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Insider and Outsider Perspective in Ethnographic Research

Panelists: Anthony Naaeke, Anastacia Kurylo, David Linton, Marymount Manhattan College; Michael Grabowski, Manhattan College; Marie L. Radford, Rutgers University

NYSICA Panel Discussion, Fall 2010

Emic and etic perspectives are consequential for research because they impact the research process, the findings of a study, and the argument made by the researcher about the implications of these findings. Emic perspectives are those taken by a researcher who is a member of the community being studied. Etic perspectives are those taken by a researcher who is an outsider to the community being studied. The nature of ethnographic work involves the interpretation of cultures (Geertz, 1973). Therefore, there is a responsibility on the part of the researcher to the culture being studied because the perspective the researcher takes impacts the knowledge produced about that cultural group.

Discussion of these issues related to research trends, limitations of the research, and the merits and demerits of insider versus outsider status of the researcher, have been contentious in ethnographic studies. Questions regarding the point of reference/departure, methodology, and ethnocentric bias of the researcher are grounds of contestation for such research. For example, the essays contained in a book edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (1986), *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, “highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts” (p. 2) by ethnographers: both insiders and outsiders (natives and non-natives).

Ethnographic work constructs culture through the process of research and writing. Ethnography “decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion” (p. 2). In other words, notwithstanding the commitment of the ethnographer to the objective criteria established by the discipline, “ethnographic truths are partial” (p. 7). Beside the personal biases of the ethnographer (Shuter 2000, p. 11), there is a possibility that an ethnographer may be deliberately told partial truths by interviewees. Additionally, a culture’s body of knowledge may be revealed bit-by-bit in separate and apparently disconnected events and messages that are not immediately known to the ethnographer. The proceedings of an earlier discussion of the insider/outsider (emic/etic) debate have been published in a book edited by Headland, Pike, and Harris (1990) and titled, *Emics and etics: the insider/outsider debate*. The book explores the degree to which an ethnographer or researcher is able to immerse himself/herself into

the culture being studied such that he/she can blend his/her etic (outsider) perspective with the emic (insider) perspective of the society being studied.

Still, and after more than a decade following the publication by Headland, Pike and Harris (1990), discussions about insider versus outsider status of the researcher remain alive and relevant. After all, research, particularly qualitative research, continues to take various shapes and forms. No wonder therefore, that a panel of communication professors and graduate students met at the New York State Communication Association Annual Convention in October 2010 to discuss their experiences as researchers, either as insiders or outsiders. This panel highlighted the issues involved when a researcher is a member of the community being studied. Panelists addressed the pros and cons of being an insider or an outsider in the community they study. This panel also addressed why communication matters to alleviate some of the issues that arise when conducting research as an insider or an outsider. Panelists represented a variety of research areas including rhetoric, library studies, family, media, and intercultural communication. This paper summarizes their responses to questions posed by the moderator of the panel in the hopes of keeping the discussion alive and with the intent of developing these ideas into a book in the future.

Question: Tell us in a few sentences about your research and whether you view yourself as an outsider to or insider in the group you study?

Anthony: “My research focuses on qualitative analysis of cultural narratives of the Dagaaba of Ghana. I consider myself as an insider in this group because I am a native Dagaaba (singular of Dagaaba) who grew up among this group of people in Ghana.”

Marie: “My primary research focuses on qualitative approaches to the study of interpersonal communication in face-to-face and virtual encounters between librarians and library users. Before becoming a full-time faculty member at Pratt and Rutgers, I was an academic librarian and a school librarian for a number of years. Since I have so much experience, I consider myself to be an insider, although I am no longer a practicing librarian, so from a strict ethnographic point of view, I am an outsider.”

David: “I lecture, teach and publish on the topic of the social construction of menstruation. I view myself as both an outsider and, surprisingly, an insider. Obviously, as a man and a non-menstruator I am studying a biological phenomenon that is "foreign" to me. However, as a member of the gender/class that has been the shaper and determiner of the values, superstitions, taboos, and social practices surrounding menstruation, I am an insider. In other words, physically menstruation belongs to women, socially it is largely a creation of male beliefs, fears and needs.

I think that a continuous self-evaluation is advisable when researching a group. I like to ask myself the following questions: Am I understanding this moment in the same way as my participant is? What are the barriers preventing me from doing so, or is there a barrier

that would prevent me from even knowing the answer to this question? What other ways would an outsider perceive this moment?"

Michael: "I am writing a book titled: Why We Love Movies: Neurocinematics. As a part of this project, I was a Scholar-in-Residence at NYU's Center for Neural Science to observe and participate in experiments involving the study of film perception. My time there helped me discover not only what these researchers were studying, but also how they were studying which led me to reconceptualize the book to including the story of their culture and work. So in that sense, I was an outsider as an ethnographer documenting the culture of a neuroscience lab, but I was also an insider in that I, like them, was interested in the research they were conducting."

Anastacia: "I study interpersonally communicated stereotypes and the role these play in the perpetuation of stereotypic knowledge. I take a multi-method approach but currently am using thematic analysis of participants' first-hand accounts describing interactions in which stereotypes were interpersonally communicated. I study stereotypes broadly rather than look at a specific group that is stereotyped. Visually I look as though I could come from a variety of ethnic or racial backgrounds so for these groups I could be perceived as an insider. But certainly there are some groups for whom I would be perceived as an outsider. When I was in Russia, I was definitely perceived as an outsider."

Question: What advantage(s) do you have as an insider/outsider within the culture you study?

Anthony: "As an insider I know the language of the Dagaaba as well as the narratives that I now analyze. I grew up listening to these narratives and retelling them myself to my peers. Additionally, growing up among the Dagaaba helps me to know and understand the contexts in which cultural narratives arise and the unstated messages in these narratives. Some of the research informants are known to me personally and that makes it easy to contact them."

Marie: "The most important advantage I have is access to informants and data from insiders who trust me and are familiar with my work and the applications to practice. I've been able to easily recruit participants for focus groups, surveys, and interviews through professional channels such as listserves, professional organizations, etc. Also at times my librarian colleagues have helped me recruit user participants. In one phase of my research I needed to recruit teens for focus groups and three librarians in three different states were able to recruit groups of teens (and to get parental consent forms signed). This research would have been extremely difficult to accomplish without their help."

Anastacia: "It is to my advantage to have an ambiguous cultural identity that people are unable to pin down. I think, in general, it makes people cautious about saying anything too offensive because they don't want to offend me accidentally. When people assume that I am from a minority group they may view my research as more credible because

they presume I am an insider from a group who is negatively affected by prejudice and discrimination and that this is a personal motivation for me to pursue research on the topic. I tend not to disclose my ethnic or racial background in general unless directly asked. I have the advantage of being able to use the ambiguity of my identity to work the insider/ outsider angle as appropriate.

The ambiguity in my group membership hurts my research for the same reason it helps. If participants view me as from a minority group they may be more cautious in what stereotypes they want to report and more careful about admitting they communicate these at all. For example, in one study 98% of participants reported about stereotypes that other people communicated rather than those the participants themselves had communicated even though they were encouraged to do either. This self-report bias might have been exacerbated by the ambiguity of my cultural identity. If they could identify what ethnicity or race I was easily, they might have felt comfortable admitting they communicated stereotypes of other groups (than what they identified me as). The type of stereotypes would no doubt still be affected, but perhaps my participants would have been more willing to admit that they had been the ones who communicated these.”

David: “As an outsider I bring to the topic the advantage of distance and perspective. As an insider I bring to the topic the advantage of being of the class that has shaped the prevailing value systems.”

Michael: “The advantage as an outsider is that it allowed me to ask the ‘dumb’ questions, the simple questions that someone with insider status would be assumed to already know. I used that to my advantage to ask about some basic assumptions researchers make, which in turn would bring them to question some of these assumptions. Sometimes the question I asked was one that they had not bothered to think about beforehand, and the resulting discussion revealed new truths.”

Question: What challenge(s) have you experienced with being an insider/ outsider within the culture you study?

Michael: “Of course, the advantages of balancing the insider/outsider dialectic brings with it challenges of both as well. As an outsider barging in on their lab, it took a while of gaining the trust of some of the postdocs. Who is this guy, really, and what does he want? I also had to cut through some performances, trying to understand when information was significant or if I was being diverted by someone’s self-promotion. I saw a similarity to bringing a camera into a room: at first, people either shy away or perform, but as time passes, the camera becomes invisible to many, and backstage performance emerge. The more that time passed and I gained some insider status, the more I had to remind myself that I was not working in the lab but working on the lab. Reminding myself of that critical distance became more difficult as I became more familiar with the research.”

Marie: “Maintaining objectivity in qualitative research is always a challenge. I have recruited a diverse group of graduate students on my research team (including communication students who have no library experience) which helps to keep me grounded in the data.”

Anthony: “Sometimes informants think that I should know the answers to some of the questions I ask because I grew up among them. Also, I get intimidated or shy to ask some questions that I should have known. Traveling to interview people is also a challenge due to constraints such as transportation or money to motivate people to spend time with me.”

David: “Initially many women respond to my interest with suspicion and caution due to the fact that men are generally thought to have a negative attitude toward menstruation. However, once both men and women become comfortable with my comfort and nonjudgmental approach they tend to relax, open up and appreciate the opportunity to engage.”

Anastacia: “The reason I proposed the original panel is because I was fascinated by Janice Kelly's work on fatherhood and David's work on menstruation in which the investigators were clearly not members of the groups they studied. I was curious about what I assumed would be disadvantages of being an outsider and how these were handled.

Question: What are practical considerations you take into account as an insider/outsider when you study this culture?

Anastacia: “I am careful to represent the topic of stereotypes as a multi-group construct rather than as one that affects only groups that are victims of prejudice and discrimination. For my research, stereotypes of nerds are as informative to study as stereotypes of women. This inclusivity is not characteristic of communication research that typically discusses stereotypes of specific groups but *is* typical of psychology research on this topic.”

David: “Mainly I have found it very important to be neutral or even openly curious about the topic so as to dispel concerns about negative values.”

Michael: “In my case, reminding myself of my original project and its scope became hard to do. I wanted to collaborate and participate in many of the research projects going on at the lab, and I would have to pull back, reminding myself of my own project and my purpose for being there: to understand the culture of the lab and its approach to the study of film perception.”

Anthony: “As an insider, there is a possibility of being biased in favor of my culture and I have to be aware of this and try as much as possible to be objective. Other times, I take it for granted that my native status guarantees that I have clear and accurate knowledge of

the culture whereas I could be wrong. To overcome this, I ask other natives in order to be accurate.”

Marie: “Logistically, being an insider has been enormously helpful. For example see my answer above on recruiting participants, but in addition, librarians and library organizations have provided meeting space to conduct focus groups and interviews in the field with no charge.”

Question: What responses have you received, positive or negative, about your research? How have these affected your work?

Michael: “I was fortunate enough to present along with several of the researchers on a panel at the New York Academy of Science, where I brought my outsider perspective to their research. I was quite encouraged by the response, as it generated new ideas from both the panel and the audience and suggested the fruitfulness of collaboration between science and the humanities. I look forward to receiving feedback on my book once I finish it, to see if I did faithfully capture their understanding of their work as they see it.”

David: “Mostly they have been positive, especially from women. I have been accepted into the world of menstrual researchers and activists having been asked to join the Board of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, to be the keynote speaker at their most recent conference and to become the editor of the association's newsletter. However, publishers and editors have been reluctant to accept for publication some of my work because they fear or think that women will not buy/read books written about menstruation by men.”

Marie: “I have received very positive feedback about my work from practitioners and researchers. Last year I was given the highest award from the American Library Association for distinguished contribution to library reference service. Quite an honor to be recognized like this for the impact my research has had on improving service to library users.”

Anthony: “Sometimes I have received very positive comments about my research. Other times some comments indicate that my interpretation of my cultural narratives was either inaccurate or that I read too much into the narratives. Comments like that help me to clarify my position or conduct further research to confirm the accuracy of my work.”

Anastacia: “Ironically, because my work is interdisciplinary my biggest challenge has been transitioning from an outsider into being an insider in either psychology or communication in terms of getting published. The feedback I have received from editors has been positive about my work; however, framing the studies in ways that represent both fields well has been a challenge. Because I am not an insider in the psychology field, I am not as familiar with the norms and knowledge of that culture. Additionally, because the topic of stereotypes is not a focal point of communication research, I have had to find

ways to frame studies to present the material in a relevant way for communication journals. The responses I get from editors remind me of my outsider status.”

Question: One critique that came up in the NYSCA panel is that the insider/outsider dichotomy is too simplistic to explain the process we are seeking to describe. In what ways is the process more complex?

Marie: “I’m not sure about this one. I don’t have enough knowledge to comment. I would agree that the insider/outsider facet is just one piece of a complex picture when qualitative research approaches are examined. Subjectivity is, of course, unavoidable, and comes from the sum total of the researcher’s experiences, group membership, and cultural background.”

Anthony: “The insider/outsider status can wrongly assume that insiders are better suited to do research about their culture and outsiders are not but that is not exactly right. Some insiders may be emotionally and ideologically distant from their own culture to the extent that they cannot speak authoritatively on their culture whereas outsiders could be more knowledgeable about a culture that is not native to them. Some outsiders have lived in the new culture longer than natives, as in the case of some missionaries.”

Anastacia: “Particularly, the terms are slippery. We don’t necessarily know in which way we might be perceived as an insider or outsider because we all have multiple group identities and shift among these in each moment depending on which ones are salient in a certain interaction. One’s insider or outsider status changes even in interactions with the same people and even in the same conversations. To treat a researcher as either one or the other is to assume these are static.”

Michael: “I think, in a way, we are all insiders and outsiders when we approach a social group, and the dynamic between the two poles of the dichotomy shifts as we both integrate ourselves within and distance ourselves from the group. I think the ideal is some kind of balance. You must be an insider to gain the perspective of the group, as well as to be trusted with the backstage behavior often withheld from outsiders. Yet, a researcher must also maintain some critical distance so that s/he is not merely an unfiltered advocate for the group.”

David: “As stated above, the process is complex in that most people who study social phenomena tend to become or act as both insiders and outsiders. For instance, that is the common stance of many anthropologists who become “participant observers.” Even researchers studying the play activity of babies often have to get down on the floor to see what it’s like to see things from a baby’s point of view. Or, consider the journalism of George Plimpton who actually engaged in professional sports and other activities in order to write about them from the “insider” angle.”

Question: What commonalities are there in the way researchers approach their study of groups regardless of their own group membership?

Marie: “I believe that we all endeavor to use the best qualitative methodologies, depending on the informants we deem to be most appropriate. We often strive to triangulate findings, using multi-methods, and multiple data sources to ensure that we have valid and reliable results.”

Anthony: “Researchers often have an issue they want to study. They interact with group members, ask questions, participate in group activities, record their findings and analyze their findings.”

Michael: “I think, in some way (and despite my answer above), we are all to some degree advocates for the group we research, as we want their stories to be told. It may not be (and often is not) the message that group would like to portray to the outside world, but it is a complex, human-centric portrayal. In that sense, we are all documenting the particular social rules, roles and rituals that make up that group.”

Anastacia: “Ethical considerations and reliability are important regardless of group membership. Reliability can be established in a variety of ways in qualitative as well as quantitative studies. Although I use thematic analysis in much of my work, I report inter-rater agreement which I have often assessed on 100% of the data. An ethical and reliable study requires these issues be taken into consideration from the beginning when a researcher decides how to approach their study regardless of whether they are an insider or outsider to the culture they study.”

Question: What recommendations do you have for researchers who plan to begin a similar research path as you?

David: “Respect your subjects! Avoid judgment. Be patient; it can take a while to gain trust.”

Marie: “I see insider perspectives as invaluable, I would recommend that beginning researchers seek out a seasoned mentor who does similar research to themselves, and that they spend as much time as possible in the field, even if they are already familiar with the scapes they are researching. To approach the usual from the perspective of looking with new eyes, is the challenge. It is an exhilarating experience when fresh insights are gained through this effort. I also do recommend gathering a diverse team or a few colleagues who will help you along the way with reviewing your data analysis and conclusions. Staying grounded in the data is also extremely important.”

Anastacia: “As an insider or outsider of a group it is easy and often attractive to take the viewpoint you had before you began the study. This ultimately will lead to a reproduction of what you thought you knew. I tell my students that if they use terms in their paper that they knew before they took my class they don't get points for using these (even if they are

in the glossary of the textbook). I hold myself accountable to that rule as well. To the extent possible I leave my preconceptions aside when I collect my data and analyze it. I often still confirm what I expected, but I had valid empirical grounds for the findings rather than relying on my own expectations to justify decisions and findings.”

Anthony: “I recommend that researchers get to understand a culture by living with the people, understand why they do what they do, learn their language, ask questions and analyze their findings with the context of the culture in mind. It would be good for researchers to seek the opinion of insiders who have scholarly expertise in the area of study and that they ask critical questions as a way of getting a clearer understanding of the issue being studied.”

Whatever approach a researcher takes, it is important that “outsiders” feel just as competent as “insiders,” and vice versa, in making their contribution on the chosen subject of inquiry. This is because, every researcher’s insights help to see the full picture—and more clearly. Without both insiders and outsiders making their respective brush strokes, the canvas will probably never be completed. In the book titled, *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot (1995), a widely respected scholar of Haitian history, rejects the facile proposition that history is no more than self-justifying propaganda written by the winners of conflict. Rather, he suggests that we can gain a broader and more accurate view of past events by striving to listen to a broader spectrum of voices. While recognizing that competing groups and individuals may lack equal access to modes of communication, Trouillot maintains that the variety of voices is there; we simply have to work harder to hear them. In other words, insiders and outsiders should realize that their perspective and contribution to ethnography is relevant and significant while calling on them to endeavor to know, respect, and understand a people and their culture by immersing himself/herself into the culture, learning their language and bracketing his/her personal biases.

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