Beyond Indigenous Authenticity: Reflections on the Insider/Outsider Debate in Immigration Research

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The insider/outsider debate in field research has recently been identified as one of the more important areas of needed research in immigration scholarship. My fieldwork as a native ethnographer among Somali immigrants to Canada is used to further that argument by showing the insatiability of categories such as native ethnographers and that the insider/outsider roles are products of the particular situation in which a given fieldwork takes place and not from the status characteristics per se of the researcher.

Over the past decade, debates about the increasing number of academics who study their own immigrant communities have placed the politics of representation and authenticity at the core of contemporary immigration research. In a recent article based on a National Survey of Immigration Scholars, Rumbaut (1999) reports that almost half (48 percent) of immigration scholars in the United States are themselves of immigrant stock. Herbert Gans (1997, 1999) also reports similar patterns. He finds that 53 percent of researchers applying for dissertation grants to the National Science Research Council in 1997 planned to study their own ethnic immigrant communities. According to Rumbaut, this trend will change the dynamics of the insider versus outsider categories in the future as well as the nature and the kind of immigration research produced in the United States. Gans (1997) further shows the significance of this debate by identifying insider versus outsider/outside/insider issues as an important gap in the contemporary immigration literature. In fact, scholars have identified the increase in the number of ethnic researchers as the main source of the controversy surrounding the assimilationist versus ethnic retentionist scholars. Most of the early immigration scholars were outsiders who did not speak the language or share the cultural background of the ethnic groups they studied. The majority of contemporary immigration scholars, however, share similar cultural backgrounds with the groups they study. These differences, according to Gans, led
to the first group favoring Park’s assimilationist theory and the other group favoring ethnic retentionist perspectives.

Such discussions are crucial in identifying the values that researchers bring to the field, the kinds of data they collect, and how they ultimately interpret the data. However, they have ignored the possibility that the researcher’s relationship with research participants may not be determined a priori and therefore designated as either insider or outsider (Narayan 1993). I intend to inquire more deeply into this issue and problematize the insider/outsider debate in immigration research.

The problematization of the insider versus outsider debate is, of course, not a new phenomenon (Merton 1972). The main disjuncture between the insider and outsider perspectives, according to Merton, is simply a conflict in what Merton, quoting Heidegger, calls the “public interpretation of reality” (p. 19): The outsider perspective primarily draws on the classical philosophical arguments that warn against “the corrupting influence of group loyalties upon the human understanding” (p. 19). It operates from the assumption that objective knowledge relies on the degree to which researchers can detach themselves from the prejudices of the social groups they study (Agar 1980; Boon 1983; Simmel [1908] 1971). This view holds the implied contention that to gain access to credible information and data sites, the competent ethnographer must create a balance between the “proportion of nearness and remoteness” Simmel ([1908] 1971:146) so as to not commit what social anthropologists call “going native.” The insider perspective, on the other hand, essentially questions the ability of outsider scholars to competently understand the experiences of minority groups. Certain African American scholars (Conant 1968; Hare 1967; Ibn Alkalimat 1969; Wilson 1965) prompted this question, and later feminist and postcolonial scholars embraced it. The perspective claims that outsiders cannot have the necessary sensibilities that can make, to borrow from Max Weber, verstehen, or empathetic understanding, possible because outsider ethnographers are not initiated in the cultural values of the people they study.

The insider/outsider distinction lacks acknowledgment that insiders and outsiders, like all social roles and statuses, are frequently situational, depending on the prevailing social, political, and cultural values of a given social context. In other words, according to Merton, we cannot permanently locate individuals according to a single social status. Rather, they occupy a set of social statuses such that one individual can occupy an insider status in one moment and an outsider in another. Accordingly, “the sociological perspective of the status set, ‘one’ is not a man or a black or an adolescent or a protestant, or self defined. Sociologically, ‘one’ is, of course, all of these and, depending on the size of the status set, much more” (Merton 1972:24). Here, Merton introduces the malleability or the situational nature of the boundary separating outsiders from insiders. As he put it, “Differences of religion or age or class or occupation work to divide what similarities of race, sex or nationality work to unite” (pp. 23–24). Merton (p. 36) points out that the central question should not be whether or not one group or the other has privileged access to social reality but a consideration of “their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of truth seeking”
(see also Waters 1999). Maines (2001:109) has recently echoed Merton’s arguments that “instead of grouping ourselves around totalizing claims . . . we should try to find the most appropriate voice, distance, information formats, and interpretive frames and devices for the empirical and analytical concerns at hand.” However, Merton’s argument that the production of credible and objective knowledge does not depend on predetermining who is an insider and/or who is an outsider but rather on the particular situation in which these roles are enacted provides the necessary theoretical conditions that can allow us to transcend, to borrow from Maines again, totalizing categories, yet Merton’s argument does not elaborate on how, in fact, we can realize such conditions.

Using autobiographical and reflective modes of writing (Ellis and Bochner 2000), I provide a critical analysis that challenges the insider/outsider opposition categories in field research, specifically in immigration research, by examining the multidimensional nature of insider/outsider relationships in my recent studies of Somali immigrants. I argue that the insider/outsider dichotomy assumes the existence of a normatively and collectively shared understanding of who is an insider and who is not based on some generalized sociodemographic, racial, and cultural attributes when, in fact, the distinction remains contested (Narayan 1993; Parameswaran 2001). My analysis of difficult if not failed interviews with Somali immigrants in Toronto challenges the distinctions between insiders and outsiders and shows the instability of categories such as native ethnographer. In my concluding remarks, I discuss how, in fact, the insider and outsider roles are products of the particular situation in which fieldwork takes place as much as and sometimes more than they are the status characteristics of the researcher.

FROM INSIDER TO OUTSIDER

I immigrated to the United States in 1984 and immediately became an outsider in at least three ways. First, I speak with an accent; second, I am a Muslim; and third, I am black. The first was and remains a permanent part of my everyday identity. Each time I engage in a conversation, the first question that arises, even if not asked right away, is, where am I from? Others comment on the supposed anthropological exoticness of my accent and ask, where is this accent from? Regardless of the question, though, a foreign accent is an identity marker that designates the bearer as an immigrant. In most respects, the second, my religion, has positioned me as a sort of invisible outsider, because so long as I do not tell anyone of it, no one really knows. But the third, becoming black, has been something over which I have had the least control. In a fundamental sense, “color-based” racial categories did not figure in my everyday social realities in Somalia. These categories are not a meaningful social dimension in that country, and Somalis do not see or evaluate one another according to skin color in the strict sense employed in the United States. However, race is an intrinsic part of North American culture and stratification, and therefore on entering in the United States, my skin color became a criterion for others to locate
me as a racial outsider. In fact, I became an outsider for two groups: for whites, because I am black; and for African Americans, because I was born in Africa. Like other immigrants dealing with problems of being an outsider, though, I sought to create some sense of insider status by finding other Somalis with whom to associate. Before I started my academic studies, I worked in places where other immigrant Somalis worked, lived in the same neighborhoods, ate familiar food, and spoke in Somali for the purpose of feeling at home culturally. This dialectic of simultaneously being an insider and an outsider is a familiar situation for the majority of immigrants.

BEING A NATIVE ETHNOGRAPHER

In some ways I am similar to other immigrant scholars insofar as one of my major topics of study is my original home country and culture or my ethnic community in the diaspora (Rumbaut 1999). From the early to mid-1990s, I worked on several projects pertaining to the Somali civil war (Kusow 1994, 1995), but not until 1996, when I chose a topic for my Ph.D. dissertation, did I decide to engage in ethnographic research of Somali immigrants in Canada (Kusow 1998). Initially, I assumed that my insider status would give me fairly instant access to informants and interview subjects, that my insider knowledge would allow me to see the Somali situation more clearly, and that my local knowledge would transfer to superior interview questions. I specifically chose an ethnographic approach over survey or statistical methods for my dissertation research on the assumption that my insider status would be a blanket advantage. I soon discovered, however, that in many ways I remained an outsider within the Somali immigrant community while being very much an insider to it. In short, I discovered that the insider/outsider distinction is far more complicated than our professional literature suggests and that these complications bear directly on issues of credible data and knowledge production.

One complication involved my becoming a kind of “suspicious insider,” especially in discussions pertaining to politically or culturally sensitive issues. In my own experience, I had insider access to these issues simply by initiating a casual conversation with almost any Somali I met. However, as soon as I revealed my research identity, the nature of the conversation would suddenly change. For example, in the early days of my fieldwork, an incident occurred when I went to a popular coffee shop where Somali immigrants in Toronto gathered. Because most seats in the coffee shop were taken, I joined a gentleman who came in just before me and took the last available table. As I sat down, we introduced ourselves and as usual started talking about Somali politics and the civil war. He said that he had read about many civil war situations in the world but none had reached the same intensity with which Somalis destroyed the country. He stated:

You know, people can disagree with each other, but why destroy the country and sell its factories as scrap metal in neighboring countries?

Somalis do not have the slightest idea about nationalism. What do they have in this country [Canada]? Our culture has been thrown into a deep well, lost.
Children do not respect their parents, women do not respect their husbands, and I have never seen a child saying, Don’t talk to me like this to his or her parent. We have that in Canada.

All this took place in about the first twenty minutes of our conversation, and while he talked about the negative turn that Somali culture has taken since the civil war, I decided to tell him about my research project. Once I told him, however, and even before I could request an interview with him, he started to advise me about the proper things to write about the Somali community in Canada. He said that I should write about the good things, about how the Somali community in Canada is very clean and not involved in criminal activities like selling drugs, about our beautiful culture, about how Somalia before the war was a great country, and finally about the problems that we have with Canadian immigration. After a long conversation of that sort, I thanked him for his advice but said that I also wanted to ask him some specific questions from my interview schedule. After he read, or pretended to read, the questions, he told me to change some of them because they were too sensitive and might produce a bad image of the Somali people. Although I understood his view, I nevertheless tried to explain what the questions were intended to achieve and that I did not have any particular interest in painting a bad image of the community. At that point he refused to grant me an interview.

This incident indicates that insider ethnographers, unlike outsiders, face an inherent contradiction between community expectations and their role as credible researchers. Thus insiders are pulled between their intellectual impulses and that of the immigrant community, which implicitly encourages them to present their subjects in a positive light. I recall when I was writing my dissertation, my adviser could not understand why I was not directly addressing issues of the clan dynamics of Somali immigrant communities when these issues had clear relevance. Although clan dynamics constantly appeared in my data, this incident is interesting because I could not grasp what my adviser suggested to me. Later, after I finished my dissertation and could reflect on my fieldwork experiences, I realized that my refusal to deal with this issue resembled that of the man who refused to grant me an interview because the questions were too sensitive. The irony, of course, is that my insider sensitivities about clan dynamics were compartmentalized from my research role, which led to some irritation about my respondents’ sensitivities and their altercasting me as a suspicious insider.

Another incident occurred one morning while I sat in a friend’s shop and a young man walked in and started conversing with my friend-informant. I had seen this man a few times in the shop already, and in the middle of the discussion my friend suggested that I interview him. I soon became interested and started explaining my research project to him. He hesitated for a moment and said he needed to take time to consider my request. After two or three days, I again saw him at the shop and asked if we could make an appointment for an interview. He hesitated for a moment and said, “I don’t trust anyone. In fact, I don’t trust any Somali. There is nothing that Somalis can trust in each other.” I understood what he meant, given
the current political climate among the Somali people. In another incident my friend-informant telephoned a woman he knew who used to come to his shop to ask if she would give me an interview. I could hear their conversation and could detect the nature of their discussion from his responses. As he hung up the telephone, my friend told me, “She did not want to give an interview, because she did not want to be implicated in anything.” He told me that she said at one point, “She wanted to talk to someone that she trusted to see if she will allow the interview or not,” but he added, “It was just an excuse to get out of it.”

Problems of access and rapport are not resolved even if respondents make the referrals—the classic snowball method of sampling. Such referrals can become more problematic in certain situations. Some respondents may not turn you down altogether because someone they trust referred you to them and thus they do not wish to disappoint that person. However, they may try to provide quick responses or create other doubts about the research itself. In one case, a respondent referred me to a young lady he knew very well. The next day, I called her and went to her house. Several children were also in the living room, watching television. After several minutes, I asked her if we could start, hoping that she would find a little privacy. She said, “O.K.,” but remained sitting in the living room. As I started asking her the questions she responded with one-word answers, which was basically her way of giving me no information at all. Another situation involved a contentious discussion about the legitimacy of my research, that is, whether I was the actual person who was doing the research or if I was working for some other research group from a university. After explaining that this project was my own, the discussion shifted to the Behavioral Investigation Committee. While reading the informed consent form, the woman said, “Why is this called a Behavioral Investigation Committee? I thought you were doing a research on the Somali immigrants in Toronto.” “Well, yes, I am,” I said. “If that is the case, then why is this Dr. Williams phone number written here if you are the one doing the research?” she asked. I tried to explain the process and the procedures used by the human subjects committee. At any rate, I finally sorted through the problems and interestingly enough collected one of the best interviews among all my respondents. All of this speaks to how the process of access and rapport are confounded by multiple issues beyond a simple insider/outsider dichotomy.

MALE/NATIVE ETHNOGRAPHERS AND FEMALE PARTICIPANTS

Another important area where the insider/outside distinction becomes irrelevant is in cultures that segregate social activities along gender lines. The Somali community is one such example. Despite considering myself as an insider, I was locked out from interacting with female participants in several meaningful ways. Most public social activities and community gatherings organized men’s and women’s seating separately. In fact, women and men attending the same event in the same location
do not meet, let alone interact with one another. A wedding celebration consists of two ceremonies held at different times and sometimes at different locations, one for the men and another for the women. The only men allowed to go to the female gathering are those who operate the videocamera or provide musical entertainment, and they tend to be relatives of the bride or the groom. In such social arrangements, cultural or racial differences or similarities do not determine insider or outsider status; the social organization of gender does. What this situation suggests is that a Western, outsider, female ethnographer may have better access than would I as a native, male ethnographer; alternatively, in the case of male respondents, a male outsider ethnographer may have better access than a female Somali ethnographer.

My own experience as a native ethnographer provides a good example of the above discussion. One of the most difficult problems I faced during my fieldwork was how to find and interact with female participants. I was able to talk to several Somali female students at the local universities, but beyond them, finding access to female participants remained a daunting experience. In the Somali social context, one cannot simply call a female participant for an appointment or go to her house without the assistance of a male relative, for one must avoid any suggestion of impropriety or other misunderstandings. If the woman is married, the situation is even more complicated. Married women cannot, at least officially, associate with men other than their husbands or relatives regardless of the circumstance.

**CONCLUSION**

The primary objective of this short account has been to highlight some of the basic epistemological problems of the insider/outside debate. First, the insider/outside dichotomy as methodologically distinguishable analytic categories cannot be supported empirically. The relationship between researcher and participant cannot be determined a priori such that a researcher can be categorically designated either an insider or an outsider. Rather, research status is something that participants continuously negotiate and locally determine. A researcher can be an insider in a particular local situation but an outsider in another. I argue that the researcher’s characteristics do not solely determine insider/outside status. Rather, this status emerges from the interaction between the researcher and the participants as well as the social and the political situation within which the interaction occurs. For example, if I compare myself (a native ethnographer) with a Western ethnographer and use racial and cultural similarities and differences, one would say that I am an insider and the Western ethnographer is an outsider. But if I introduce gender and compare myself, a male native ethnographer, with a female who is culturally an outsider, then I may be the outsider and the female who is culturally an outsider may be an insider on the basis of gender because Somali society is segregated along gender lines (cf. Warren 1988).

Considerations of these shifting insider/outside statuses bring me to the second point of my discussion, namely, the role of social identities in politically conflicted societies. In such circumstances, the so-called insider may face similar or perhaps more
difficult problems than would an outsider. In such situations, the political identities implicate the insider in the conflict. Being an insider in a community, such as the Somali community for whom conflict has been a part of their everyday lives over the past decade, arguably poses more limits than being an outsider. In fact, participants from such societies may compete for access to an outsider and not the other way around, particularly if the researcher is a Westerner. This dynamic may occur because members of the community are engaged in a serious political conflict and struggle, and they assume that a Western ethnographer telling their version of the story may tip the balance. Hence they constantly seek to find a Western ethnographer to tell their story. This dynamic has been true in most colonial anthropology wherein those who had access to Western ethnographers had their stories told to Western audiences. As a result, they received political and economic support that translated into political advantage.

Despite some exceptions, most sociologists, particularly immigration scholars, at least implicitly, have accepted normatively shared understandings of who has insider or outsider status on the bases of certain categories such as race and cultural differences. For example, minority social scientists studying minority groups are considered insiders, whereas nonminority social scientists studying minority groups are considered outsiders. The same is true for immigrants studying immigrants (Rumbaut 1999). As Gans (1999) reports, though, assumptions of insider advantage held by immigrants studying other immigrants, as a case of insider ethnography, cannot be empirically sustained under all circumstances. Can we consider all black social scientists studying black communities as insider situations? What about class, gender, and political identity differences among members of the black community? As Gans recently pointed out, the problem is whether or not we can designate, for example, an affluent Dominican American studying poor immigrant Dominicans or a Lebanese Christian American studying Syrian Jewish immigrants as insider situations. The issue at hand is whether we use religion, political identities, and the degree of conflict between groups, gender, race, nationality, or some other category to determine who is an insider or who is an outsider. If we use one category, what should we do methodologically about the potential implications of the other categories that may come into play at any moment? These considerations lead me to assert that we must not see insider/outsider identities as predetermined roles but rather as a result of the nature of the research topic under investigation, the status characteristics and biographical particularities of both the researcher and the participant(s), and the local conditions in which the fieldwork takes place. This last point means that the degree of “outsiderness” or “insider-ness” emerges through a process that links the researcher and the participants in a collaborative process of meaning-making (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) in which the roles of the researcher as well as of participants are neither external nor internal to the particular moment in which the fieldwork takes place.

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REFERENCES


