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## **Cross-Cultural Research: Insider/Outsider Dichotomy Reconsidered**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/PBE.2021.012>

### **Abstract**

The aim of my article is to confront the insider/outsider dichotomy with the present state of cultural research from the meta-analytical perspective. In the beginning, the paper reconstructs classical Robert Merton's theory of insider/outsider and the research potential of its basic assumption. Then, the emic-/etic approaches, as well as absolutist and constructivist approaches to cross-cultural research, are considered. The four James Bank's types of cultural researchers and Richard Hanvey's cultural empathy levels are presented against the background of multicultural reality. Further, the opposition of indigenous epistemology and the Western one is analyzed, as well as potential value of decolonizing methodology is emphasized. Finally, the article brings solid conclusions regarding the importance of the insider/outsider dichotomy as a tool for understanding the key issues of cross-cultural research even in our current global era.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural research, insider/outsider, cultural empathy, decolonizing methodology.

### **Introduction**

In the nearest past, the process of cultural globalization has been treated as a rather “mechanical” homogenous replication of Western patterns. The world seemed to be Westernized, and many researchers stressed the thesis about vul-

gar Americanization of all cultures. At present, the situation is perceived as more complicated. The world is fragmented, multidimensional and often simultaneously global and glocal. The cultural flows are multidirectional and often contradictory. However, it does not mean the old classical dilemmas have lost their topicality in attempts to research various cultures.

The aim of my article is to confront the dichotomy of insider/outsider with the present state of cultural research. Perhaps, this dichotomy seems too simple and a little old-fashioned. However, the author believes that this dichotomy is still at the heart of debate regarding the possibilities/limitations of researching foreign culture (Garcia, 2014; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015).

### **The insider/outsider dilemma**

The origin of the insider/outsider dilemma can be found in the monumental theory of Robert Merton. While discussing the various contexts of this dilemma, he states that proponents of the first approach are convinced about the validity of “epistemological claims of the Insider to monopolistic or privileged access to social truth” (Merton, 1972, p. 19). In addition, the insider approach is based on the assumption that “outsider has structurally imposed incapacity to comprehend alien groups, statuses, cultures, and societies. Unlike the Insider, the Outsider has neither been socialized in the group (...) and therefore cannot have direct, intuitive sensitivity that alone makes empathic understanding possible” (Merton, 1972, p. 15). From this perspective, Merton writes, “only French scholars can understand French society”, “only Black historian can truly understand Black history”, “only Catholics can understand Catholics” (Merton, 1972, pp. 13–14). Thus, Robert Merton concludes: “Extreme insiderism moves towards doctrine methodological solipsism (...) each group must, in the end, have a monopoly of knowledge about itself“ (Merton, 1972, p. 14).

On the other hand, proponents of the outsider approach are convinced that “the prospect of achieving certain kinds of insights may actually be somewhat better for Outsider” (Merton, 1972, p. 33). As insiders, we are “dominated by the customs of our group, we maintain received opinion (...) Only when we escape from the cave and extend our visions do we provide for access to authentic knowledge” (Merton, 1972, pp. 30–31). Therefore the proponents of this approach are convinced that “knowledge about groups, unprejudiced by membership in them, is accessible only to outsiders” (Merton, 1972, p. 31). Merton reminds here the Simmel conviction that “the stranger, not caught up into commitments to the group, can more readily acquire the strategic role of

relatively objective inquirer” (Merton, 1972, p. 32). In summarizing insider/outsider debate, Robert Merton recalls the Simmel and Weber consideration putting the question: “one must be a Caesar in order to understand him or one must not be a Caesar to understand him” (Merton, 1972, p. 31).

### **Various dimension of outsider/insider dichotomy in cross-cultural research**

The dichotomy of insider/outsider is transformed often in the cross-cultural research into emic/etic approach. Emic approach concerns the indigenous/native definitions of culture. Emic terms are “specific to a language or culture”; they are “used to refer to first order concepts – the local language, concepts, or ways of expression used by the members in a particular group or setting to name their experience” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 81). “The emic or inside perspective follows in (...) cultural anthropologists’ striving to understand culture from <<the native point of view>>” (Morris et al., 1999, p. 781). On the other hand, “the etic or outside perspective follows in (...) anthropological approaches that link cultural practices to external antecedent factors (...)” (Morris et al., p. 781). In general, in the etic approach, the researcher uses a context of his/her own culture to explain examined behaviours and phenomenon of other cultures (Adamopoulos & Lonner, 2001, pp. 11–12). It is worth emphasizing: the emic model is treated as culture-specific, etic as a universal one (Barnard, 2009, p. 220). In practice, the etic perspective is, in fact, the outsider perspective. An etic researcher figures as an observer of culture and tries to obtain objective data. So the method here relies on a descriptive system (Helfrich, 1999), and the aim becomes a “study of similarities and differences (...) in various cultural and ethnocultural groups; of the relationships between psychological variables and socio-cultural, ecological and biological variables, and of ongoing changes in these variables” (Berry et al., 2002, p. 3).

We may also adduce here two approaches to cross-culture research: that of an absolutist and a relativist, which also replicate to the certain extent the dichotomy of insider/outsider. “The absolutist view in cross-culture psychology is that psychological phenomena are basically the same in all cultures while relativist in cross-culture psychology is that psychological phenomena should be studied only <<within>> a culture where these phenomena occur” (Kuldeep, 2009, p. 83). As Marshall H. Segall, Walter J. Lonner and John W. Berry write: “absolutists would be prone to attempt context-free measurements, using standard psychological instruments, frequently making evaluative comparisons, and,

as a consequence, open themselves up to the error of using <<imposed ethics>> when working in societies other than their own. In contrast, relativists would lean toward strictly emic research, considering context-free concepts and their measurement to be impossible. They would try to avoid all comparisons, which, if made at all, would be as nonevaluative as possible” (Segall et al., 1998, p. 1104).

On the other hand, constructivist “challenges essentialist dualisms such as insider/outsider, the researcher/researched, and questions distinctions that have been drawn between ethnographic <<emic>>, which seeks to understand a culture from inside, and the comparative <<etic>>, which seeks across different cultures” (Crossley et al., 2016, p. 21). Sometimes the “insider-outsider boundaries (...) do occur as fixed, immovable entities (...), and at other times as something more fluid, almost invisible” (Crossley et al., p. 22). In constructivist approach “multiple <<knowledges>> can coexist (...) depending on social, political, cultural, economic ethnic and gender factors that differentiate the interpretations” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 313).

To dissolve the sharpness of dichotomy insider/outsider, we can take into account the phenomenological paradigm, in which a researcher is conscious of the existing multicultural reality. There is an assumption here that the subjective reality of particular people is equally real as the objective reality described and measured by a scientist. Therefore, so-called “objective reality” does not exist. Instead, one is dealing with different but equally true versions of reality (Fetterman, 1998, p. 5).

Also, Sharon Wray and Michelle Bartholomew write that “positioning of insider and outsider identities as opposite is problematic because it does not take into account the ways in which identities interconnect (...) when researcher and participant discuss and compare their different <<narratives of the past>>, previously held understandings and perceptions that construct aspects of insiderness and outsiderhood are often disrupted” (Wray & Bartholomew, 2010, pp. 8–9).

James Banks created a very interesting typology of cross-cultural researchers which broadens the dichotomous insider/outsider division. The first one is “an indigenous insider” who “endorses the unique values, perspectives, behaviours and knowledge of his or her indigenous community and culture”. The second is “an indigenous outsider”, which has been “socialized within the cultural community” but afterwards “has assimilated into an outside culture”. The third type is called “external outsider”, which has been “socialized within another culture” but “acquired the beliefs, values, behaviours, attitudes and knowledge of the cul-

ture with which he or she is carrying out the research". Ultimately, the "external outsider" has been "socialized within a community" which "differs from the one in which he or she undertakes the research". This type has a "little appreciation" of values and knowledge of researched community and often "misunderstands and misinterprets" its cultural reality (Liamputtong, 2010a, p. 110).

Usually, a researcher is outside the culture that is an object of his/her interest. The cultural elements and their role in a given culture is distant for him or her. So the researcher has to get to know them to understand the functioning of a particular culture. Sometimes it is connected with culture shock, understood as "a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences" (Adler, 1975, p. 13). Adler points to a form of alienation connected with it but also puts the emphasis on a positive meaning of culture shock. Through immersion in a foreign culture, a researcher can learn and understand certain cultural phenomena and develop "higher levels of personality" (Adler, 1975, p. 14). Adler describes five stages of transitional experience connected with culture shock. The first one is the initial contact with a different culture saturated with ethnocentrism. We deal with excitement, euphoria and delight of new culture in this stage. The truth is that at this stage of contact with a foreign culture, one relies more on finding common elements with their own culture; rather than the new and strange or unfamiliar. This mechanism serves as a confirmation of our own cultural, behavioural pattern. The second stage, named disintegration, is full of disorientation, tension and frustration, connected with raising awareness of being different. In the third stage, reintegration, an individual rejects foreign culture, which can become „the basis for new intuitive, emotional, and cognitive experiences". Mechanisms as: stereotyping, generalization and evaluation appear here. Despite hostility toward a foreign culture, raising cultural consciousness is experienced. The autonomy stage follows and is characterized by sensitivity and empathy toward the second culture. An individual is able to function in both cultures as an insider and as an outsider. The last fifth phase is called independence, and it is associated with enjoyment from cultural differences and similarities (Adler, 1975, pp. 6–18).

Another author, Darla Deardorff, describes intercultural competence in several dimensions. One of them is a respect for different cultures, their diversity and particularity. Another one is knowledge about various cultures and intercultural dialogue. And the next one is an ability to distance from own ethnocentric point of view. I think that the above elements allow a researcher to conduct cross-cultural research (Deardorff, 2006).

We can also refer here to a somewhat similar approach suggested by Richard Hanvey. He recognizes four levels of cultural empathy in cross-cultural awareness and research. The first one concerns an “awareness of superficial or very visible cultural traits”, and the cognition is full of “touristic stereotypes” (e.g. naming cultural phenomena as bizarre). The second level is connected with an “awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one’s own”, and the process of cognition may be “full of cultural conflict” (e.g. naming culture phenomenon as frustrating or irrational). The third level is, in its content, similar to the second one but cognition is quite different; it is based on intellectual analysis and conviction that the specific phenomenon is believable and understandable. The highest level of cultural empathy can be described in the following way: “awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider”. And the cognition is based here on the culture immersion and “subjective familiarity” (Hanvey, 1975, p. 11).

So, the main problem in cross-cultural research is connected with cultural empathy or cultural sensitivity (Pedersen et al., 2008). It is inevitable that (at the beginning) a researcher is immersed in their own culture and that it determines the way of seeing and interpreting data. In this context, according to Pranee Liamputong, cultural sensitivity is “referred to as knowing the culture context of the group with whom the researchers wish to work”. “The acquisition of culture knowledge of the social group” is of the utmost importance (Liamputong, 2008, p. 4). Darla Deardorff emphasizes that cross-cultural research requires „cultural sensitivity and the adherence to cultural norms” (Deardorff, 2006).

## **Decolonizing methodology**

In addition, some researchers stress the necessity to develop a decolonizing methodology in cross-cultural research. Certainly, it is closer to an insider approach, even if it is conducted by an outside researcher. At the core of it, there is a rejection of “colonial research traditions” which have made indigenous knowledge “silent”. Decolonizing methodology “is guided by the values, knowledge and research of indigenous people,” and it “strives to empower indigenous communities and respect their culture and traditions”. Interestingly, it is emphasized that such a methodology “also allows collaboration among the native researchers themselves and with outsider researchers” (Liamputong, 2010b, pp. 22–23). Thus, the dualism insider/outsider is not dismissed here.

There are a few questions to raise when considering a decolonizing approach: “whose research is it?” (Tuhiwai & Smith, 2006, p. 10), “whose experi-

ence and knowledge counts as valid, scientific knowledge?”, “how is a theory of universally valid knowledge linked to the depreciation and destruction of other knowledge?” “who is seen as capable of producing knowledge?” (Ziai et al., 2020, p. 6). There remains a question whether we accept only insider knowledge or there can be some kind of epistemology and methods that let us compare the inside world with the outside one? Researchers who work with the decolonizing methodology have some difficulties to reconstruct the Western version of science according to indigenous ways of thinking but still preserve at least some kind of “scientific rigour”, which is at the core of every research. For example, how to create indigenous statistics (Walter & Andersen, 2013) or academic Indigenous astronomy (Norris et al., 2009) or physics? Many indigenous researchers try to supplement Indigenous knowledge with Western academy tradition. Others call for a separate Indigenous science. As Gloria Emeagwali and Edward Shizha expressed it: “indigenous science is better understood as practical, personal and contextual units which can not be detached from an individual, their community or the environment (both physical and spiritual) (...). Before the advent of Western methods of inquiry, African knowledge and methods had successfully guided people in all spheres of life, including the spiritual, social, educational, agricultural, political and economic” (Emeagwali & Shizha, 2020, p. 7).

No one can deny that the history of cross-cultural research has been mostly dominated by an outsider approach. Western science saturated by Western epistemology and values has been used not only to research indigenous cultures but also to classify them as a “lower other”, to marginalize and colonize them. The domination of a Western approach to research has led to “imposing universal, standardized thinking and action (...) The Western version of reality and identity is exported”. On the other hand, in this process, “there is a permanent decontextualization of various practices and values of local culture”, which is based on depriving them of local traditions and history to evaluate them according to Western standards (Melosik, 2014, p. 396).

In conclusion, even if cross-culture research may be conducted outside of the insider/outsider dichotomy, it does not refer to culture policy between the West and the rest. It is often the case that indigenous cultures, African, Asian or South American, look at themselves through the Western eyes; they take an outsider point of view to understand their own culture (Melosik, 2014, p. 22). On the other hand, the process of globalization, which has been mentioned at the beginning of my article, is very dynamic and often gives relative autonomy to a local culture.

## Conclusion

In my opinion, the insider/outsider controversy is still important in cross-culture research, even if the debate in this field has lost its tension. It can be considered at two levels. The first one is epistemological and methodological. When, for example, American or British scientists research the Australian or Canadian indigenous culture, and the positivist survey is used, the conclusion is simple. The outsider position is at stake here, and epistemologically (and often ethically) unfamiliar schemas are imposed on the participants in research and researched area. When the American or British scientists use soft qualitative methods, we can suppose that “softer” data which is received is more adequate to describe reality. Nonetheless, they are still cultural outsiders using (even if qualitative) methods of research developed in Western history of cognition. Maybe they are “lesser outsider...?”. And what when a positivist survey is used by an indigenous Australian or Canadian researcher to explore Australian or Canadian culture? It is still a Western positivist instrument but used by a member of an indigenous community. Is he/she the insider or outsider in this research? And what if he/she uses interview methods in the research?

The situation is even more complicated at the personal level. Even if an American or a British scholar has done his/her best to develop the highest possible level of cultural empathy or sensitivity, he/she is still biased by Western early childhood socialization, by teenager school year and peer group, by family and social values. No one can dismiss himself/herself; no one can be culturally bland; there is no way to deprive his/her identity of initial characteristics and values. The same is in the case of an indigenous researcher doing research in his/her own culture. He/she would not be deprived of his/her identity values and attitudes attained during culture immersion. Thus it is possible to conclude that the outsider/insider controversy will exist forever, even if in more and more complicated ways.

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