on an historical perspective to examine the intellectual origins of 'otherness' as a foundation for the subsequent re-examination of the implications for contemporary forms of cross-cultural and comparative investigation.

Some theoretical positions in relation to the insider/outsider

Insider/outsider perspectives have been discussed, theorised and researched across many academic disciplines over several decades: in anthropology from the perspective of the observer studying different cultures; in sociology with regard to social groupings and class, the dynamics of power relationships and social mobility; in psychology with regard to group behaviour and interaction; in linguistics and intercultural studies in the context of second

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language acquisition and cultural integration; and in philosophy in terms of the individual, the self, phenomenology and reflexivity. All these perspectives have left their mark on research theories, methodologies and methods - including in the field of international and cross-cultural comparative education.

On a broader level, being inside or outside is often part of everyday language and consciousness. For thousands of years human beings have erected boundaries to protect their own against 'outsiders'. In many societies, as Arnot (2012) points out, individuals and groups have strong loyalties to their own communities in which they have a role and a contribution to make, and a set of relationships that they can draw upon when in need. These civic identities are often outside the nation state being located within, for example, ethnic or family structures. Not surprisingly, it is usual for people to define who they are in relation to who they are not.   In some ancient cultures the monstrous 'Other', such as the Chimaera, defines and makes clear the civilised self. In modern culture, the song "*Baby it's cold outside*" (Loesser 1944) seductively invites the listener to stay indoors where it is warm and welcoming. Being an insider can make one feel comfortable and ensure a sense of belonging. On the other hand, a person can be an insider, while feeling like an outsider. Differentiated groups from within the 'inner' circle can exercise power, sometimes beyond what can be expected: just as outsiders can be powerful oppressors - the strangers who are not really part of us. Some outsiders may just be travellers, newcomers, migrants or settlers trying hard to become part of the insider majority (Gudykunst 1983). As teachers and researchers we often assume that drawing learners inside the learning community is, indeed, a good thing. We aim to create a sense of safety and belonging, though this can also lead to the imposition of one set of values and norms over another, something that we will return to later.

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This sense of belonging, of wanting to be part of a community, has been explored by many scholars, including early social scientists such as Ferdinand Toennies (1855-1936) against the background of increasing modernity, industrialisation, urbanisation and isolation. Toennies theorised about *Gemeinschaft* (communit*y*) which offered intimacy and warmth, as opposed to *Gesellschaft* (society) which was seen as unwelcoming to outsiders. He argued, well over a hundred years ago, that modern society was caught in an irresistible process of disintegration. Its very progress was doomed. It was the community that would offer comfort, while the outside world was inevitably strange and somewhat hostile (Lindenfeld 1988)

The German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1928), also considered the role of the outsider from the perspective of the individual migrant in his seminal paper, 'The Stranger' (Simmel 1908). This was set in the context of a Germany where, by 1907, five per cent of its working population (12 million) were migrants (Bade 1983). The resulting fear of foreigners/outsiders became emotive and widespread, and this was coupled with the desire to preserve one's own cultural heritage or insiderness. Paradoxically perhaps, Simmel also explored the notion of the newcomer or wanderer who does not mind being an outsider. Indeed, his stranger is strong and self-sufficient. Simmel's sociology was informed by the dialectic approach which characterises the individual and society. He argued that there is no such thing as an harmonious group because any social relationship needs to include both harmony and conflict, attraction and repulsion, love and hatred:

> The stranger thus is not to be considered here in the usual sense of the term, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the man who comes today and stays tomorrow – the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going.
> (Simmel cited in Levine, 1971:143)

Simmel's understanding of the stranger is that of an objective outsider arguing that, because the stranger is not bound by roots and traditions, they can confront the group with a distinctly objective attitude. Simmel's stranger is an expert who views the new environment with a

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degree of objectivity bringing with it a freedom to understand more clearly, without the filter of the cultural prejudices of the insider:

> Objectivity may also be defined as freedom: The objective man is not bound by the ties which could prejudice his perception, his understanding, and his assessment of data.
>
> (Simmel cited in Levine, 1971:146)

Simmel, however, did agree that this objectivity could also be seen as partial because, he argued, "Objectivity is by no means non-participation, it is a positive and definitive kind of participation" (Simmel in Levine, 1971, 145). Insiders may confide in outsiders on issues they would not discuss with those on the inside. This type of stranger, or outsider, is seen in a positive light, as the expert who sees things clearly and has much to contribute. The contemporary researcher, too, can experience that sense of being the knowledgeable outsider, the objective one, who can observe and perceive matters more clearly than a subjective insider. The methodological limitations and 'political' implications of such dualistic thinking underpin the significance of our renewed analysis and reconsideration.

Alfred Schuetz, (1899-1959) took an altogether different stance when considering the role of the individual outsider, the stranger. Schuetz was an Austrian migrant to the USA from Nazi Germany in 1938. This had a bearing on much of his writings. His equally seminal paper 'The Stranger' (1944) concerns an individual who tries to be at least tolerated by the insider group that s/he approaches. Insiders are viewed as the dominant group to which the newcomer, or stranger, tries to become accepted by seeking to gain cultural knowledge of the insider group. Such new knowledge may remain incoherent, inconsistent and lacking in clarity, but for members of the in-group it may offer sufficient coherence for allowing the stranger to be admitted.

> The stranger, therefore, approaches the other group as a newcomer in the true meaning of the term. At best he may be able to share the present and the future….however he remains excluded from such experiences of its past. Seen from the point of view of the approached group, he is a man without history.
>
> (Schuetz 1944:502)

This idea of a 'past', or history, is also important in terms of interpreting meaning and understanding when we look across cultures. It is noteworthy that the strangers of both Simmel and Schuetz perform a different function with regard to conflict within the group: Simmel's stranger observes conflict situations within the local group from the outside; while Schuetz's stranger is in conflict from within. A comparison between these two concepts shows that Simmel's stranger is credited with objectivity because the locals are seen to need the outsider perspective, while Schuetz's stranger needs to work hard to seek acceptance from within the new community in order to become an insider.

It is not difficult to see how these two opposing perspectives of the insider and outsider have relevance for the field of international and comparative education. Concepts such as objectivity and subjectivity are central to all research deliberations. In one sense we are all newcomers, strangers or outsiders though, as researchers, we are rarely entirely on one side or the other – and in practice, we are often somewhere in between. This tension is developed by Schuetz (1945) through his concept of the 'homecomer' who is, simultaneously, both insider and outsider. The homecomer is someone who has been away for a prolonged period of time and is about to rejoin a group even though s/he may feel like an outsider to it. Homecomers expect to return to an environment of which they think they still have intimate knowledge - although the home environment may have changed. The Chinese have a nickname for such a returnee, 'sea turtle' (*hai-gui* in Mandarin), which refers to someone who was born on a shore but has been across the sea, and is now returning to that same shore (Gill 2010). This ambiguity - of being both inside and outside - affects many who have spent

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a prolonged period in a different culture and who experience a sense of not quite belonging in

either culture. The following quotation, from an international student based in the UK,

illustrates this:

> I have got two sets of values: one is for here [the UK] and one is for China…I
> think they are just natural…I am grown-up here. When I went back to China, I
> just went back to being the same – who I was before I came here…but it
> [England] is not my place. I am a guest and the guest is always less powerful.
>
> (Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010:17)

This is important because it raises the relative power of insiders and outsiders, which can

have profound effects on all involved in the research process. It is interesting to note that, in

this situation, the student sees himself/herself as less powerful as an outsider because of

his/her status as a 'guest'.

The researcher Merton (1972) examines the insider/outsider concept, not from the perspective

of the individual, but from that of social groupings such as suppressed black communities in a

predominantly white American society. He argues that researchers should look at power

relationships beyond their own organisations and their own contexts; being an insider does

not necessarily mean the same as being a member of the community being researched.

Merton goes on to say that in structural terms, we are all insiders and outsiders, members of

some groups and, sometimes, not of others. He writes about distrust between social groupings

and of extreme insiderism. He argues that this can lead to a mistaken assumption that, for

example, only black scholars can understand black issues, or only women can understand

women's issues. Following this logic, the outsider would be characterised as having a

structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups. This can set up essentialist

views of one group being superior to the other, or some knowledge being more relevant or

valuable than others. Merton argues that there is no need to be Caesar in order to understand

Caesar though, referring back to Fox (1989), without a detailed understanding of the history

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and cultural underpinning of a group, outsiders may be distracted by what they see as different and so focus on certain aspects, such as collectivism or individualism, without real depth of analysis or deep understanding. Researchers, and policy makers, beware!

Sociologically, of course, we might consider that we are all both insiders and outsiders: members of some groups and not of others by reason of gender, language, cultural/professional background, nationality, ethnicity and age, adding to the fluidity of such terms. Katyal and King (2011) describe their educational research carried out in Hong Kong, a city in which they had each lived and worked for a long time. At one level, they regarded themselves as insiders, since they had a degree of familiarity with the city and were researching their own professional environment. However, neither was ethnically Chinese (one an Indian woman and the other an American man) and this became an important factor while collecting data in a number of Hong Kong schools. Here there were elements of outsiderness within a dominant Chinese culture where different understandings of what is meant by leadership and management in a Confucian context constantly challenged their own Western cultural values and sensitivities.

Soudien (2009) also usefully explores the concepts of insider and outsiderness by examining two dominant critiques of globalisation, that is, the 'delinkers' who stand outside globalisation and its educational cultures, as opposed to the 'subverters', who call for the reform of structures from within. With reference to the developing world and the developed world, he links the term 'outsiderness' to rationality and individualism, the 'white' hegemony, on the one hand, and to power and oppression within globalisation discourses on the other.

> Evident in the variety of these outsider approaches to
> globalisation, it needs to be said, is a serious and sustained

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> critique of the hierachylising and ranking, the dividing, and indeed the 'othering' proclivities of globalisation.
>
> (Soudien, 2009:40)

Soudien extends his analysis in ways that directly relate to our own theoretical and methodological concerns by arguing that what is important is to recognise the impact that insider/outsider perspectives have had on educational practice around the world.

> Critically, as inclusive educational policy has attempted to be in most countries, it has come to settle around normative markers – literacy and competence in the global economy – that advantages the English-speaking middle class groupings and disadvantages those who do not fit this profile or who struggle to obtain the attributes of English-speaking middleclass groupings and middle-class behaviour.
>
> (Soudien, 2009:43)

However, such polarisation, in Soudien's view, does not reflect the realities of the gap, the third space, the in-between which is a feature of everyday life. The third space is neither inside nor outside but pivots across the difference of being outside and inside. The old and the new can live side by side. Different cultural traditions can be accommodated with the more powerful discourses of the new.

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Mediating cultural and linguistic meaning in the 'third' space

If we move beyond the bipolar and essentialist constructs of insider/outsiderness we must acknowledge the space and tensions between - just as individual migrants are not just immigrants/outsiders but also newcomers. To some extent their own culture, their own ideas and belief systems travel with them, and this allows them to create new understandings and interpretations within the host communities (Cowen 2009). Researchers also have multiple identities which can play out differently in different situations. Moreover, they have past histories and what the German philosopher, Gadamer (2012) refers to as 'prejudices' or pre-

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judgement (*prae-judicium*) creating an 'historically-effected conciousness' (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein)*, which Gadamer sees as a positive attribute. It is through our historically-effected consciousnesses that we understand and interpret the world. For Gadamer, the past has a truly pervasive power in the phenomenon of understanding. The past cannot be restricted to merely supplying the texts or events that make up the objects of interpretation, but it is what creates our horizon (*Horizont*) of understanding. Thus Gadamer develops a concept of understanding that takes the interpreter's present participation in history into account, when he says:

> The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable. Now if what we have before our eyes is not only the artistic tradition of a people, or a historical tradition, or the principles of modern science in its hermeneutical precondition but rather the whole of our experience, then we have succeeded, I think, in joining the experiences to our own universal and human experience of life.
>
> (Gadamer 1976:13)

So, as researchers, we cannot escape our past histories but Gadamer sees that as a strength which enables us to have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of new situations and experience. He goes on to argue that in seeking to interpret the world we should create a 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung)* which enables us to mediate between the familiar and the strange, or the inside and the outside, in a way which leaves neither unaffected. However, he is not referring to a compromise of understanding but what Warnke (1987, 169) argues is a conversation in which, *all participants are led beyond their initial positions towards a consensus that is more differentiated and articulated than the separate views with which the conversation-partners began.* Gadamer himself argues that the aim is not necessarily to agree with other points of view but to understand them:

> In a conversation, when we have discovered the other person's standpoint and horizon, his ideas become intelligible without our necessarily having to agree with him; so also when someone thinks historically, he comes to understand the meaning of what has been handed down without necessarily agreeing with it or seeing himself in it.
>
> (Gadamer 2012:302)

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In a similar vein, the cultural theorist, Bhabha draws attention to a 'Third Space' which can be seen as between the insider and outsider. Communication between the two requires the 'production of meaning' which relies, not only on a general understanding of the use of language, but an understanding of the 'performance' of language in a particular context, which might not be fully understood on either side:

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation….The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other.
>
> (Bhabha 1994:53)

This draws into the discussion the role of language in mediating meaning. As outsiders we need to be able to understand and interpret, not only what is said in a literal sense, but also the underlying meaning of historically and culturally-embedded discourse. There is a growing body of literature from cultural and activity theorists, and others, which argues that, in the process of intercultural communication, there is a third perspective which is constructed when the insider and outsider meet. This liminal space of in-betweeness can be an area of hostility but also one of great creativity, mutual understanding and new wisdom. As Bakhtin suggests (1986:7):

> A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning….We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we see answers to our questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths….. such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched.

Bakhtin refers to this as 'stranger knowledge' and argues that this new awareness is not necessarily vocalised but can involve hearing what has not been said. This requires what psychologists refer to as cognitive empathy and Sennet (2012) argues

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that this requires a curiosity and openness to new understandings and a dialogic form of communication which is subjunctive and tentative, rather than declarative. This can be difficult if you enter the research space as the 'expert' outsider, with opinions and values developed elsewhere. However, international and comparative researchers can often be found working within this third space, whether as individual researchers who have knowledge of more than one cultural and linguistic context, or as cross-cultural teams which include both cultural and linguistic insiders/outsiders.

Searching for linguistic and conceptual equivalence, a fundamental aspiration for cross-cultural researchers, can be both time consuming and difficult to realise, whether working across national boundaries or across cultural borders within the same national context. The REFLEX study, mentioned earlier, demonstrates this. It was a qualitative study which also involved a large-scale survey of fifteen European countries and Japan, focusing on university graduates, their higher education experiences and subsequent employment five years after graduation. This work challenged the large team of researchers' essentialist notions of cross-cultural knowledge and understanding. The extensive questionnaire comprised eleven sections which included educational and related experiences, transition from study to work, employment history since graduation, current work, competences needed for work and evaluation of study programme. Designing and implementing the survey was anything but a straight forward process. The countries involved collected graduates' data differently, depending on the availability of central databases containing graduates' contact details. Researchers in Switzerland and the Netherlands were able to use a national register from which to draw their sample. But in many other countries (for example, Finland, Germany and the UK) researchers had to rely on the co-operation of individual higher education institutions, and their interpretations of data protection issues, to access graduates' contact details. These various interpretations of 'data protection' challenged preconceived notions of what is ethically right or wrong. Similarly, survey questions concerning ethnicity, common practice in many countries, were inconceivable on grounds a troubled history in Germany and Austria, yet this point is not easily understood by outsiders. Furthermore, reciprocal explanations of terminology were time consuming and difficult to realise. Words such as "job" or "occupation", even "profession", or poor translations leading to expressions such as

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'on the job', carry different meaning in different cultural contexts. The term 'profession', for example, is complex because in the Anglo-Saxon meaning it often refers to a qualification accredited by, and providing entry to, professional bodies, usually after graduation. While in many other countries this accreditation role is assigned to the universities. Over the course of the project, such cross-cultural distinctions became blurred revealing the limitations of overly simplistic and essentialist conceptualisations (Arthur 2006; Arthur *et al.* 2007; Little and Arthur 2010).

Theories of representation, which might help clarify these points, distinguish between the reflective approach, in which language functions like a mirror to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world; the intentional approach, where as individuals we use language to convey meaning or to communicate things which are special and unique to us; and the constructivist approach in which meaning and language operate through symbolic practices and processes. The relationship between language, knowledge and culture is a complex one. After all, language must mean something, in the sense of mental representation. In other words, representation is the production of meaning of the concepts in our mind through language. As Hall (1997, 24) explains, the main point is that meaning does not inhere in things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that produces meaning – which is culturally moulded. Meanings change, adapt or fade away in the course of time and from one location to another. In the constructivist sense, there is a social, public aspect to language. Things carry no meaning in themselves. People construct meaning using representational systems, such as concepts and signs, within the context of their own cultural environment. However, paradigms of culture pose a multitude of questions yet offer few answers. Their interpretation rests on one's own understanding and perception of a given context or situation. Cultural understanding is therefore not readily transferable from one country to another or one community to another, particularly if language barriers intervene. This is where simplistic or aggregated understandings of different educational practices and their influence on pupil attainment, such as 'whole class teaching', 'rote learning', 'personalised learning', 'assessment for learning', can lead to distortions within education policy making.

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We have moved into a new global intellectual context where research partnerships require insiders and outsiders to work together new ways. Those who have engaged in research across different cultures and linguistic communities know how complex and, at the same time, exciting such ventures can be. However, research is not an aim in itself, a goal to be reached for individual satisfaction. Researchers must seek to communicate with others; findings are to be shared with communities similar to or different from one's own. Researchers are concerned with creating mutual understanding and sharing cross-cultural meaning – what Crossley (2008, 2009) has referred to as a 'bridging of cultures and traditions'. In other words, scholars construct meaning out of their own situation, and then mediate that meaning to others in a spirit of mutuality and co-operation. In this case there are two meanings, the primary meaning which is constructed in relation to the self and its cultural context; and the secondary meaning which is collectively constructed by the group. Shotter (1993) agrees with much that has been argued above by suggesting that both sets of meanings lead to newly created knowledge which he refers to as a third kind of knowledge. This third kind of knowledge is derived from within a shared situation, a social institution or society, or, in this instance, from collaborative comparative research. In this case individual researchers cannot come to a shared understanding of the phenomenon under investigation on their own. They are dependent on processes of negotiation within the group. Recognising the potential of this 'third' space to generate new insights for both the individual researcher and the cross-cultural research team has important theoretical and methodological implications for international and comparative education. Moreover, returning to some of the issues raised at the outset of this paper, such contextually situated analysis has the potential to counter-balance current preoccupations with the comparison of large, cross-national datasets where meaning is often attributed to aggregated identities and categories.

Implications for contemporary teaching and research in comparative and international education

Within this journal, *Compare,* many scholars have contributed to the rich collective history and well-established literature that underpins the field of comparative and international education. See, for example, articles on the 'reconceptualisation' of the field in the Special

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Issue published in 1999 following the inauguration of BAICE itself (Volume 29, No. 3, 1999); and the 2010 Special Issue celebrating *Compare's* 40th Anniversary (Evans and Robinson-Pant, 2012). In much of this work, comparative education is characterised as a multidisciplinary field of enquiry, which draws on global networks and applies both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Traditionally, some studies seek to undertake multinational comparisons, at the system level, while others focus on one region or one country. Some scholars work alone in cultural contexts unfamiliar to them, while others work in international teams. Many studies focus attention on global trends and their influences on education. Some researchers are multi-lingual, while others rely on cultural mediators and translation. Some researchers work in professional contexts which are familiar to them, while others seek to understand cultural and professional contexts of which they have no previous knowledge. Some researchers are seen as insiders or outsiders; some find they are both; and many feel they need greater help in negotiating and understanding the potential and implications of such fluid and challenging roles. With the internationalisation of higher education we also note that aspects of insiderness and outsiderness are becoming increasingly relevant to students and teachers in higher education. In the UK, for example, there were 47,000 Chinese students registered in 2008-2009, and 34,000 students from India in the same year (HEFCE 2011). For those studying in contexts which are culturally different from their own, there are many linguistic, cultural and ethical complexities that stem from being an outsider. Think of the Chinese student comparing the impact of quality assurance on academic work in English and Chinese higher education who experiences differential barriers with regard to access and linguistic understanding. Similarly, for international students studying at Western universities but collecting data in their own national context, there can be complexities and challenges in trying to work within different cultural and academic conventions. For instance, the African student studying at a European university but

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researching education in the pastoral communities of their home country; or the urbanised Mexican student, of European extraction, who studies the educational practices of indigenous communities in rural Mexico. Such students and their supervisors face ethical challenges around appropriate research questions and designs, as well as what constitutes 'data' and/or 'informed consent' in communities which distrust the need for signed paperwork (Robinson-Pant 2005; Robinson-Pant and Singal, N. 2013; Sikes 2013). The subtleties of representation and local voice may be constrained when working to different research norms and requirements. Students and their supervisors may need to seek new ways of working across historical, cultural, ethnic, linguistic and national boundaries.

The challenges are numerous and time, contexts and places can, and often do, shift insider/outsider perspectives, perhaps to a point where such distinctions become meaningless. Power relationships within the research process also deserve greater acknowledgement, and in this respect we could do more to interrogate the nature of the power of the researcher. Insiders can withhold data or pass on misleading information. Outsiders, on the other hand, may have to do more to question their own values and biases, along with the typicality of given phenomena under investigation (Tobin *et.al* 1989). Cultural and linguistic knowledge of the education system or context under investigation can be both an advantage and, at times, also a disadvantage. Insiders may recognise the cultural and linguistic complexities of given phenomena, but this may also hinder the research process and reduce much needed clarity. It can thus be argued that linguistic and cultural knowledge may be less important than the sharing and understanding of professional concerns across contextual boundaries. Teachers all over the world, for example, may have similar experiences when dealing with children, but understanding the contrasting influences that arise from different historical and cultural traditions, may be much more problematic. Similarly, researchers need to do more to ask

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themselves about what kind of knowledge has shaped their strategies and research findings, where has this knowledge come from and how has it shaped their view of the world.

Conclusions

So, to conclude, factors that include ethnicity, language, gender, age, academic status, and personal and professional experience all shape and influence insider/outsider perspectives on the research process – and these in turn influence methodological approaches, research designs, data analysis and evaluation. Questions that arise from this generate important implications for all researchers, and for long held assumptions about the benefits of working as an objective outsider to 'make the familiar strange'. How can outsiders, without the detailed historical and cultural understanding of the insider, interpret what they see? Is it possible, or appropriate, to objectify the subjective and, bearing the researcher's reflexivity in mind, to subjectify what seems to be at first glance objective? Do international and comparative researchers have to have teaching experience in order to research teachers? Do they have to speak the language of those being researched as has long been argued? Indeed, what can be learned from the literature relating to insider and outsiderness for the increasingly mobile research community of the 21st century?

Being an insider or outsider, we argue, has much to do with our own constantly evolving lives, academic scholarship, previous experiences, and prior knowledge of the context to be researched. It has much to do with how we each perceive the world, and how we interpret what we see and experience. As Hellawell maintains:

> There are then "subtly varying shades of 'insiderism' and 'outsiderism'. The more important point has to do with empathy, trying to understand the other person, or the other context, rather than closeness or distance. Moreover, it can sometimes become

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> apparent that the same researcher can slide along more than one insider-outsider continuum and in both directions during the research process (Hellawell, 2006:489)

A key word here is 'empathy'; this means, the capacity to recognise and share thoughts or feelings that are being experienced by others. International comparativists often aim to build bridges, to mediate between different cultural communities, between those on the inside and those outside – and to construct intercultural meaning. Researchers are both inside and outside the learning environment, and inside and outside of the phenomena under investigation. Research may require us to to distance ourselves and yet at the same time to become immersed. We are neither complete observers nor complete participants but often working in that 'third space' in between. Important, too, is the interactive process shaped by the researcher's personal history and biography, gender and ethnicity. Here reflexivity and situated ethics increasingly matter. The researcher, as the mediator of meaning, seeks a new body of ethical directiveness fitted for our contemporary world. In this, mutual understanding and shared meaning are important. While Habermas (1984) suggests that our goal should be finding agreement rather than just understanding, Gadamer (2012) recognises that, at least in the historical sense, understanding may not always bring agreement. We can understand the past without agreeing with its precepts. Bhabha (1994) takes this a stage further by arguing that it is by moving through the 'third space' of intercultural dialogue, beyond the concepts of the insider and the outsider, that we can produce new meaning that does not result in 'merging or mixing' but mutually enriches understanding. Certainly, all researchers need to come to terms with their own position within the research process and engage with a diversity of expectations and perspectives – many of which may be fragmented, imaginary, or even contradictory and divisive. For those working in higher education it is important to see this as part of a developmental process.

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We thank our reviewers for advice in improving the final version of this paper and hope that

our efforts to encourage others to revisit such issues and dilemmas will be both informative

and thought-provoking, and contribute to the advancement of theoretical and methodological

thinking within and beyond the field itself.

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