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A 3-Level Model of Insider Ethnography

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Abstract

This article discusses ethnographic insiderness. After juxtaposing insider and outsider ethnography, we suggest insider-ethnography requires a more nuanced and complete discussion for it to be better understood, theoretically and practically. Accordingly, we propose a model of insider-ethnography that suggests three relative levels of ethnographic insiderness exist. We use examples from extant ethnography to substantiate our model theoretically and empirically. Our analysis occurs at a time when calls for a more reflexive understanding of ethnography exist, but reflexive analysis of insider ethnography is sparse.

Keywords

Bodybuilding/Gym-Culture, Ethnography, Insider Ethnography, Masculinity

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A 3-Level Model of Insider Ethnography

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This article discusses ethnographic insiderness. After juxtaposing insider and outsider ethnography, we suggest insider-ethnography requires a more nuanced and complete discussion for it to be better understood, theoretically and practically. Accordingly, we propose a model of insider-ethnography that suggests three relative levels of ethnographic insiderness exist. We use examples from extant ethnography to substantiate our model theoretically and empirically. Our analysis occurs at a time when calls for a more reflexive understanding of ethnography exist, but reflexive analysis of insider ethnography is sparse. Keywords: Bodybuilding/Gym-Culture, Ethnography, Insider Ethnography, Masculinity

This article discusses insider and outsider research (Merton, 1972), with a specific focus on differentiating between *levels* of insider-ethnography. At one level, as Naaeke et al. (2012) note, “Discussions about insider versus outsider status of the researcher remain alive and relevant” (p. 2). This is true not just in anthropology and sociology—disciplines where ethnography is formative and most obviously aligned—but also in other disciplines where the use of ethnography has proven useful (e.g., educational research, nursing studies and human geography; Banks, 1998; Herbert, 2000; Trowler, 2012). However, it is our contention that current discussion of insider ethnography does not sufficiently differentiate between *degrees* of insiderness and so potentially contributes to the fallacy that all inside ethnographers are essentially involved in the same process (i.e., the process of researching who and what is familiar to them). This is problematic. Familiarity is relative; degrees, or levels, of insiderness exist in the field. We therefore present a 3-level model of insider-ethnography, which develops from, and is illustrated by, extant literature, and also offer brief illustrative examples from our first-hand research experiences to substantiate our model empirically as well as theoretically.

Despite the vitality of the insider/outsider debate reported by Naaeke et al. (2012), insider-ethnography itself has been only partially explored a decade ago. Commenting on her insider position, Chavez (2008) mused:

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. (p. 478)

When Giazitzoglu attempted a similar reflection on his earlier fieldwork into entrepreneurs (Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017) and bodybuilding (Giazitzoglu, 2010, 2018) he found little progress since Chavez’s article. The article therefore begins by considering the context of insider-ethnography, with the intention of showing how it could be better conceptualized, before setting out our model of 3 levels, sustained by illustrations from extant research and first-hand field experience.

Insider Ethnography

Ethnography entails gaining access to naturally occurring events, observing, uncovering and comprehending the meanings which the social actors involved attach to these events to produce a systematic written account of what has been ethnographically observed and heard. As a research method, ethnography has occasioned extensive debate about the best ways of achieving prolonged, direct encounters with participants, as they act out those parts of their lives relating to the phenomenon being investigated (Payne & Payne, 2004, pp. 71-75). Following Merton (1972), the key issue has been seen as the relative merits of *outsider research* and *insider research* (see Chavez, 2008, p. 479 for a visualization). The former is carried out by researchers including ethnographers with limited prior knowledge of the research site and its members, and the latter by ethnographers operating, to various extents, within their own group, or in a group into which the ethnographer gains membership on the basis of shared or closely similar social and cultural identity usually arising from previous experiences.

Outsiders are likely to encounter greater practical problems of gaining physical, let alone social, entry to a research site, and may lack sensitivity to members' culture (Harries, 2014; Kempson, 2015). However, outsiders bring *anthropological distance*, and may be more alert to taken-for-granted features of the setting. An illustrative case is MacLeod's research in the settlement in which he grew up and continues to live today (MacLeod & Payne, 1994). When he started his ethnographic study, he had already achieved more than 20 years of participation in village life, complete with kinship, friendship, and co-worker links, and acquired the repertoire of earlier, shared, mundane interaction events that bind participants together and convey a common sense of identity. No researcher coming fresh to the setting could achieve this level of integration and acceptance (although, of course, not every researcher can have the luxury of this familiarity in other settings). On the other hand, as MacLeod acknowledges, his research access to the village's middle-class *incomers*, and to younger female residents, was less successful precisely because of his local persona, and gender, and there were occasions when his lack of anthropological distance made him slow to recognise the significance of some taken-for-granted matters, such as alcoholism, and patriarchal attitudes (Payne, 1996).

The significance of this is not simply that insider-ethnographers are more readily accepted because of shared characteristics and experiences but may have less analytical awareness of the implications of cultural meanings they already share with members of the group being studied. As Chavez demonstrates,

This has implications on the assumed ability of the insider to interpret data objectively: 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. (Chavez, 2008, p. 474)

There are inherent strengths and weaknesses attached to both approaches. Neither outsiders or insiders can be seen as having "a monopoly on advantage or objectivity" (Chavez, 2008, p. 476). Rather, both approaches create challenges for the researcher's reflexivity that must be continuously acknowledged if authentic data are to be generated from respondents during field-immersion. "Qualitative researchers, outsiders or insiders, cannot be assured that their observations, interpretations, and representations are not affected by their various identities or positionalities" (Chavez, 2008, p. 475).

It follows from this that rather than a dichotomy *between* insiders and outsiders, the overlap of problems facing both types of ethnographer has led Breen (2007) and Trowler (2012) to suggest that a *continuum* of insiderness/outsiderness would be a better formulation. Naples (1996) argues that degrees of insiderness are fluid and have constantly to be re-negotiated in the field. Banks (1998) points to the importance of cultural background and re-socialisation in the ethnographic process: being a former member of a group does not automatically grant insider status, instead the former member must behave in specific ways to re-position themselves as a legitimate insider among participants when obtaining data.

In the light of this fluidity, the model we are proposing is a logical extension of Chavez's (2008) distinction between *total insiders* who have deep experiences with the researched group, and *partial insiders* retaining a degree of detachment despite sharing aspects of a common identity. While agreeing with Breen and Trowler that a continuum exists, we suggest re-conceptualising this as three levels (or locations on the continuum) for the practical heuristic purposes of being able to discuss key issues. Thus, we are not dismissing the idea of a continuum, nor claiming that any one level is essential for all ethnographic projects but introducing a useful refinement.

This is because notwithstanding the contributions listed above, there has been relatively little attempt to take discussion of insiderness per se beyond abstractions, or the current predominant focus on the different *types of bias* that insider and outsider positions may create. These limitations are all the more surprising, given the *reflexive turn* in ethnography (Brewer, 2000) which encourages scholars to explore ethnography more critically and personally. Our model is intended help to address the insider position with rigor.

Currently the ethnographic insider is typically defined in general, even schematic, terms; as "someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and so on) gives them a lived familiarity with the group being researched" (Griffith, 1998, p. 361), and one who "shares membership in a social group with research participants" (Nowicka & Cieslik, 2014, p. 6; see also Adler & Adler, 1987). As Chavez (2008) laments:

Assumptions about insider positionality are theoretical, supported by little empirical evidence. . . . In truth, little insider research and a lack of development of an insider methodology have failed to systematically describe what insiders actually experience. (p. 475)

While extant attempts to visualise insiderness (e.g., Banks, 1998; Labaree, 2002) are interesting and conceptually helpful, it is necessary to go past such visual abstraction and consider the real experiences of insider-researchers.

Illustration: Previous Research on Gym Users and Bodybuilders

We can illustrate this from ethnographies of gyms, gym-users and body-builders. Klein's (1993) seminal ethnographic account of southern California's elite bodybuilding community says almost nothing about how Klein's own identity, embodiment and experiences of bodybuilding had an impact on his relationships in the field, and therefore the sort of data his participants afforded him. Did Klein's participants merely tell him what they thought an academic of a different age and class wanted to hear? His claim to have been a *quasi-insider* (1993, p. 283) is contentious: What is its basis and why is it important within the context of his study? Klein's access to bodybuilders was mainly through gym owners' introductions. His access and rapport with his participants did not seem to derive from Klein's own physiology or bodybuilding practices, and therefore is relatively superficial. For some limited purposes

this may not matter, but because he does not consider how his data may have been different had his participants seen him in a different way, his account is constrained.

Andrews, Sudwell, and Sparkes's (2005, pp. 879-888) ethnography of *hardcore bodybuilders* also relied on access to gym users via gym owners, and a weekly training session in the gym which saw the researcher train with participants and engage in related behaviour like the consumption of protein shakes. Hence, the study initially appears founded on authentic insidership. Yet this insidership, and its impact on data acquisition, is not elaborated; the extent to which a weekly training session can sustain the sort of insidership, associated dialogue and rapport with participants, needed for rich qualitative data to emerge, is not debated.

Likewise, the work of Monaghan (2001)—in our view the most convincing ethnographer of bodybuilding—still fails to consider how Monaghan's own physiology, training methods and views on steroids impacted his research into, and sense of insidership with, Welsh bodybuilding participants. The quality of Monaghan's data does suggest a deep relationship existed in Monaghan's fieldwork, yet questions about how this deep relationship came about as a result of Monaghan's identity, embodiment and practices—and how this relationship was both an advantage and disadvantage—are unexplored.

In his ethnography of four *hardcore* US gyms, Bridges (2009) states that:

As a reflexive ethnographer, I trust that my being a young man intrigued by weight-lifting culture aided me in gaining access to this group. While much smaller in stature, my own social history of athletics lent me enough status among the men at least to enable my observations to be less disruptive to their daily routines. Additionally, lifting alongside them allowed me to gain trust and to establish a relationship with them on their own. (p. 85)

Here, Bridges hints at the fundamental relationship between gym-users and gym ethnographers; he recognizes that an insidership based on athleticism is a seminal part of his methodological narrative. Yet Bridges only addresses this notion in three sentences, and in a provisional way. Much more about this relationship and the extent to which it might represent a true level of insidership could be offered.

In the light of these limitations, the next section of this article provides a model that differentiates between the degrees of ethnographic insidership, thus expanding key but numerically sparse discussions in the current literature in the area. While the discussion here is predominantly linked to researching males, we believe our model and its differentiation between levels of insidership are highly applicable to other ethnographic contexts.

A 3-Level Model of Insider Ethnography

Our proposed model of insider-ethnography recognizes that three *levels* of insidership can exist in ethnographic fieldwork. The first, most basic, level of insidership that our model proposes occurs when an ethnographer has a lived familiarity (Herbert, 2000, p. 556) with their participants, based on researcher and researched sharing the same age, gender, race and/or social class. According to our model, at level one insidership, there is a shared membership between ethnographer and participants on the basis of objective identity-markers. It is this level of insider-ethnography that Conant (1968) refers to via the assertion that only black ethnographers can understand black participants because of the experience that shared race-identity apparently creates. Equally, many feminist scholars suggest only women can truly access and qualitatively understand women's experiences (e.g., Cooper & Rogers, 2015; Oakley, 2016) due to the similar experiences that shared-gender creates.

Despite the apparent similarity between the positions taken by Conant, and Cooper and Rogers, they illustrate the difficulty of deciding which general characteristics are most important, in which specific settings. The research topic, the site, and the researcher's theoretical disposition all have a major impact on which of age, gender, race or social class, or which combination of these (in the intersectionality debate), is most significant. Conant, and Cooper and Rogers, also run together *access* and *understanding* the data generated once access has been achieved. Despite their general sharing of experience, the relationship between level one ethnographers and their participants may be rather superficial. The level one ethnographer must build on the objective markers of identity they share with their participants if they are to establish the trusting relationships needed for rich data to be elicited.

Giazitzoglu (2010, 2018) researched white, working class men who use a public gymnasium in a post-industrial British town, both locations defined by "a cultural knowledge of the way to become and be a working-class man in this place" (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2007, p. 350). His upbringing in a similar town meant that despite his greater education, his ability to enact a shared social-class identity meant it was easy for him to establish an initial, level one, access and insidership in the field. He was able to share—or appear to share—the traits, or hidden injuries (Sennett & Cobb, 1972) of working class identity and masculinity with participants, and thus access participants because they saw him as an *insider* rather than *imposter*. While Giazitzoglu's male gender and whiteness helped to secure a level one status among white working-class men in the field, his knowledge of how to *be* a working-class male (e.g., through the clothes he wore in the gym and his decision to talk about little except lifting weights and football in front of participants) further secured his insider position.

The *second level* of ethnographic insidership in our proposed model sees the ethnographer gain access to, and rapport with, participants not only on the basis of the researcher and the researched having lived familiarity, but also by means of more specific shared cultural capital, and the ability to *enact* routine collective behavior, general discourses and core styles in a given cultural field. Here, the ethnographer resembles their participants at an objective identity level one way—in terms variously of age, social class, gender, and ethnicity—and is additionally like their participants in terms of how they subjectively project their identity, through learned acts and cultural artifacts in ordinary situations. It is this learned knowledge of how to perform in a cultural field, often derived through the ethnographers' social backgrounds, which defines the second level ethnographer. By behaving appropriately, the *level two insider* goes beyond initial contact and physical entry to the world of the researched, to establish closer interaction and rapport, from which data may be generated.

Adopting the metaphor of culture seen as a game (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), to play the game (i.e., in order for an ethnographer or agent to participate in and understand a cultural phenomenon) one must know the rules of the game: the norms and conventions that define a cultural phenomenon, context and the humans involved in it. Only when an ethnographer is familiar with the rules of the game that define the culture and people they are studying, does what we define as a level two insider position arise. Of course, the rules of the game change; participation therefore requires an ability to learn and re-learn a game's rules, which points towards a third level. While desirable, level two may be over-optimistically *mistaken* for a more thorough-going insider status.

Examples of what our model defines as level two ethnography can be found in the work of Giulianotti (1995) into UK soccer hooliganism. Giulianotti is a white male of a certain age and class, researching men of the same demographics (level one), but, crucially, was able to denote a particular style of dramaturgical masculinity and self-presentation that was similar to his participants (level two). Giulianotti's participants were taking part in illegal behavior and were therefore highly suspicious of *outsiders* entering their cliques. Level one status alone might have allowed Giulianotti physical access to hooligans. Instead, to access his participants'

cultural world and gather nuanced data from them, Giulianotti had to *talk the talk* of their participants and deploy cultural capital—such as the wearing of certain clothing, the consumption of specific alcoholic drinks and the discussions of distinctive topics with esoteric detail. By so doing, Giulianotti demonstrated a level two insider position on the basis of him being able to act out *the rules of the game* in front of participants. This goes beyond simple participant observation where achieving research requires a less active and systematic role, such as Ryan's (2009) helping with the cleaning to assist him in obtaining interviews with cleaners.

It is possible for a level two position to occur without conventional level one characteristics. For example, Poulton (2012) was a female ethnographer looking at male football hooligans. Because of her gender and social class, she did not share an insider status with her participants at level one, who were male and largely working class. However, because Poulton knew enough about what is culturally required among her participants in terms of socially-constructed Bourdieusian games-play, she was able to cement a level two position. Hence, she elicited rich data in the field, resulting in her work being entitled, to quote one of her participants, "If you had balls, you'd be one of us!" (Poulton, 2012, p. 6). In turn, Poulton avoided the sort of harassment female ethnographers have encountered when researching male participants when they have failed to cement a suitable level of insiderness (e.g., Lumsden, 2009).

Level three in our proposed model sees the ethnographer not merely knowing the rules of the game (level 2) but how to be an active, competent, and even creative player of the game. Thus, level three ethnography sees the researcher actively and *creatively participate* in the studied group's central behavior. This is not about gaining access and rapport with participants on the basis of *talking the talk* (level 2) but also *walking the walk*, although this becomes problematic when studying transgressive groups involved in illegal cultural-acts like football violence. When our model talks of level three, it suggests a position akin to what Chavez (2008, p. 476) discussed as total insider or indigenous insider.

Thus, level two ethnographers of football hooliganism can be socially accepted by hooligans and gain data in the public spaces which hooligans frequent, while a level three ethnographer will actually participate in illegal, violent and indeed often pre-meditated activity (and, in so doing, become incriminated). Level two researchers look on (e.g., the refusal of Giulianotti, 1995, to become involved in football hooligan fights), whereas level three researchers are more prepared to join in: to *perform* hooliganism. There are obvious ethical issues here, as well as problems linked to the emotional consequences of conducting such research and the ability to generate epistemologically valid data, to which we return to later.

Level three is far from the *de facto* form of insiderness lamented by Merton (1972, p. 15). At level three, the ethnographer's academic status has relatively little impact on their fieldwork as far as the participants are concerned. It seems that Monaghan, when researching bouncers (security doorman working in Britain's nighttime economy) "informed. . . respondents of [his] university affiliation"; yet his "ethnographic contacts" treated him "as a working doorman" (2002, p. 410). In other words, Monaghan was good enough at actively performing the role of doorman that he was treated as a doorman. For the doormen he researched, Monaghan's third level status transcended his academic identity, with obvious benefits to data generation.

Achieving level three may require ethnographers to undergo sacrifices in the field in order to validate their insider status. Wacquant (1995, p. 71), when researching professional boxers, was informed by his coach following a sparring bout "your hooter don't bleed or don't get red no more like it used to . . . you're beginning to look like a fighter". Accordingly, Wacquant did not only talk knowledgably about boxing (level two). Rather, he—as a third

level ethnographer—learned to fight with distinction, sacrificing his own body in a way that gained respect among his participants.

Giazitzoglu (2010, 2018) was able to acquire level three insidership because his prior participation in bodybuilding helped to establish his own embodied identity. Having learned to body-build as a teenager in the late 1990s, in the gym he later studied, and having continued to practice bodybuilding after moving away, he began fieldwork with a physique similar to many of his participants. His body functioned to give legitimacy among his participants, based on a shared pursuit of muscularity. This allowed integration among the participants as an active bodybuilder from the onset of fieldwork, playing the game in accordance with their rules.

The distinctive level three features of his fieldwork included his ability to engage not only correctly, but also with extreme activities. On the one hand, he was able to lift heavy weights in the controlled manner which constitutes *good-form* in the bodybuilding community. On the other hand, he could willingly participate in the impromptu strength-tests with which gym's users challenge each other, such as *who can bench, squat and deadlift the most?* These tests can sometimes continue until the physical collapse of even hardened bodybuilders. Giazitzoglu's successful performance in these competitions was at times sufficient to receive praise from participants, which demonstrates that he was seen as *playing the game* for its own sake. In the later stages of fieldwork, he was also to adapt and navigate through new demands around medication and drug usage (Giazitzoglu, 2018).

This third level insider position meant that participants acted naturally in front of him. Without a third level insider status, the data elicited would have been less authentic, natural, and rich—albeit packaged in the discourse and argot of bodybuilding. It follows that Giazitzoglu's theoretical interpretations about participants were more likely to be based on participants' natural actions, rather than on participants' actions modified to suit him as an observer. Table 1 summarizes the three levels of insider ethnography our model proposes.

Table 1: Levels of Insider Ethnography

Insider Level	Nature of shared identity between researched and researcher
1	The fundamental, objective, shared markers of identity represented by gender and ethnicity.
2	Identities that are shared on the basis of learned cultural acts and rituals; and a mutual agreement between researcher and researched about how to articulate and reproduce the Bourdieusian “rules of the game” in a given field.
3	Totally familiar with the nuances of the culture being ethnographically analysed; with the ethnographer being a competent player, as well as articulator, of the game.

Discussion

While our proposed model can be taken narrowly as a simple technical statement, it also has wider ramifications for research practice and the demands our profession places upon us as practitioners. It may be the line between who can and cannot effectively research certain groups should be re-visited. If prior evidence of potential to perform at level three is a requirement, does this unduly restrict who can study certain settings? Desirable though level three insidership may be, relatively few ethnographers can easily achieve it. One benefit of our model is to increase awareness of the range of insider positions possible, so that we can evaluate fieldwork performance more effectively.

Our proposed model also implies that there is a range (or *levels*) of settings and research goals, each of which can be studied with an appropriate threshold level of insidership. We can illustrate this with the example of male *locker room banter*. Leaving aside ethical questions, if the research question is simply to document the level, and relative frequency, of extreme sexist remarks among other conversational topics, then level one access might be sufficient to discover this. However, if researchers, rather, want to explore when *banter* takes place in conversation, the *language* used, between *which actors*, a level two acceptance would yield better data. But for a full understanding and thorough-going analysis of actors' meanings, the social hierarchy and group integration, and how the talk reflected the actual sexist physical acts of the men involved, the researcher would need to achieve complete acceptance (at which point ethical issues become harder to ignore). Thus, while a researcher with level three insidership could address all three of these research scenarios, researchers with only levels one or two insidership would be less effective in tackling the third, more demanding research question.

A corollary is that level three insidership may be particularly suited to research into *hard to reach* groups (Bonevski et al., 2014). Although discussion of such groups has largely concentrated in identifying, contacting and sampling hard to reach groups (e.g., Johnston & Sabin, 2010; Matthews & Cramer, 2008), the ethnographer faces the additional challenge of achieving authentic *interaction* with participants and making sociological sense of their lives, once they have been located. This interactional aspect of accessing hard to reach groups has been neglected in the considerable literature in the fields of social and health policy.

Our proposed model's level three state requires considerable effort and skill to achieve, but we contend that the data thus collected, and the potential quality of the analysis, out-weigh the low possibility of loss of perspective. Indeed, as Payne (1996, pp. 24-26) has argued with respect to British community studies of small settlements, researchers often unconsciously over-estimate their rapport with their participants. It is implausible that "residents can say 'I've lived here 20 years and I'm still an incomer . . .' [but] most sociologists seem to have had relatively little difficulty in gaining access and acceptance" in a few months of fieldwork. While some loss of anthropological distance is a potential risk for all levels of insider researcher, the chances of seriously *going native* (to use the somewhat offensive term often heard in the earlier days of ethnography (e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 102) the actual chances of that happening were always slim.

This is important because even in reflex accounts, few ethnographic accounts reflect sufficiently on *how* the researcher came to exist at level three or the implications of their third-level status (Chavez, 2008; Giazitzoglu, 2018). For example, Wacquant's work (1995, p. 81) shows a picture of Wacquant wrapping the hands of a lightweight champion before a bout. This is a symbolic act, demonstrating Wacquant's unequivocal third level status. But so much more could be said about it: what did Wacquant do in the field, over time, to find himself performing such an almost sacred act? How did performing such an act have an impact on other relationships in the field? There is a methodological story to be told around such questions, which can reveal much about how third-level ethnography arises and the impact of this position

—both positive and negative—on data-acquisition and researcher experience in the field. Yet such stories and questions are too often neglected within ethnographic accounts, not least because of traditions of word-length limitations from the days of hard copy print publishing (that need no longer apply in digital formats). We hope that, by drawing attention to this situation, more insider ethnographers will reflexively consider the relative level and extent of their insiderness, its basis and its implications.

Post-modernist calls encourage ethnographers to be more reflexive (Brewer, 2000). However, reflexivity has been somewhat under-elaborated in relation to insider ethnography. The degrees of insiderness that can exist in fieldwork and analysis have not been fully differentiated and discussed. This article offers a corrective, by proposing a 3-level model of insider-ethnography which differentiates between degrees of insiderness. Rather than taking insiderness for granted, and seeing all insider ethnography as essentially the same, it advocates seeing insider ethnography as a complex and variegated position. Levels of insiderness have profound potential implications for data acquisition, data analysis, and related issues such as researchers' and informant's emotion well-being.

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