

# Insiders, Outsiders, and Credible Visitors in Research

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## ABSTRACT

There is a growing consensus around both the importance of researcher positionality for the conduct of research and the intersectional and variable salience of positionality and its effects. However, at the same time, static assumptions of “insider” and “outsider” status prevail. This article presents a productive and two-fold intervention in these discussions. First, we show that the insider/outsider distinction is fraught on logistical and conceptual grounds. Relying on our experiences in conducting interview research from rural villages to diplomatic offices, we show that these elements of status are fluid and dynamic. Second, we suggest an alternative to this dichotomy through the aspirational status of a “credible visitor.” We define this as a performative aspect of positionality founded on humility and reflexivity and enacted through showcasing competence and engaging in transparency. We describe how this approach to performing status may facilitate access as well as fruitful and ethical research interactions.

Accounts of the dynamism of researcher positionality and the importance of reflexivity are blooming in political science. Implicit or explicit within much of this discussion are notions of researchers’ relational status vis-à-vis the groups and people they seek to work with and study. Whether one is an “insider” or an “outsider” often is presented as a foundational distinction in how we should think about the conduct of research. This article contributes two productive interventions in this growing literature. First, we argue that the oft-implied dichotomy of insider/outsider status—and the impulse to cultivate one side of it—is problematic on logistical and conceptual grounds. Although there is some value in interrogating positionality with these categories in mind, we show that the notion of insider/outsider is far from an ideal aspirational reference point for students and scholars. Rather, we demonstrate that insider/outsider status is always amorphous and fluid. Second, we offer an alternative. We suggest that researchers should be “credible visitors” within research interactions. We intend this notion as an aspirational status or focal point in thinking about performing positionality in the field, and we show that researchers can use this approach to better pursue access and engage in fruitful and ethical interactions.

This article is structured in two parts. First, we explore insider/outsider status. We examine the limitations and pitfalls of defining these categories in static terms as well as seeking to position oneself as one or the other. The second part advances our alternative, describing what it means to be a credible visitor in research interactions. To explore the value of our approach, we reflect on a series of experiences in conducting different interview-based research on social policy in East Africa and on diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

## INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

Insider/outsider status refers to the proximal location of a researcher vis-à-vis a group. Thinking about how near or far a researcher is from participants infuses accounts of best practices across the discipline, including recent and important reflections on field experiments (Kim et al. 2022) and research in conflict zones (Parashar 2019). Traditionally, this conception has been presented as largely dichotomous: insiders are members of a self-defined group and outsiders are not (Merton 1972, 21). Membership may be a function of several elements of personal or professional history, including shared culture or language, perceived ethnic or racial commonalities, attributions of gender or sexual orientation, perceptions of class and community, or social-biographical qualities (e.g., education and work experience). Membership is always a matter of perception on the part of the researcher and the participant. This means that this status is

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variable across and within communities (Fujii 2013). As Schatz (2009, 7) explains, “[M]embership in any community or category comes in shades of gray” and “must not imply an unchanging essence or permanent membership.” Positionality is fluid and a matter of degree—one can fit more or less within a group and be more or less seen as such by members of that group, and this status can vary over time and context (Soedirgo and Glas 2020). Despite the challenge of seeing the role of positionality and the growing

community “finds what is familiar to the group significantly unfamiliar and so is prompted to raise questions for inquiry less apt to be raised at all by Insiders” (Merton 1972, 33). At the same time, however, a researcher cannot be too far removed from a community. Common language, or an interpreter, may be a requirement for interactions, and there is wide agreement that *some* sense of cultural competence or background knowledge is foundational to productive research. Thus, an informed outsider

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recognition that the insider/outsider dichotomy is fraught (Cammett 2013), there is much discussion about the importance of adopting or showcasing the markers of insider or outsider status.

Much methodological advice stresses the importance—or necessity—of having and/or performing some type of insider positionality (Blix 2015). Sharing markers of a community, from gender and language to personal experience, often is seen as a requirement for both access and understanding. Having “cultural competence and knowledge” often is assumed to be foundational for meaningful interactions (MacLean 2013), sensitizing researchers to the necessary nuances of experience and meaning (Berger 2015). A lack of this insider status—that is, not having common traits or shared experiences—may restrict access or make interpretation particularly fraught. Barrett and McIntosh (1985), for example, question whether a white woman’s position is simply too far removed from the experiences of Black women to afford insight into many experiences. Dew, McEntyre, and Vaughan (2019) similarly underscore the inherent limitations of non-Indigenous researchers inquiring into Aboriginal communities, removed as they are from local experience and systems of knowledge. In these examples, some type of insider status is viewed as necessary to demonstrate credibility, to build trusting relationships, and to make possible knowledge generation.

At the same time, however, some scholars stress the value of conducting research as an outsider for similar reasons: signaling credibility, engendering possible trust, and providing insight. Many scholars reflect on outsider status as affording access in ways that local scholars may not experience. This may be the product of perceptions of educational pedigree or the simple fact that they traveled far. Aarie, for example, found that officials at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Jakarta seemed to welcome him as a result of his traveling from North America. Other scholars suggest that simply being an “other” invites meaningful discussions that may not be offered to insiders. MacLean (2013, 78) found that being a “white, highly educated American woman” in communities in Ghana, Kenya, and Cote D’Ivoire prompted participants to detail experiences and rationales that may not have been provided to an insider. Beyond access and engagement, outsider status may provide productive vantage points to interpret and generate knowledge. This claim stems from an assertion that it is a challenge for members of a community to recognize and articulate the norms, practices, and meanings shared within it. These often are taken-for-granted qualities that may be starkly apparent to observers who confront a community as an outsider. In this view, a “stranger” to a

often is suggested as a useful vantage point to examine meaning making and behavior (Welch et al. 2002).

For insiders and outsiders alike, then, much conventional wisdom centers on the importance of the status-holder to signal credibility, generate trust, and make meaningful interpretations. In addition, many methodological statements often implicitly or explicitly present insider/outsider status as discrete identifiable categories that researchers can or should perform and carry with them.

Methodological statements tend to suggest that researchers are inherently an insider through shared elements of positionality (e.g., cultural affinity and/or personal history) or that they can become so through preparation and experience (e.g., time in research settings, language training, and doing one’s “homework”) (Cammett 2013; Leech 2002). However, a growing literature on the intersectional dynamics of positionality underscores that what renders a researcher inside or outside of a community is never given or static (Glas 2021). Rather, the intersectional and dynamic nature of identity dictates that a researcher will never be an insider or an outsider ideal type but instead will be perceived as a messy sense of both—and that these perceptions are likely to change over time and across interactions. These lessons are stressed, in particular, by scholars reflecting on the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. Riessman (1987), for example, famously emphasizes that gender is “not enough” to assume meaningful commonality between researchers and participants. Henderson (2009) and Bouka (2015) highlight a similar point regarding the dynamics of race. Both scholars were perceived as “anomalies” in their research interactions. In Bouka’s view, her “identity/identities, and hence [...] positionality in the field, were much more complex than simply [her] race.” In these examples, variable and changing perceptions of positionality shape interactions in important ways. These variable insider/outsider statuses can lead to access, as in Henderson’s experiences. At other times they can variably shape the contours of power and privilege and lead to confusion and complications in interactions (see also Fujii 2017; Takeda 2013). Of course, some researchers will be *more* of an insider than others by virtue of immediately salient attributes, such as a perception of a “skinfolk connection” (Bouka 2015). However, the particularities of what makes a researcher an insider or an outsider should not be assumed as given or static. When reflexively confronting status, some researchers, therefore, perceive shifting status from an outsider to “blend” in as an insider (Holmes 2021) or as simultaneously being part of both a “minority” and a “majority” in interactions (Obasi 2012).

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These reflections are echoed by many scholars who return to familiar or “home” communities for research and perceive themselves as “outsiders from within” (Collins 1986; see also Sirmate 2014). Tuhiwai Smith (2012, 5), for example, found that Indigenous researchers working within “their own communities, work partially as insiders, and are often employed for this purpose, and partially as outsiders, because of their Western education or because they may work across clan, tribe, linguistic, age, and gender boundaries” (see also Dew, McEntyre, and Vaughan 2019). Other scholars document a similar sense of fluid and partial insider status when returning to different social or professional communities. Flores (2018) sensed a similar partial insider status

commitments. At its core, this entails a commitment to both humility and reflexivity. In practice, it requires foregrounding and showcasing competence and transparency in interactions. By focusing on these four commitments—rather than concerns about insider/outsider status—researchers will be well positioned to engage in nuanced, ethical, and productive research interactions.

Foundationally, being a credible visitor—and being perceived as one—requires a researcher to approach interactions with “humility” (Yanow 2009) and to adopt the “human ethos” of relational research practices (Fujii 2017). This means that scholars recognize the human, social, contingent, and fallible nature of our

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as a military veteran working within veteran groups, and Kara (2017) describes much the same experience when shifting from participant to researcher in activist settings (see also Hill and Dao 2021). In these examples, although scholars had common experiences and markers as “insiders”—and assumed themselves to be as such—their status as researchers shifted how they were perceived, rendering them simultaneously both an insider and an outsider in important ways.

To further complicate the notion of insider/outsider status, researchers also are likely to sense their status changing over time and across interactions. We have perceived this in our own research experiences. Alesha felt this shift acutely during her years-long work in rural communities in Kenya and Tanzania. Given her growing fluency in local languages, recognition of her time within communities, and participation in day-to-day activities, she sensed that she had developed credibility and trust that, at times, blurred the insider/outsider divide in the view of many of those whom she interviewed. For example, one evening while having tea with an administrative chief, he explained that many researchers had come through their community. They often were survey enumerators who stayed a day or two and then left. However, he noted that Alesha—after having spent months living and participating in the community—was more likely to gain the trust and respect of community members who then were more likely share their

research interactions, wherein uncertain and variable dynamics of power and privilege ultimately shape interactions in myriad and important ways. As a result, researchers must foreground considerations around ethical working relationships with participants, which requires an active approach to reflexivity. This entails a commitment to continual reflection on power and positionality as we navigate interactions (Soedirgo and Glas 2020). In this way, being a credible visitor is not a discrete goal to be realized or box to be ticked but rather part of an ongoing and active process of self-reflection as we move through interactions.

From these two related foundational commitments, being a credible visitor requires that we adopt and signal competency and transparency in our interactions. What competency and transparency entail varies across communities and contexts, as does how to signal these to participants. However, we discuss several considerations. First, competence requires knowledge and the presentation of knowledge to legitimize our intervention into different communities and to demonstrate that we can be trusted as we navigate different spaces as a researcher. There are two core ways to develop this. In some cases, legitimacy may stem from engagement over time. This may signal that a researcher should “be here” and should explore themes and issues, making possible trust—that is, that a researcher can share in privy or sensitive knowledge. As Alesha’s experiences highlight, this may require lengthy time

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experiences with her. She remained an outsider, of course, but her status was shifting and changing in meaningful ways.

From these examples, it is clear that researchers may present variable, overlapping, and dynamic qualities of both insider and outsider status in their interactions. Given the importance and imprecision of positionality, the next section outlines an alternative approach to considering how we present and perform status—as a “credible visitor.”

#### BEING A CREDIBLE VISITOR

We conceptualize being a credible visitor as an aspirational element of researcher positionality consisting of four interrelated

within communities and language skills. In other contexts—particularly less-than-immersive, short-term research—signaling competency and the associated legitimacy and trustworthiness may require a demonstration of nuanced or privy knowledge or active signals of deference to hierarchies (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). For example, in Aarie’s experience of interviewing diplomatic elites, signaling that he already had learned privy information from other interviewees was important in soliciting nuanced discussion. When interviewing ASEAN officials about tense intraorganizational debates, for example, Aarie often would hear official lines that skirted controversial developments. It was only by destabilizing the conversation by sharing some less well-known

details that an interviewee was surprised to hear (e.g., language used in private meetings or details of contentious discussions behind closed doors) that some interviewees then disclosed a more detailed depiction of an event. After Aarie shared these snippets of knowledge, the demeanor of some interviewees visibly changed: some requested anonymity or to stop recording. This suggested a change in the tone of the interaction, in how Aarie was viewed, and in what he should know. This type of knowledge can be gleaned in different ways, depending on different research designs and time frames. This includes conducting interviews over a long period in some contexts, relying on the knowledge of local interlocutors and research assistants, and preliminary research done in advance of shorter durations when conducting interviews or running surveys.

Similarly, when ethical considerations allow, referencing prior interactions with superiors can signal this level of legitimacy and trustworthiness. This possibility varies depending on context and ethical considerations. Explicit permission should be sought before referencing prior interactions and details, and care should be taken to avoid such references when it is not appropriate. For Aarie, with permission of previous interviewees, signaling this access and information gleaned therein often opened areas of conversation that otherwise may not have been forthcoming. On one occasion, for example, an ASEAN interviewee stated, “I don’t know if [superior] told you this story, but...,” and then proceeded to provide insight into privy events that otherwise likely would not have been forthcoming if the interviewee did not know that Aarie had interacted with her superiors.

Alesha had much the same experience when conducting interviews with senior government officials in Kenya and Tanzania. Many enthusiastically welcomed her only after telephone calls from superiors with whom she had developed a working relationship and demonstrated her credibility. Many officials seemed more forthcoming with nuanced discussions when they were aware of her interviews with their colleagues, particularly on sensitive topics. We were both far from “insiders” in the halls of the ASEAN Secretariat and government offices across Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. However, we sensed that by signaling a record of access to participants and privy information, we demonstrated our competency within these communities. In doing so, we accrued a sense of legitimacy—even belonging—in those spaces. As a result, we often found welcome access and nuanced discussions.

Practicing and signaling transparency as a researcher is similarly crucial to being a credible visitor. The demands of transparency with participants extend beyond the requirement of informed consent, centering on clearly communicating the purpose of the interactions and how the shared knowledge will be used, including any attempt to facilitate other interactions. One way to consider these dynamics begins with Fujii’s (2017) approach to developing an ethical working relationship, which is founded on mutually agreed-to terms and is cognizant of the risks and power dynamics at work across all interactions. In Alesha’s experience, for example, she actively attempted to cultivate trusting and transparent relationships with participants through multiple community meetings before and after the research. This included clearly communicating the purpose and limits of the research, discussing the potential costs and benefits, and sharing the results with the community, the aim being to develop respectful and productive working relationships—even friendship in some contexts—which

augmented perceptions of status as a competent visitor. Aarie attempted the same goal, developing productive and sometimes warm relationships with participants as a result of respectful, honest, and transparent discussions about the research project. This resulted in Aarie being welcomed for follow-up interviews and informal conversations—sometimes years later—as well as suggestions to change the context from an office to a café or a home.

In these reflections, neither Alesha nor Aarie were ever “insiders.” Moreover, thinking in this way is not particularly productive. Rather, through these variable performances—from sustained interaction, showcasing privy knowledge, and signaling a track record of access—we were able to project belonging, underscoring our competence as a researcher and our legitimacy for “being here,” and that we were transparent and thus trustworthy visitors to various communities. It is not always possible to signal this level of engagement, of course. A researcher must start somewhere in terms of both access and knowledge, and not all interactions will be positive. However, by thinking about performing positionality not as an insider or an informed outsider but rather aspirationally as a credible visitor, we believe that researchers can better pursue productive and ethical research.

## CONCLUSION

This article argues that the common wisdom about the insider/outsider distinction is fraught on logistical and conceptual grounds. It is likely that researchers are always and variably perceived as a fluid form of both statuses. Moreover, our ability to recognize our insider/outsider status is inherently limited by the relational and contextual nature of research. As a result, we suggest that researchers pursue an element of positionality as a credible visitor. As discussed, this is an aspirational enterprise grounded by a human and reflexive approach to research and a commitment to being—and signaling—competence and transparency. By engaging in research from this foundation, researchers may be better situated to seek out access, engage in knowledge generation, and embark on productive and ethical working relationships with participants.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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