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## On the Inside Looking In: Methodological Insights and Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Insider Research

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## On the Inside Looking In: Methodological Insights and Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Insider Research

### Abstract

As qualitative researchers, what stories we are told, how they are relayed to us, and the narratives that we form and share with others are inevitably influenced by our position and experiences as a researcher in relation to our participants. This is particularly true for insider research, which is concerned with the study of one's own social group or society. This paper explores some of the possible methodological insights and challenges that may arise from insider research, and suggests several techniques and tools that may be utilized to aid in, rather than hinder, the process of the telling and sharing of participants' stories. Such strategies may also be used to minimize ethical implications, avoid potential bias and increase the trustworthiness of the data gathered. This analysis draws on the author's own experiences as an insider researcher and principal investigator on a research project that employed qualitative methodologies.

### Keywords

Positionality, Insider/Outsider, Reflexivity, Qualitative Research, Methodology

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## On the Inside Looking In: Methodological Insights and Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Insider Research

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*As qualitative researchers, what stories we are told, how they are relayed to us, and the narratives that we form and share with others are inevitably influenced by our position and experiences as a researcher in relation to our participants. This is particularly true for insider research, which is concerned with the study of one's own social group or society. This paper explores some of the possible methodological insights and challenges that may arise from insider research, and suggests several techniques and tools that may be utilized to aid in, rather than hinder, the process of the telling and sharing of participants' stories. Such strategies may also be used to minimize ethical implications, avoid potential bias and increase the trustworthiness of the data gathered. This analysis draws on the author's own experiences as an insider researcher and principal investigator on a research project that employed qualitative methodologies. Keywords: Positionality, Insider/Outsider, Reflexivity, Qualitative Research, Methodology*

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### Introduction

Insider research is that which is conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member. While insider research has its roots in ethnographic field research in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology (Sikes & Potts, 2008), it has relevance across many disciplines, and should be of particular interest to those concerned with the methodological and ethical consequences of conducting research. The issue of insider research that is discussed here is one of positionality. While there are other issues surrounding insider research that may complicate the research process -such as ethical considerations, sociological understandings of self, among others - they are beyond the scope of this paper, which is concerned primarily with those issues most relevant to positionality as it relates to research methodology.

Despite the influence of one's theoretical and cultural viewpoints and the importance of acknowledging one's own biases, researchers rarely address their position in their research, and furthermore, papers focusing explicitly on the task of conducting insider research are often limited to autoethnographies and participatory research accounts. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to bring attention to the insight that may be gained from engaging in the reflective and reflexive process of doing insider research and to outline ways in which insider researchers may navigate the twisting, winding paths of data collection and analysis in order to reach a deeper level of introspection that may assist them in the narration of their participant's stories.

The amount of insider research being conducted has increased in recent years; much of this research is happening within the field of education. The expansion of professional doctorate programs, such as the Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.), has resulted in more teachers engaging in research in their own educational institutions, known as "practitioner enquiry" within the category of action research (Hellowell, 2006).

For my own doctoral dissertation in education, I am conducting a sociological study of graduate students in the social sciences and humanities disciplines at my home institution.

Broadly speaking, I am exploring the various forms of supports that are currently available to assist graduate students in their integration and socialization into the university community, and to determine the effects, if any, of these services on graduate student persistence. This study exemplifies insider researcher in that as researcher, I hold prior knowledge and understandings of the group I wish to study, and am also a member of that group. I play two roles simultaneously: that of researcher and researched. In order to mitigate any potential bias as a result of my insider status, I sought to identify techniques that could be employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the data that I was gathering; that it was as accurate as possible.

I provide here a review of the current literature on understandings of insider research and, using my own doctoral research as a case study, present several techniques and tools which may be employed to enhance the quality and trustworthiness of the data that is collected in this type of research, as well as to counter any methodological or ethical challenges or potential biases that may arise.

### What is Insider Research?

Simplistically, insider research has been defined as the study of one's own social group or society (Naples, 2003, p. 46). A similar definition is provided by Loxley and Seery (2008), in the social sciences, who claim that insider research is undertaken by members of the same group, who share characteristics (cultural, biological, occupational, etc.). These definitions are rather vague; an early definition by the sociologist Robert Merton (1972) states that the insider is an individual who possesses *a priori* intimate knowledge of the community and its members. Hellowell (2006) notes that, based on this definition, having knowledge of the community does not imply that one *must* be a member. Merton himself made only too clear this point- quoting the phrase made popular by Georg Simmel and Max Weber: "one need not be Caesar in order to understand Caesar" (Merton, 1972, p. 31)<sup>1</sup> Insider research is often discussed in contrast to outsider research; based on the definition offered by Merton, this would be research that is undertaken by those who do not have a priori knowledge of the community under study, nor its members.

It has been argued, however, that the insider-outsider dichotomy is a false one (Banks, 1998; Chavez, 2008; Merton, 1972; Naples, 2003); it has even been suggested that the role of the researcher be conceptualized on a continuum, rather than as an either/or dichotomy (Breen, 2007; Trowler, 2011). Certainly, both insider and outsider researchers have to deal with similar methodological issues around positionality, among other issues not pertinent to this discussion. Nonetheless, there are differences in how each position may be viewed, how each affects the type of data that is gathered and how it is analyzed. Most important, insider researchers may be confronted with methodological and ethical issues that may be deemed to be irrelevant to outsider-researchers (Breen, 2007).

Positionality is determined by where one stands in relation to the other; this can shift throughout the process of conducting research. Positions are relative to the cultural values and norms of both the researcher and participants (Merriam et al., 2001). Insider positionality refers to "the aspects of an insider researcher's self or identity which is aligned or shared with participants" (Chavez, 2008, p. 475), but it is noted that no clear definition of the term has been developed, due to the difficulties associated with determining what degree of social experience merits this classification. Chavez (2008) goes on to note that insider researchers may be considered to be *total insiders*, who share multiple identities or profound experiences with the community they are studying, or *partial insiders*, who share a sole identity with a certain extent of distance or detachment from the community.

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<sup>1</sup> See Merton (1972) for a more thorough investigation of the origins of this aphorism.

Banks (1998) offers the following typology to help differentiate further between insiders and outsiders. The true *indigenous-insider* as researcher holds the values, perspectives, behaviours, beliefs, and knowledge of his/her indigenous/cultural community that is under study, whereas the *indigenous-outsider* has assimilated into outsider culture and is thus perceived as an outsider by the indigenous people of his/her community. The *external-insider*, meanwhile, has become socialized, or “adopted” into the outsider culture, rejecting the cultural values of his/her indigenous community. Finally, the *external-outsider* is socialized into a community different from the one under study, and has only a partial understanding and appreciation for its cultural values (Banks, 1998); he/she is thus merely a visitor, interested in learning more about the group of which he/she is not a part.

At times, the boundaries between insider/outsider status can be blurred; “[I]nsiderness or outsidership are not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations...” (Naples, 1996, p. 140). This perspective suggests that neither the insider nor the outsider has “a monopoly on advantage or objectivity” (Chavez, 2008, p. 476). However, as will be discussed below, such statements have been the subject of considerable debate.

## **The Pros and Cons of Insider Research**

While the advantages of insider researcher have received considerable attention in the literature, critical assessments of researcher positioning as it relates to the quality of data collected and the problems arising from assuming an insider position have received less attention (Taylor, 2011). Advocates and critics alike have cited many advantages and disadvantages of insider research. I have chosen here to highlight some of these benefits and shortcomings and organized them into categories based on how they may affect the collection and analysis of data.

### **Pros**

#### ***Knowledge***

Insider researchers often do not have to worry about orienting themselves with the research environment and/or participants. Unlike outsider researchers, insider researchers are free from the effects of culture shock; they are able to blend into situations without disturbing social settings (Aguiler, 1981). Furthermore, they have a pre-existing knowledge of the context of the research (Bell, 2005). With regards to participants, insider researchers have the “ability to ask meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues,” as well as the ability to “project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study” (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, & Muhamad, 2001, p. 411). Furthermore, insiders are able to “understand the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts of participants as well as possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field” (Chavez, 2008, p. 481).

#### ***Interaction***

Unlike the outsider researcher, who may be unfamiliar, or at least less familiar than an insider researcher with the social group or culture under study, Aguiler (1981) writes that for the insider researcher, interaction is more natural and they are less likely to stereotype and pass judgment on the participants under study. Because they are familiar with the group and social setting, insider researchers know how to approach individuals; thus their colleagues are

usually happy to talk, often welcoming the opportunity to discuss issues with someone who understands (Bell, 2005)

### *Access*

It is often assumed that being an insider means easy access (Merriam et al., 2001), especially when compared to outsider researchers, who may not have contacts within the social group and possess less knowledge of how “membership” is attained. The advantages of being an insider with regards to accessing the field “more quickly and intimately” has been referred to as “expediency of access” (Chavez, 2008, p. 482). Of course, a benefit of being a member of the group under study is acceptance (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, access may be more problematic for some insider researchers than one may initially think; this will be discussed in more detail below.

### **Cons**

#### *Too subjective*

Critics of insider research argue that member knowledge is the result of “subjective involvement- a deterrent to objective perception and analysis” (Aguiler, 1981, p. 15). It is argued that the perception of the insider researcher is narrowed, as too much is familiar; research at home limits the analysis of social and cultural structures and patterns (Aguiler, 1981); and the researcher may become normalized to an extent that threatens to impede analysis. Likewise, DeLyser (2001) notes that greater familiarity can lead to a loss of “objectivity” and there is thus the increased risk of the researcher making assumptions based on their prior knowledge and/or experience. There is therefore the need to keep oneself somewhat distanced, which can be hard to do.

Chavez (2008) relays a successful tactic that she, as well as other insider researchers, have employed to avoid receiving deferring responses from participants, (such as *You know what I mean* or *We talked about that before*). She would begin the interview session with a disclaimer, indicating that although she may have already discussed this with the participant before, it would be best if he/she could pretend as if they were talking about it for the first time.

#### *Biased*

Insider research is frequently accused of being inherently biased, as the researcher is considered to be too close to the culture under study to raise provocative questions (Merriam et al., 2001). Indeed, “The selection of a topic that clearly reflects a personal interest and the selection of colleagues as subjects raise the spectre of insider ‘bias’” (Van Heugten, 2004, p. 207). Researcher bias in this context would refer to the process whereby the researcher’s personal beliefs, experiences, and values influence the study methodology, design, and/or results. The insider researcher must then be wary of projecting one’s own views onto participants, or the data analysis.

Insider researchers mustn’t fear bias, for “The insiders’ biases may be a source of insight as well as error” (Aguiler, 1981, p. 26), but they must be aware of the potential of biases to creep in and to take steps to ensure that the research conducted is as error-prone as possible. The same warning may be made to outsider researchers, in that they may inadvertently hold preconceived and perhaps even incorrect perceptions of the social group or

organization under study, and, thus, must make efforts to become aware of these and where a concern, alleviate the ill effects of such biases.

### **Methodological Issues Associated with Insider Research**

While the pros and cons of insider research have been addressed in the literature in a more general sense, issues directly related to methodology and the process of conducting research and analyzing findings in the context of insider researcher have received considerably less attention. I focus here on several challenges associated with qualitative insider research that may influence how it is conducted and analyzed.

#### **Threat to objectivity**

Objectivity may be hard for the insider researcher to obtain due to the high level of subjective involvement. It is argued that the inherent bias of insider research challenges the positivist stance that research be objective (Workman, 2007). Likewise, as Sikes and Potts (2008) acknowledge, a common criticism of insider research is the extent to which it can be considered “objective” and thus scientifically reliable and valid. Drake (2010) asserts that the insider’s privileged access (closeness) may indeed compromise their ability to engage critically with the data.

#### **Compromise validity**

Sikes and Potts (2008) note that further complications may arise from the researcher “going native.” Going native is a term associated with anthropology, participatory research, and ethnography; it refers to taking on the traits of people around you and of those under study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) warn that the tendency to “go native” may be incited by prolonged engagement with the culture under study, a technique whose use they encourage to achieve trustworthiness. This will be addressed later in this discussion. Certainly, for those researchers who are already native from the outset - as many insider researchers may be - a sort of reverse orientation is required. Chavez (2008) notes that unlike traditional training for outsider researchers that starts with “getting to know the field,” insider researchers need to start by getting into their own heads; recognizing the ways in which they are like and unlike their participants; knowing which of their social identities may advantage and/or complicate the process. A “native” researcher shares the following viewpoint on being positioned as both the subject and object of her study:

...whereas all researchers necessarily reflect on their relationship to the research project, the native researcher is grounded implicitly and situated at all moments in the dual and mutual status of subject-object; she is both the subject of her study and the participant object of her study. (Kanuhu, 2000, p. 441, as cited in Chavez, 2008, p. 478)

One clear disadvantage then, of insider research, when compared to outsider research, is the lack of detachment from the field; insiders must face the task of managing the influence of being both the researcher and the researched (Chavez, 2008). It has been suggested that this may be “mitigated” by collecting reflective personal data. Van Heugten (2004) suggests “stream of consciousness writing,” interviewing oneself and talking with others about their experiences.

### **Gaining access**

Gaining access to information may also prove problematic for the insider researcher, as they may be seen as either too much of an insider (assumed that he/she knows the situation; participant is not forthcoming) *or* he/she is seen as too distanced from the group to trust with information, much like an outside researcher. Aguiler (1981) reiterates this, noting that difficulties with gaining access may be the result of participants perceiving the researcher as a cultural member but social stranger. This predicament may call for impression management, as high expectations are placed on the performance of the researcher to gain the subjects' trust. Chavez (2008) cites this as a complication of the insider status; as large amounts of impression management may be required to maintain rapport and/or identity. She also notes that the subject-object positioning of the insider can constrain access to the field.

Very much relevant to this discussion of impression management with regards to gaining access and researcher positionality, is disclosure. It is certainly important, and not only from an ethical standpoint, that the researcher be as forthcoming about their own identity as is necessarily relevant to the research; this may require a skilful performance on the part of the researcher to convince the participant of his *true* identity-especially as it may be desirable to shift from one's role as researcher to researched and back again. "...On the whole, we may expect individuals to relax the strict maintenance of front when they are with those they have known for a long time, and to tighten their front when among persons who are new to them. With those whom one does not know, careful performances are required" (Goffman, 1959, p. 222).

### **Confidentiality**

The insider researcher may become privy to confidential information about colleagues and/or the institution under study; this has the potential to negatively affect relationships (Bell, 2005). Interviewing may become uncomfortable at times. It has been suggested that potential insider researchers consider and "...contemplate the potential repercussions that professionalizing the personal may have" (DeLyser, 2001, p. 446, as cited in Chavez, 2008, p. 483).

### **Power**

Much as they may have to in order to gain access, insider researchers may have to work at impression management to establish respect and avoid a power struggle with participants. This is especially true when the researcher is interviewing one's peers, who although a part of his/her "group," may differ from the others in significant ways, such as age, gender, or ethnicity. An important fact to remember is that "During fieldwork the researcher's power is negotiated, not given" (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 409). Insider researchers may therefore choose to conceptualize or present themselves as co-investigators or advocates in an attempt to minimize the power differential between themselves and the research participants (Breen, 2007; DeLyser, 2001). While typically symptomatic of outsiders, insiders may also be prone to ethnocentrism (Merton, 1972). This is the belief that one's group is centrally important, emphasizing again the need for an outside perspective.

### **Shifting social identities**

Chavez (2008) describes several other challenges that may arise from insider research, such as the large amount of impression management required, cultural sensitivities around the



researcher and/or participant role, becoming over-familiar with the community under study, and bias in selecting participants, among others. She notes that many of these complications are the result of a lack of reflection or monitoring of the effects of the subject-object positionality or the shifting of social identities. Much as shapeshifting creatures in popular folklore tales are able to alter their appearance by transforming into another animal, insider researchers must be able to shift between identities and their dual roles of researcher and the researched, but without causing a noticeable disturbance to the research setting.

### **Techniques and Tools to Assist in Insider Research**

Taylor (2011) writes that there is little in the way of methodological guidance on how one goes about managing differences arising from intimacy and negotiating the ethics of friendship in a social research paradigm. Below, several techniques and tools are presented which may assist the insider researcher in carrying out the research project; where applicable, I have offered ways in which these methods were used in my own research. I draw here primarily on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who discuss the importance of establishing trustworthiness in research. Guba (1981) proposed the following criteria for establishing trustworthiness in research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A number of techniques have been proposed that can be utilized to establish these, and may be of particularly relevant in insider research:

- 1) **Credibility:** Guba (1981) suggests several techniques that may be employed to establish credibility: prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking. The first of these, prolonged engagement, refers to the “investment of sufficient time” to learn the culture, to test for distortions of the researcher (self) or participants, and to build trust (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.301). Persistent observation aims to “identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail” (Ibid 304). Triangulation, peer debriefing, and referential adequacy will be discussed in more detail below. Negative case analysis is a “process of revising hypotheses with hindsight” (Ibid 309). A hypothesis is refined continuously until it accounts for all known cases without exception. Finally, member checking is the process of engaging participants in data analysis for verification (Ibid).
- 2) **Transferability:** Guba (1981) recommends thick description to facilitate transferability. This refers to detailed note taking to help understand the research setting and context.
- 3) **Dependability**
- 4) **Confirmability:** The chief means of establishing dependability and confirmability that Guba (1981) discusses is auditing. This technique is discussed in more detail below.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also go into more detail to describe several measures that may be employed to build trustworthiness in a more general sense.

### **Maintaining field journals**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that in addition to field notes, researchers keep at least three other forms of notes; in journal format: a log of day-to-day activities, kept individually by team members; a personal log; an individual reflection diary; a methodological log. Throughout the collection and analysis of my data, I have been keeping field notes, as well as a daily activity log, and a personal reflection log.

### **Mounting safeguards**

Safeguards should be mounted against distortions that may arise from any of the following, and recorded in the methodological log: the researcher's presence, involvement with participants, bias that may arise on the part of the researcher(s) or participants, or data-gathering techniques.

### **Arranging for on-site team interactions**

Both informal and formal interactions should be facilitated between all members of the research team on a continuous basis. I meet with my supervisor usually on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. These meets are typically casual chats about how the research is going; I also keep my committee apprised of my progress through formal documentation.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation refers to "the researcher's use of multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories" (Denzin, 1978, as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305). I am employing a mixed methods approach in my research, utilizing qualitative and quantitative analyses. While I am the principal investigator, my supervisor is involved, assisting with data analysis. Several theoretical frameworks, primarily in the areas of sociology and psychology, will influence my interpretation of the findings.

### **Gathering referential adequacy materials**

Materials should be gathered that may not be used in the initial analysis but are to be archived and later compared against data analyses to test their adequacy. Prior to the commencement of data collection, I visited department offices and met with graduate coordinators to gather pamphlets, handbooks, and informational material on programs.

### **Debriefing**

Peer debriefing is a technique whereby the researcher shares findings and elements of the research with peers or colleagues. This allows the researcher to think critically about the research, test hypotheses, and to acknowledge any feelings that may affect judgment. My supervisor is available to read over transcripts and help in coding, as well as quantitative analyses.

### **Developing and maintaining an audit trail**

A paper trail should be kept of all records resulting from the research, including raw data, field notes, findings and reports, process and methodological notes, personal notes and

instrument development information. I keep paper as well as electronic copies of all material related to the research project on an encrypted computer.

### **Tools to avoid potential bias**

Van Heugten (2004) highlights several other tools the insider researcher may employ to avoid bias: stream of consciousness writing, interviewing oneself; speaking with others about the experience to create distance and deconstructing the familiar world. She emphasizes that the insider researchers' subjectivity must be "open to intensive scrutiny" and "challenged on an ongoing basis" (p. 208). While I am conducting my doctoral research, I am finding it very difficult to create distance from both my research subject and its subjects. Many "others" with whom I have social relationships outside of the research project are or have been graduate students themselves and are always willing and interested to talk about my research and the graduate student experience itself, making it hard to separate my research life from my real life! While I am always writing and reflecting on the process, it has proven difficult, largely as a result of my positioning as an intimate-insider, to gauge what level of involvement is "enough" versus "too much."

### **Reflexivity**

A final technique that I would argue is important to all types of research, and is of particular importance to the insider researcher, is the practice of reflexivity. Within sociology, Pierre Bourdieu's work on the notion of reflexivity is highly regarded and well cited. He calls for an active engagement of the self in questioning perceptions and exposing their contextualized and power driven nature (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). According to Van den Hoonaard (2002), "Self-reflexivity involves the researchers taking into account his or her own consciousness" (p. 88). Of particular relevance to the insider researcher are the relations between researcher and participants, one of several diverse sets of reflexive relationships explored by Doucet (2008). The extent of reflexivity that is called for in insider research is perhaps not addressed nor practiced to the degree it is or should be in qualitative research; particularly so in outsider research. Discussions of reflexivity to date have focused on the social location of the researcher and the ways in which the researcher's emotional responses to participants may influence the analysis of their narratives; certainly situating oneself socially and emotionally in relation to participants is a crucial part of reflexivity (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Establishing and maintaining an appropriate degree of both social and emotional distance is also an important element of the reflexive process; of course this requires the researcher to determine what that appropriate level of distancing is, which is no easy task. It is suggested that researchers consider the interplay between their multiple social locations and how these intersect with the particularities of their "personal biographies...at the time of analyzing data" (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 419). The tedious process of separating out the narratives of the researcher and the researched is summed up by Taylor (2011) as follows:

Where the researcher-self is a part of the Other's narrative, the narrative of the researched and the researcher become entwined. The researcher, then, is forced to look both outward and inward, to be reflexive and self-conscious in terms of positioning, to be both self-aware and researcher-self-aware and to acknowledge the intertextuality that is a part of both the data gathering and writing processes. (p. 9)

While the importance of being reflexive is acknowledged within social science research, the difficulties, practicalities and methods of doing it are rarely addressed, particularly in qualitative data analysis. Rather, it is assumed that “the researcher, the research method, and the data are separate entities as opposed to being reflexively interdependent and interconnected” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 414). A problem with this type of approach, the authors note, is that the “embodied,” situated and subjective researcher carrying out the analysis is made invisible as are the various contexts in which the research is conducted. Couture, Zaidi, and Maticka-Tyndale (2012) argue for an intersectional approach to reflexive accounts of qualitative research, in which the role of the researcher’s multiple identities in shaping and negotiating insider/outsider status and its influence on the collection of data is considered.

There are numerous methods by which insider researchers may develop reflexivity and incorporate it into their research. Drake (2010) writes of the role diaries and external perspectives play in stimulating reflexivity; that is, their importance as a form of “self-triangulation.” Hellowell (2006) writes that he encourages his doctoral students to exercise reflexivity in their own research. He gives an example of how this may be accomplished through the writing of an extended methodology section of the thesis- one student he supervised attached an appendix - which he recommends to other students conducting insider research. In my research proposal, I included a section to acknowledge my position as an insider researcher, identifying the methodological and ethical implications and ways in which reflexivity could be practiced.

Van den Hoonard writes “If we are to take self-reflexivity seriously, we must recognize that we are always producing two works- a research biography and an autobiography” (Van den Hoonard, 2002, p. 123). This is an interesting alternative way of viewing the subject/object and researched/researcher dichotomies. Instead of worrying over whether one is too much of an insider or outsider, researchers should strive to be both. There is much to be gained from being close to one’s research, as there is much to be gained from keeping one’s distance and having an outside perspective. “...Ideally the researcher should be both inside and outside the perceptions of the researched” (Hellowell, 2006, p. 487).

### **My Experiences as an Insider Researcher**

My dissertation research is concerned with the experiences of graduate students in the social sciences and humanities. As a graduate student in education, I have much in common with my participants, and I am essentially a member of the same social group on a number of levels, classifying me, essentially, as an indigenous-insider.

This research is being conducted at the university where I am currently enrolled as a student; this type of insider research, in which the subject under study is the higher education institution in which the researcher is employed or enrolled, has been classified as a form of “endogenous research” (Trowler, 2011). I also completed my undergraduate studies within the Faculty of Arts, the focus of my study. I am, already, then, what anthropologists would call “native.” I have many ties, both socially and professionally, to a number of departments, as well as individuals (e.g., faculty, staff, and students) that I am studying. While I knew a significant number of potential participants prior to beginning this project, many only casually, others I know on a more intimate level. Taylor (2011) uses the term “intimate insider” to refer to researchers whose pre-existing friendships (close, distant, casual or otherwise) evolve into informant relationships - friend-informants - as opposed to the majority of existing work that deals with informant-friendships. She notes that it is likely that such relationships will shape the researcher’s work and influence their positioning in the field. Knowing your informants, or participants, in a personal way undoubtedly affects the

manner in which you relate to them professionally. Knowing when not to overstep the line between friend and researcher is a vital skill that the intimate insider must develop.

“Insiderness coupled with intimate knowledge of and an emotional attachment to one’s informants makes objectivity incredibly difficult and leaves very little room for analytic distance” (Taylor, 2011, p. 15). Self-critique and reflexivity can allow the insider researcher to gain some distance from the familiar and unlearn the seemingly natural ways of their own behaviour and that of their friends. This has proven difficult, however, as “the field” I am studying is a space I inhabit not only as a place to work and learn, but is also my place of personal belonging. Indwelling - to be permanently present in my research, is virtually unavoidable.

Negotiating the power-dynamics of the friend-informant relationship can also lead to tricky situations as confusion over the dual role of the insider researcher can become a barrier to communication. Insider researchers can be put in an awkward position with regards to the disclosure of information that may be damaging to individuals or the institution. Furthermore, the researcher’s position in relation to the participant, will likely influence what is disclosed, and how that information is delivered. After some discussion with my supervisor, we decided that interviews with participants that were known to me beyond the capacity of the study would be conducted by a research assistant. While insider researchers can certainly be actively engaged in the collection of data and its analysis, it is important to remember to maintain a level of distancing from the study subjects and subject matter more generally.

### Conclusion

Conducting insider research is a complex process with many benefits, but it also poses significant challenges and opportunities, as we have seen. To “indwell,” to be permanently present in one’s research, which in my case, is the world of the graduate student, presents a unique opportunity to reflect on how one’s positionality affects the type of data that is collected, how it is collected, and how we interpret it. The stories our participants tell us, and how we choose to represent and share them are inevitably shaped by our own understandings and where we stand with regards to their (or our!) social world.

While the merits and demerits of insider research have been probed quite extensively in the literature to date, particularly in fields employing qualitative methods, there is a dearth of writing on the actual practice of *doing* it. It has been the aim of this paper, therefore, to offer insider researchers some direction in preparing to conduct methodologically and ethically sound insider research. Using my own ongoing doctoral research as a case study, I have explored the concept of insider research; outlined the major advantages and disadvantages of this approach that have been identified in the literature, particularly with regards to methodology; and suggested several useful techniques and tools that may guide the qualitative insider researcher through the research process and assist them in addressing any methodological or ethical challenges, or potential biases they may face.

Insider research forces us to examine the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, questioning whether our work can ever be truly objective and to explore the effects of our subjectivities that we bring to our research. Such introspection may also lead to a re-examination of the ways in which we, as researchers, instead of holding to a dichotomous perspective, may seek ways to occupy the space between insider and outsider, as Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue. There is certainly value in recognizing and acknowledging our own potential biases, which we are not always aware of, and much to be learned in determining which biases are important enough to the research process to be revealed explicitly to one’s reader’s and audiences (Doucet, 2008).

It is strongly recommended that positionality be discussed more explicitly in accounts of qualitative research. Qualitative researchers should recognize and address their position and role in the research project, as such reflection will not only provide the reader with a fuller, richer account of the methods employed but will also work to ensure that the participant's voice is heard in the narratives that the researcher shares.

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