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Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality

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Abstract

The debate on insider/outsider positionality has raised issues about the methodological advantages and liabilities between the two, yet no clear account exists for what insider scholars can expect when they enter the field. First, I conceptualize how insider positionality can dually benefit and disadvantage the insider. Using a partial review of insider studies, including my study of my multigenerational Mexican American family, I also present a practical discussion on specific insider advantages and complications. In conclusion, I present a new approach to training novice insider scholars that will help them mediate between insider perspective and researcher position, an approach that promises greater rigor to insider research that will serve the goals of qualitative research for social justice in minority and indigenous communities

Keywords

Insider Positionality and Insider Research

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Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality

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The debate on insider/outsider positionality has raised issues about the methodological advantages and liabilities between the two, yet no clear account exists for what insider scholars can expect when they enter the field. First, I conceptualize how insider positionality can dually benefit and disadvantage the insider. Using a partial review of insider studies, including my study of my multigenerational Mexican American family, I also present a practical discussion on specific insider advantages and complications. In conclusion, I present a new approach to training novice insider scholars that will help them mediate between insider perspective and researcher position, an approach that promises greater rigor to insider research that will serve the goals of qualitative research for social justice in minority and indigenous communities. Key Words: Insider Positionality and Insider Research

Introduction

The "insider/outsider" debate has been largely that, a debate. In line with the positivist tradition, the outsider perspective was considered optimal for its "objective" and "accurate" account of the field, while insiders, who possessed deeper insights about the people, place, and events, were believed to hold a biased position that complicated their ability to observe and interpret. However, scholars (Banks, 1998; Merton, 1978; Naples, 1996) have argued that the outsider-insider distinction is a false dichotomy since outsiders and insiders have to contend with similar methodological issues around positionality, a researcher's sense of self, and the situated knowledge she/he possesses as a result of her/his location in the social order¹.

Post-structuralists and post-modernists have criticized the notion that a qualitative researcher has a bounded and impenetrable sense of self that can be used as an objective tool in the field. Instead, a researcher is co-participant as she/he positions her-/himself in relation to participants, and participants position themselves in relation to how a researcher is perceived or behaves (Ellis, 2004; Gergen, 2000). The notion of a single researcher self or position has given way to "polyvocality...where we are encouraged to recognize that both within...scholars and within those who join...as participants in...research the multiplicity of competing and often contradictory values, political impulses, conceptions of good, notions of desire and sense of our 'selves' as person"

¹ I am aware that there are other dimensions of the insider/outsider discussion (ethical concerns, boundaries between Self and Other, feminist scholars contribution [Riesman, 1987; Visweswaran, 1994; Wolf, 1996]), but here I limit the discussion to those issues relevant to positionality.

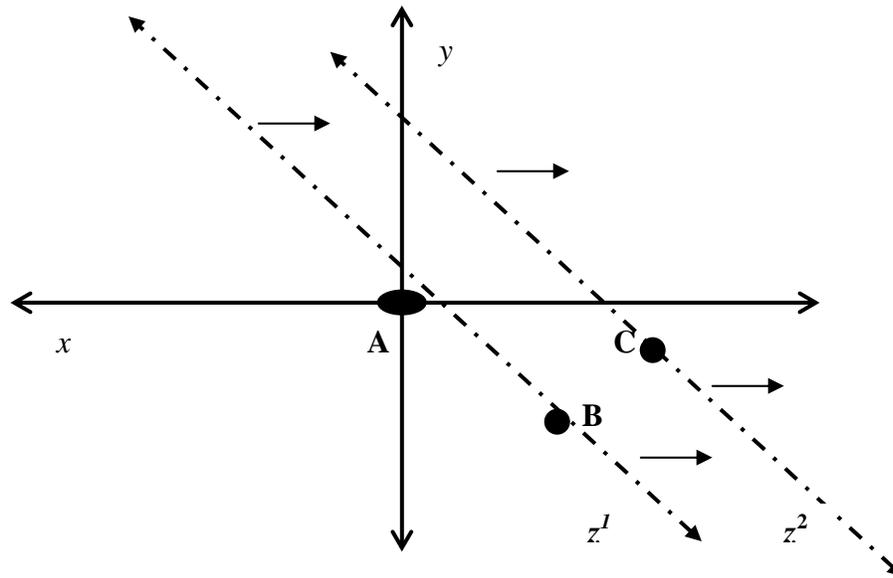
(Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p. 595). As a result, qualitative researchers, outsiders or insiders, cannot be assured that their observations, interpretations, and representations are not affected by their various identities or positionalities.

Nevertheless, the debate around insider-outsider has stagnated by the heavy focus on the differences between types of bias associated with either being an insider or an outsider. For an outsider, the danger is the imposition of the researcher's values, beliefs, and perceptions on the lives of participants, which may result in a positivistic representation and interpretation. For an insider bias may be overly positive or negligent if the knowledge, culture, and experience she/he shares with participants manifests as a rose-colored observational lens or blindness to the ordinary. These assumptions about insider positionality are theoretical, supported by little empirical evidence, and neglect the current trends of thinking in social construction and polyvocality. In truth, little insider research and a lack of development of an insider methodology have failed to systematically describe what insiders actually experience.

Theoretically, the insider positionality, the aspects of an insider researcher's self or identity which is aligned or shared with participants, has gone without definition, since to date no single articulation exists that describes what configuration or degree of social experience warrants the designation of insider. Nevertheless, the development of new qualitative research methodologies, changes in conceptualization of the researcher role, and the increase in insider scholars has generated little discussion about the unique methodological concerns relevant to insiders studying their own communities. This article combines a partial review of literature with my reflection on my insider study of my own family, to provide a methodological frame for novice insider scholars entering the field.

Today, insider scholars have been characterized as total insiders, where researchers share multiple identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, class) or profound experiences (e.g., wars, family membership); and partial insiders, who share a single identity (or a few identities) with a degree of distance or detachment from the community. Banks (1998) defines insiderness through his typology of cross-cultural researchers, where one's positionality is based on the community in which one was socialized (indigenous or outside), and the intellectual and cultural distance of the researcher from the "indigenous community or culture." Generally, he agrees that the indigenous insider, having been socialized in the community, has the greatest ascribed closeness and "endorses the values, perspectives...and knowledge of his or her community and culture and is perceived by people within the community as a legitimate community member who can speak with authority about it" (p. 8). An indigenous-outsider, likewise raised in the indigenous community, has rejected it through high levels of assimilation and has less insiderness compared to an external-insider, who was socialized outside the community, but endorses the cultural perspective and values of the indigenous community. From this perspective, Banks conceptualizes insider positionality along a continuum of closeness to, or distance from, the indigenous community as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 2. Conceptualization of insiderness based on multiple shifting identities through time.



Note. Adapted from Labaree (2002). The horizontal arrows along side *z* axes indicate the passage of time. Thus, conceptually, a researcher can experience various levels of insiderness and outsidership at different moments.

Citing Kanuha (2000), Labaree claims that an insider can spend much of her/his time at *Point A*, where the researcher as member of the community is both subject and object of the study. It is this position where an insider draws her/his methodological advantage. In relation to the *z* axis, a researcher can experience various degrees of insiderness and outsidership given how she/he is socially situated to (and by) participants during the research process, which affects various stages and aspects of the study, a perspective on positionality that can be found in recent insider scholarship (Davies & Davies, 2007; Hill, 2006; Kacen & Chaitin, 2006; Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008).

For example, as a member of my own family (Fuentes family), generally I was at *Point A*, a position I will describe in more detail below. On the other hand, I had a greater degree of insiderness when I talked to my immediate family members (*Point B*), as opposed to a greater degree of outsidership when I talked to members of my extended family (*Point C*). Furthermore, these shifts can happen within individual interviews, as in the case of my interview with my grandmother, which is described in a later section. For example, in interviewing my mother, we shared a closeness when talking about the period of her life when she raised me, but when she discussed her own life as a child, I became a removed observer listening to details I knew little about.

This new look at insiderness demonstrates that scholars can expect to draw much of their advantage from their positionality at the intersection of insider and outsider (*Point A*). However, this position can also have a dual effect as a complication. Kanuha (2000), who studied gays and lesbians in her native Hawaii, articulates how she was positioned as 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. (p. 441)

Where she found clear advantages from her position she explicates that this nested positionality also provided complications.

In my research the deeply personal and often painful life histories that participants described about being lesbian, people of color, and female mirrored many of my own life experiences...At times in the initial interviews, I found myself having difficulty focusing on the interview process and, more important on the responses and narratives of study respondents because of the distraction of my own self-reflections on similar events. (p. 442)

Social psychology explains that the connection of the self to groups elicits particular behavior. For example, the presence of ingroup and outgroup members is salient to categorizing the self in group interaction (Abrams & Hogg, 2004). When members of an ingroup are present, individuals are likely to differentiate them based on "individuals or ...subgroup representatives" from the ingroup: *You are like me but with some differences*. When outgroup members are present, they distinguish others based on in- and outgroup characteristics: *You are more unlike me than like me*. For an insider researcher, this body of work suggests that when researching one's own, we may tend to draw ourselves closer to participants as members of our ingroups, even when good observational skills are necessary for validity and reliability. For Kanuha, operating at the intersection of self and other proved distressing and "constrain[ing to], the detachment required in most indigenous studies" (2000, p. 442). Where outsiders have the advantage of detachment from the field, an insider must learn to manage the influence of being researcher and the researched.

A second complication arises from the notion that insiders must expect that their advantage may shift in the sands of social reality. Although the above social psychological finding (*You are like me with some differences*) indicates an insider advantage, it also presents a complication with how much an insider can trust her closeness to participants from moment to moment. Specifically, a participant may draw us near as a member of the ingroup, but in the next moment, because of a social difference (gender, class, age, region), may distance herself from the researcher. This situation is depicted in Figure 2 with *Point B*, indicating closeness to the researcher at one moment, and *Point C*, indicating a shift to greater outsidership because of individual or subgroup differences.

It has been nearly six years since completing my dissertation, perhaps a necessary period of time to detach from the experience of researching one's own family. I feel the need to critically reflect on the experience of being an insider scholar as I recognize that little on insider methodology has been written, even in the wake of an increasing number of studies.

Table 1.

Methodological Advantages and Complications of Insider Positionality

Advantages to Insider Status	Complications to Insider Status
<p><i>Positionality</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •a nuanced perspective for observation, interpretation and representation •an equalized relationship between researcher and participants •expediency of rapport building •immediate legitimacy in the field •economy to acclimating to the field <p><i>Access</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •expediency of access •access to more in-group activities <p><i>Data Collection/Interpretation/Representation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •insight into the linguistic, cognitive, emotional, sensory and psychological principles of participants •knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field •stimulation of natural interaction and behavior •detection of participants' hidden behaviors and perceptions •detection of nonverbal gestures of embarrassment and discomfort •detection of informants' actual behavior versus their performed selves •identification of unusual and unfamiliar occurrences 	<p><i>Positionality</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Insider status unchecked can complicate or overwhelm researcher role. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦over-identification or over-reliance on status obscures researcher role or goal of research ♦social roles in group or community constrain researcher role and objectives ♦expectation to participant in community events or affairs ♦overload with exchange or reciprocity requests from participants ♦requests to take sides in community political and moral issues ♦the rise of value conflicts as a result of research and community member role ♦compromised professional ethics and/or research results ♦participants' perceptions and expectations co-opt researcher or constrain role <p><i>Access</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •bias in entering field and establishing rapport •limited access based on political climate <p><i>Data Collection/Interpretation/Representation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •observer and/or participant role may be culturally inappropriate •large amounts of impression management to maintain rapport and/or identity •selective reporting •difficulty with recognizing patterns due to familiarity with community •bias in selecting participants •breaking or maintaining relationships with participants when leaving the field •community interaction style compromises interview process or observation •insiderness obscures representation or implementation due to turbulent or changing political and historical climate of the field

Note. This table does not represent the experience of every insider scholar surveyed here. In some cases, an advantage to one scholar was not an advantage to another, or not experienced altogether. Complications seem to outnumber advantages. This should not be taken as indicative of the phenomenon. In fact, many insiders tend to report more on the failures than the successes, perhaps because as Parameswaran (2001) suggests by citing Visweswaran (1994), they provide lessons about methodology, epistemology, and phenomenology.

Table 1 demonstrates that an insider's familiarity with the community can provide facile and economic access and movement in the field as well as can provide multiple levels of insight about human behavior necessary for data collection, interpretation, and representation. These advantages more than likely come from the unique position of an insider as subject-object, as community members perceive the researcher as friend and not foe. My experience with my Fuentes family exemplifies some of these advantages.

In searching for a dissertation topic, I struggled with choosing my family as a research subject. Like Kanuha (2000), I chose to look at my own family "...for more understanding of others whose lives were similar to mine," and in search of "a theoretical and conceptual framework for comprehending what seemed...to me to be commonplace but rarely elucidated" (p. 441). Perplexed by the educational, socioeconomic, and occupational plateau of later-generation Mexican Americans, I conducted a retrospective longitudinal descriptive study of my five-generation Mexican American working-class family in Los Angeles. I completed 33 Fuentes family oral histories (a total of 64 interviews), with members ranging from 7 to 91, to view the continuity and change in the home, work experience, and school experiences of my family.²

Upon entering the field, I had theoretically understood the general debate on insiderness, but had no realization or practical knowledge about how this might play out in the study of my family. At the beginning of data collection, I soon learned that I was naively informed, a surprising revelation experienced by so many insider scholars. Beoku-Betts (1994) describes, "I came to realize that while the insider standpoint was a valid approach to the research process it was more fragile and complex than it is often portrayed as being" (p. 430). I entered the field with my training as a traditional scholar, some readings on insider issues, and little critical reflection or understanding of my unique circumstance. After the completion of the project, I had experienced my status at times advantageous, at other times, not. More importantly, I realized that neither my insiderness, nor my training, adequately prepared me to maximize the privilege of already "knowing" the field or to resolve the challenges that arose from looking inside and out.

To provide new insider scholars the methodological forecast that I did not have, this article offers a guide to understanding insider positionality. Using the conceptual frame in Figure 2, it documents advantages and complications experienced by insiders in the research process. Using these works, and focusing on my research study of the Fuentes family, this article describes how insider research is neither an unfettered nor absolute advantage to doing research in one's "home" setting. Instead, insiders will find advantages and complications as a consequence of the need to negotiate the subject-object positionality unique to them and of contending with multiple social identities. In conclusion, I discuss how this conceptualization of insiderness calls for new techniques in training novice insiders who must manage the methodological nuances of their work.

² General findings show that race, ethnicity, and class factors interact to reproduce the family's social standing over generations. Equally important, the analysis reveals how the persistence and strength of the Fuentes' heritage cultural values (*buena educación* and *familism*) have insulated them from the continued threat of racial discrimination and economic hardship in American life (Chávez, 2007).

Benefits to Being on the “Inside”

In the latter part of the twentieth century, insider researchers³ (Aguilar, 1981; Baca Zinn, 1979; Beoku-Betts, 1994; Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; DeAndrade, 2000; DeLyser, 2001; Jones, 1970; Kacen & Chaitin, 2006; Kanuha, 2000; Kikumura, 1986; Kondo, 1986; Kusow, 2003; Labaree, 2002; Merriam et al., 2001; Messerschmidt, 1981; Miller, 1997; Nakhleh, 1981; Narayan, 1993; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984; Parameswaran, 2001; Paredes, 1978; Scheiberg, 1990; Sherif, 2001; Stephenson & Greer, 1981; Zavella, 1996) have emerged in larger numbers to reflect on their brands of research. Most scholars generally found that there were advantages to being a member of the community. Insiders can 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. For example, in the case of Mexican and Chicano communities, Paredes claimed insiders, who share language and language use, have the advantage to more closely render underlying or folkloric meaning, which may be misinterpreted by outsiders. Table 1 lists advantages and disadvantages to insider positionality. These lists are meant to be suggestive (guides) and not as absolutes nor as exhaustive. I strongly recommend that scholars read as many critiques by insiders as possible to develop a deep understanding of the notions presented here. In devising this table, I realize that others may have interpreted my categories differently. Also, many times (as is the case with my reflection) insiders juxtaposed a single occurrence as advantage and complication. When there were multiple effects, I deferred to the one that received the greatest attention by the scholar.

Positionality: Expediency of Access

Some insider researchers have found familiarity with the community and its people to create nearly instant access and rapport (De Andrade, 2000; DeLyser, 2001; Merriam et al., 2001; Nakhleh, 1981; Sherif, 2001; Stephenson & Greer, 1981), while for some their insiderness did not prevent complications in asserting their researcher role (Baca Zinn, 1979; Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Kusow, 2003; Zavella, 1996). My experience was still unique from these in that my Fuentes membership over the years had incorporated my researcher identity. Prior to undertaking my dissertation, I had interviewed my grandmother for a Chicano Studies project for an undergraduate course and interviewed some of my family members on the topic of language and ethnicity for doctoral coursework. These previous experiences, as well as my status as a perpetual student (*Haven't you graduated yet?*), had earned me a reputation as the family scholar. This pre-established role made my researcher role almost instantaneously acceptable to Fuentes members. My status as a family member, Christina, daughter of Elena,

³ Determining whether one is an insider researcher is problematic and is ultimately the decision of the researcher. For example, many feminist scholars believe that being a woman studying women constitutes insider status. However, some scholars (Gilbert, 1994; Lal, 1996; Riesmann, 1987) have noted that gender alone was not enough to constitute insider insight into the lives of women who were culturally, racially, and socioeconomically different. Although feminists may have considered them insiders, Gilbert and Lal ultimately decided that they could not identify as “insiders” because their lived experience was so disparate from participants. At some point, a native scholar needs to evaluate, especially considering how participants will perceive them, whether their level of familiarity, and connection will prove to be significant in the research process.

granddaughter of Carolina, connected me to participants through a trustworthy and legitimate social network that facilitated my access and rapport with members. The names of my mother and grandmother are pseudonyms, and do not reflect those used in the larger study (Chávez, 2007) in order to protect Fuentes members' anonymity.

These insider roles and connections made my entrance into the field antithetical to how it is portrayed in texts as awkward, time- and energy-consuming and fragile. My blended status as family member/researcher made it possible to approach almost any member about the study, requiring little to no rapport building. Fuentes members, even those in extended networks, were receptive to the idea of oral histories, since they knew of my intentions and investment in the family well being. My insider status had afforded me ease of entrée; in this light, my subject-object position proved effective in the field.

Yet, as other scholars have found, familiarity with the group also ethically bound me to participants in ways perhaps not felt by outsiders (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000). As Baca Zinn (1979) mentioned, insider status can also have a counter-effect in regards to reciprocity. In her case, the many requests she received from participants for support or services even when she was preparing to leave the field made ending the fieldwork a daunting task. In my case, while my connections to the Fuentes family help to expedite the research process, it compelled me to reciprocate for participants' contributions by offering to chronicle the Fuentes family story by compiling stories and photos into a family history album. While an ethically responsible act of reciprocation, this task created additional pressure and required more time to complete the research, as I had not realized that I committed myself to writing two books instead of one. Whereas my subject-object position benefited me during entry, it now obligated me upon leaving to reciprocate in ways (much of which came from pressure on myself) most likely not experienced by outsiders.

Access: Access to More In-Group Activities

Like others (Kondo, 1986; Nakhleh, 1981; Sherif, 2001), my insiderness was advantageous in accessing the field more quickly and intimately. For me, I had almost immediate access and legitimacy before even beginning. At social events, I started conversations about current events and family happenings, and easily transitioned into discussing the study without it seeming unusual. I might say, "By the way, I don't know if my mom (brother, grandmother, aunt) has told you that I am going to do my dissertation about the family." I could use my previous conversations with other members as a legitimate link to the discussion of the study. My membership also granted me access to both large extended family events (Easter celebration, a wedding anniversary, a camping trip) and smaller family events (Christmas and Thanksgiving celebrations) for observation, receiving formal (cards requiring RSVPs) and informal invitations through my mother (a standard way members receive invitations to social events).

This advantage was not without limits, however. Given my place in the family, I imposed limits on myself as to which events I participated based on my generational and relational status. For example, at multigenerational gatherings, second-generation members, because of their age, often sat on the periphery of the activity talking and observing the goings on. Other adult members (usually) came up to them one by one or in small groups to converse, a show of respect for their place in the family hierarchy. At times, second-generation members cannot or choose not to participate in the high velocity

activities of piñata breaking, gambling, baseball games, and conversations over loud music. Therefore, they have events attended exclusively by them (annual Fish Fry) that are meant as an opportunity to get together on a more intimate level.

An outsider might have found this event a prime site for data collection (second-generation interaction cordoned off from the influences of other generations) and made every attempt to gain entry. Unlike an outsider, however, I refrained from such action knowing the significance of the event. Methodologically, my family membership would not serve as an advantage, since my presence (a younger Fuentes) would have posed a social anomaly in an otherwise natural setting, increasing the likelihood of gathering inauthentic data and complications with rapport, as Brayboy found in privileging his researcher role over his Indian role (Brayboy & Dehyle, 2000). Here, my subject-object position could only carry me so far; my identity as a fourth-generation member made access complicated.

Ethically, I knew these to be sacred spaces for those Fuentes members, and the true value and meaning of this time for them was unknown to me. To pursue access, I might be seen as nosy and pushy at best; at worst, it was a transgression of monumental portions, treading where no later-generation Fuentes has gone before. It seemed I understood then, even if subconsciously, something that DeLyser (2001) claims every insider should consider before entering the field: “Those of us whose place of research may also be a personal space to refuge would be well advised, before undertaking insider research, to attempt to tease out and contemplate the potential repercussions that professionalizing the personal may have” (p. 446). In this light, exerting my researcher’s objective to know would have been too great a cost; to me and to my Fuentes grandmother, granduncles, and grandaunts.

Data Collection/Interpretation: Insiderness Provides Insight of Understanding the Linguistic, Cognitive, Emotional, and Psychological Precepts of Participants & Historical and Practical Happenings of the Field

In discussing interviewing in qualitative research, Fontana and Frey (2005) noted that traditional interviews (structured and unstructured) assume a singular format, where interviewer/researcher is in control of the event using probing questions and comments to guide the participant to reveal the “truth.” Insider scholars (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Parameswaran, 2001) have found that this traditional interview format complicated the research process, since it did not seem to fit the interaction and communication style of the group. It was their inside knowledge that assisted them in finding alternative forms to implement the research successfully.

Parameswaran (2001) studied romance novel reading with young middle- and upper-class women in postcolonial India. She had established that individual interviews would be the main source of data, and began to arrange individual sessions with college women in friendship groups during their break on campus. Initially, the women resisted making individual meetings with her. Parameswaran writes,

I realized that I had arrogantly encroached into their intimate, everyday rituals of friendship. It dawned on me slowly that break times in college

were sacred for these women...I was challenged to earn the right to become a part of their peer communities. (pp. 85-86)

She discovered that women wanted to know from the group setting what questions she might ask in the individual interviews. Parameswaran's ability to understand the importance of Indian women's friendship groups facilitated her decision to change her methods to do group interviews first, after which women overwhelmingly began to agree to do individual ones.

The traditional format of interviewing is an unusual discourse style in the Fuentes family. In a few cases, I had found that members previously had been interviewed for other projects on Mexican Americans. I imagine that as members of the American society, where interviewing happens on news programs and talk shows, members of the Fuentes' family had vicariously experienced the format (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Despite this fact, I felt that my familiarity (having had a number of personal conversations with members) warranted conducting semi-structured, open-ended interviews, where I would begin by asking questions from the interview schedule, but allow members to explore and elaborate on their responses freely. As oral history dictates, interviewees are in charge of the flow of content, and the interviewer is solely an intent listener and facilitator, which seemed to agree with the "natural" Fuentes communication style.

What I discovered, however, was that even this relatively relaxed form of interviewing was challenged by my family position, which required further reconfiguration of the boundaries, and the flow of the interviewing event away from the traditional format. Most interviews occurred at a scheduled time and date at the home of the participant or a family relative (parent or aunt). For many Fuentes members who lived very hectic lives, I knew I had to accommodate them as much as possible by scheduling interviews when there were children or other members in the house. Although I did try my best to set clear and impermeable boundaries between the interview and the rest of the household happenings, almost invariably, that activity seeped into the event. Members talked to one another about earlier phone messages, asked whether I wanted to stay for dinner, scolded children to behave appropriately, asked whether I had talked to so-and-so, and inquired whether I noticed the garbage cans in front of neighborhood houses, indicating that the next day was "trash day."

The standard use of recording equipment was problematic for me, as for other insiders studying their families (Miller, 1997; Scheiberg, 1990). During interviews, I tried to stop and start the recorder when the household activity intruded on the interview, but in doing that it made the machine more obvious and made the conversation-like interview more artificial. I worried that this awkwardness would diminish the authentic atmosphere that I had tried to create in spite of the use of a recorder.

After starting and pausing the recorder a few times, either getting a strange stare from the interviewee, or missing part of what they said because they started talking before I re-started the recorder, I just decided to let the recorder play. I opted for a truer form of communication than the artificial mood of a research interview. More importantly, as a Fuentes member, I reconciled the collection of household happenings as part of the social expectation that comes from being home. If a Fuentes member was needed and present, s/he must respond. Whether I liked it or not, my membership in the family obligated me as well, even when undertaking research. Thus, my insider

knowledge of the Fuentes family interaction style helped me to negotiate a modified interview, facilitating the collection of authentic data, knowing where the boundaries existed between it and external activity.

Dangers in Our Midst: Complications to Insider Research

Despite their privileged position, insider researchers have reflected on potential complications with implementing research. For instance, Kusow (2003), a Somali immigrant in Canada studying the Somali community, found that his insider status positioned him within the group social roles that constrained the research process. At the beginning, Kusow happened upon a conversation in a coffeehouse with a male participant about typical topics between Somalis (politics and the civil war). After awhile, feeling he had developed significant rapport, Kusow asked the gentleman for permission to interview and allowed the potential interviewee to look over the interview questions. The result was a feedback session where “he told [Kusow] to change some of [the questions] because they were too sensitive and might produce a bad image of Somali people” (p. 595). Ultimately, the participant refused to do the interview. It would seem that the potential participant saw Kusow as Somali first and researcher second. From this perspective the subject-object position an insider holds can constrain access to the field.

Other constraints or difficulties have been: large amounts of impression management to maintain rapport and identity; observer and/or participant role may be culturally inappropriate; difficulty with recognizing patterns due to familiarity with community; bias in selecting participants; breaking or maintaining relationships with participants when leaving the field; community interaction style compromises interview process or observation; and overload with exchange or reciprocity requests from participants. The second column of Table 1 displays other noted complications.

Table 1 shows that many of the complications arise from lack of reflection and monitoring negative effects of the subject-object positionality or the shifting of social identities. My study of the Fuentes family demonstrates some of these difficulties as well.

Positionality: Insider’s Social Roles in Groups or Community Constrain Researcher Role and Objectives

Although I had experienced a positive response to my already-established reputation as the family scholar, my status as a relative (e.g., cousin, daughter, sister) granted me access and legitimacy in the field. However, my status also constrained the questions I could ask and how I could ask them. To avoid getting deferring responses (*You know what I mean* or *We talked about that before*), when I interviewed Fuentes family members with whom I had a long relationship, I had developed the strategy of beginning the interview with this disclaimer, “I know that we have probably talked about some of the things I might ask. But I want you just to pretend as if we were talking about them for the first time, so we can make sure we get the information right.” This technique was used by other insiders (DeLyser, 2001; Miller, 1997). For the most part, this technique worked, helping members overlook my familiarity to provide a good amount of detail in the telling of their stories.

On the other hand, assuming that my position as subject-object was sufficient to make members comfortable to reveal their life stories, I was unprepared when this disclaimer was not enough to get Fuentes members to open up about an issue we had already talked about. I had interviewed my grandmother at least two times before and probably knew much of what she would tell me. So, I gave her my disclaimer and it seemed to help her to recall details and specifics I had not already heard.

In recounting her childhood, my grandmother eventually began to tell me about her first childhood friend, a girl her same age with three brothers. They were the Bedfords, a White family whose father was a police officer originally from the mid-west. He had bought a farm near my grandmother's to teach his children about the values of hard work with which he had grown up. My grandmother and the daughter, Cathy, became fast friends, spending a lot of time together, going to school, to the library, and riding bicycles. I thought my grandmother and her friend made an unlikely pair in the 1930's, given the racism experienced by Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the southwest during that period. The interview eventually led to the discussion of my grandmother going to church with her friend and her friend's family.

Carolina: Right across the street [from the school] was a church. It used to be the Methodist church.

Chavez: You guys didn't go to that church, right?

Carolina: I did.

Chavez: Oh, you did? (*mild astonishment*).

Carolina: I used to go with Cathy, my friend.

Chavez: So she was a...

Carolina: a Methodist. And I used to go on Sundays, with her and her family. I was the only one.

Chavez: What did your mom think about that?

Carolina: She was happy because we didn't have a church. I used to go because we were friends. We were always together. Always (*drawn out*) together. And so on Sundays I used to go to church with them. I was the only Hispanic there.

It was my grandmother that had raised the issue of race. She did not say I was the only Fuentes there, but explicitly remarked she was the only Mexican (Hispanic). Having heard my grandmother tell me in previous conversations of the discrimination, as a result of her being the daughter of Mexican immigrants, I wanted to know why she did not receive similar discrimination in this case. Thus, I decided to immediately probe the issue by asking her to reveal that experience in detail.

Chavez: How did that feel?

Carolina: (*1 sec. pause*) Um. (*2 sec. pause*). I remember being 12 years old. And I remember my mother bought me a white dress. It was a dress for Easter. It had little printed flowers on it...I don't know why I remember that. I just do. And there were no other churches.

Chavez: Did you like going to church?

Carolina: Yeah. (*curt tone*)

My grandmother did not respond to my first request for more detail about the role of race in her experience as the only Hispanic in an all-White Methodist church, as she responded with a tangential memory about her church attire. My next request for specific information in this social setting, met with a minimal response. For those who know my grandmother, this curt intonation meant one thing; she was done interacting, either because she was upset, annoyed, or offended. It was her linguistic behavior for evasion. The appropriate response as a Fuentes family member was to drop the issue. Yet, as a researcher, I felt I needed to re-address the question in order to get at race, a significant issue in the lives of Mexican Americans. Thus, I attempted once again to reintroduce the topic of race; this time more directly, being mindful to carefully word it as not further to offend my grandmother.

Chavez: So you were the only Hispanic?

Carolina: Yeah. I was the only one that went there. Because she and I were friends. But for the rest of the family there was no church to go to.

She concludes with a reiteration of her personal connection with Cathy and her family as a cause for her being able to attend the Anglo church, but acknowledges the exclusion of other Mexicans (Hispanics) when she says that none of her other family members could attend. Yet, after three attempts, the mentioning of this circumstance was the only response about race that I could elicit from my grandmother.

I do not know why my grandmother did not want to talk about racism directly in the context of her childhood friend, a topic she felt otherwise comfortable sharing with me at other times. One explanation for this difficulty may have arisen from my generational difference, which I assumed could be bridged by our familial closeness. Kikumura (1986) experienced the same situation when studying her mother to understand cultural change and continuity in her Japanese American family. As a Nisei studying Issei, Kikumura found the generational difference problematic in knowing about certain cultural information. She says,

But more than the years, the greater gulf that existed between us consisted of cultural differences. She was a woman of Meiji Japan, born in an era of Confucian ethics...I was born in one of America's concentration camps during WWII...The differences that lay between my mother and myself grew even wider since the isolated Japanese American world of family and community to which she found herself confined seemed so far removed from the white world I had to live in. (p. 4)

Although my grandmother and I were members of the Fuentes family, I had grown up at a time when the discussion of race was legitimate and frequent, while my grandmother grew up in a time when race talk was prohibited and inconceivable. She had come to know (perhaps through my previous interviews and exposure to mass media) that race was an acceptable topic to discuss, but she had not grown up knowing *how* to talk about it.

Another explanation is a shift in closeness because of my relational status. Even though I attempted to probe the issue of race directly and indirectly, my ability to ask pointed questions as a researcher was constrained by my relationship as her granddaughter and Fuentes member. Miller (1997) found that her role as a family member mediated when an interviewee decided they no longer wanted to participate in the research game. When interviewing her husband's grandmother, Anna, about family history the interview was successful in that she created a "natural conversation," which provided detailed authentic data. However, in interviewing Anna for a second project about people's dwellings, Miller was unsuccessful.

I got a few questions about my project, but the answers were not entirely satisfactory...She had things she wanted to talk to me about that were not part of my agenda. She wanted to talk about family things and family time. I didn't press the issue. I ended up turning off the recorder at her request. (p. 340)

From this perspective, my grandmother's answer satisfied her familial obligation to reply, but it stopped way short of the detailed answer I needed as a researcher. Like Anna, my grandmother,

[may have felt] comfortable enough with [me] to tell [me] that [she] did not want [me] to document [her] or, more politely, that [she] would rather that [I] took off [my] researcher hat and got back to being a family member. (p. 341)

The high esteem for elders in Mexican American culture (and my family) and, above all, respect for the dignity of others, set a social boundary, as in Miller's case, that did not permit me to press my grandmother on the issue; I could only ask questions formulated in a polite respectful and non-intrusive manner. Directly asking my grandmother questions (*Did you feel discriminated when you went to that church?* or *Do you think that the church excluded Mexicans since you were the only one allowed to attend?*) would have created a socially inappropriate space. Although my family membership gave me ease of access to participants and authentic data along with previous insight about my grandmother's life, I realized that every time I interviewed my grandmother might be different. I could not rely on my family membership to parlay into access and authentic data every time, for every member.

In this instance, I could not reconcile my insider knowledge of my grandmother's experience with racism with my researcher's objective to know how racism figured into an unlikely childhood friendship. I was dually constrained by both my status as a Fuentes member to respect another member's wishes and by the shift of my identity generationally or relationally during the interview, issues an outsider, not bound by Fuentes' rules of interaction, may have been able to circumvent.

Data Collection: Interview Process or Observation Conflicts with Community Interaction Style

In addition to complications with access already described earlier, insiders face challenges in collecting data. For example, scholars experienced conflict between interview format and community conversational style (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000), co-optation of researcher into responses (DeAndrade, 2000) or into undertaking moral or social obligations (Baca Zinn, 1979; Parameswaran, 2001), legitimization of insiderness as part of interview (DeAndrade; Parameswaran), bias interviewing toward academic topics (Zavella, 1996), and responses affected by participants' perceptions, expectations, and interpretations of researcher's identity (Beoku-Betts, 1994; Merriam et al., 2001).

In my case, being a member of the family also created challenges to doing a "good" interview. First, perhaps attributed to the purpose of oral history, to center the story of the teller, I did not feel the level of co-optation that other insiders had felt. In interviews, when Fuentes family members used phrases like, "You know what I mean," more often than not I could provide a follow-up question or comment to refocus the interview on their elaboration of their response. There were times, however, where my follow-up was dangerously close to leading rather than redirecting the participant, as I replied, "Oh, yeah. It was like such and such for me. Was that how it was for you?" My disclosure of my experience may have helped to construct a particular picture in the mind of the Fuentes member, which may have not emerged without my comment. This negotiation of the subject-object position during interviewing, trying not to project oneself on the other, was experienced by other family researchers (Miller, 1997; Scheiberg, 1990).

Second, as in traditional fashion, all interviews were meant to be individual. I had done a few with second- and third-generation members, fully expecting the news of these successful individual interviews to go down the Fuentes grapevine (which I had subsequently used for access). Nonetheless, in some cases, upon entering the home or sitting down for the interview, one or more family members joined in, often for the duration. My coming over to do an interview perhaps warranted the enactment of a "family visit," where all members at home come from outside and backrooms, and break up conversations and phone calls to say hello and make small talk. Their goal was family talk and interaction, which undermined the intention of interviewing (Miller, 1997).

There were two husband-and-wife interviews, one sibling interview, and one grandparent-parent-child interview. An outsider may have legitimately requested for the additional members to leave; on the contrary, my status as a family member as well as the topic itself (the Fuentes family) legitimized other members' attendance at the interview without a formal invitation. For me to ask them to leave would result in violation of the family code of respect and courtesy (especially in their own homes!), thus jeopardizing future rapport and the entire research endeavor. Thus, I accepted their presence and proceeded with the interview, making note of possible interference from the enhanced dynamic. Merriam et al. (2001) provides a possible strategy in the case of group interviews: "With group interviews the researcher has to determine if the responses from other people are part of the interview; if so, whose 'story' is being told?" (p. 409). Since the number of group interviews was small, I assumed word of individual interviewing passed along social networks since no others occurred by halfway through collection.

Suffice it to say, in these instances my insider status complicated the interview process, either with negotiating the tenuousness of subject-object position or the unpredictable shifting of my social identities. Like Sherif (2001), I found that “the issues of establishing and maintaining rapport with individuals to be studied [challenging] when there [was] an increasingly unclear conceptualization on the part of researcher as to if, where, and how the boundaries in the relationship should be maintained” (p. 437). Using my insider information, when I consciously decided to set the boundaries of the altered interview form, the interviewing seemed to find its own equilibrium, if only momentarily, but I had to be cognizant and prepared to manage any nuanced complications which may have arisen at any moment.

Discussion

Overall, I found that the conceptualization of insiderness in Figure 2 to be a reliable depiction of how I and other scholars confronted the investigation of our own communities. While we are advantaged by the closeness afforded by the subject-object positionality, it dually complicated the implementation and completion of the research. Likewise, the shifting nature of our multiple identities revealed the fragility and complexity of our unique positionality. As a practical device, many insiders have consistently advocated for vigilant critical reflection on the effects of insiderness. Many (Aguilar, 1981; Kacen & Chaitin, 2006; Kondo, 1986; Nagle & Cantaffa, 2008; Nayaran 1993; Stephenson & Greer, 1981) advocate for developing a critical awareness of the process and interactants. Kondo says,

To merely observe the Other as exotic specimen, or equally unacceptable, to see the Other as a clone of the Self, is the worst sort of projection. Instead we must constantly aim for a critical awareness of our assumptions and those of our informants, to trace the parameters, the limits and the possibilities of our located understandings. (p. 86)

One suggestion has been to implement a dialectal perspective, alternating from insider to outsider position and back again. Aguilar (1981) suggests that insiders and outsiders “must meet diametrically different demands...the outsider must to some extent get into the natives' heads, skins, or shoes, whereas the insider must get out of his or her own” (p. 24).

Using critical reflection to navigate and negotiate insider positionality, to know where the self and the other begins and ends, implies that the use of particular qualitative methods may be more suitable for insider research. For example, autoethnography blurs the boundary between researcher and researched by “situat[ing] self within the research process and its written products, by making the self the object of the research and by developing a ‘reflexive connection between the researcher’s and participants’ lives” (Brunier, 2006, p. 410). As insiders are already in the position of subject and object of the research, this research methodology embeds critical reflection in the process, making the researcher *visibly* accountable for her/his presence. This dialectal process heightens an insider’s awareness of potential advantages and complications that may arise.

Furthermore, this complex positionality requires a new framework for training insider scholars, an element of insider scholarship which has yet to emerge. Most insider accounts are critical reflections on methodological and epistemological issues with no account of how these insights can affect the training of novices. Traditional training begins with “getting to know the field;” understanding participants, gaining access, and developing rapport. Insider scholars, on the other hand, need to be trained in a reverse manner: They need to get into their own heads first before getting into those of participants’; they need to know in which ways they are like their participants and in which ways they are unlike them; they need to know which of their social identities can advantage and/or complicate the process.

Training insiders should include several reflective exercises that reveal their practical knowledge of the field, so that they can verify or falsify their assumed interpretations. Further, they need to reflect on “[their] own intentions and consider how [their] own multifarious roles and identities affect [their] fieldwork procedures and the way [they] write about [their] research” (Miller, 1997, p. 336). Second, novice insiders need to develop strong observational skills that help them to differentiate what they *know* from what they *see*. Lastly, research training needs to provide a survey of potential advantages and complications as explicated here in order for scholars to develop a schema for how insiderness can be an asset as well as a liability.

This type of training recognizes the unique advantages and complications insiders may face, and it fortifies the promise of insider accounts by strengthening reliability and validity. Although insider research is now recognized as valid and necessary, insiders need to initially realize that their research experience will involve “the struggle to come to terms with what it means to be an insider and the ability to conduct sound research while an insider” (Labaree, 2002, p. 116). If insider accounts are going to serve their role in bringing social justice to minority and indigenous communities, we must begin to attend to a systematic approach to being on the inside.

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