Beyond the insider–outsider divide in migration research

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Abstract

This article engages critically with the insider–outsider divide in research with migrants and advocates a more nuanced and dynamic approach to positionality. In migration research, the insider–outsider divide typically assumes a specific form: an insider researcher is a member of the migrant group under study, whereas an outsider researcher is a member of the majority population in the country of settlement. This divide is a discursive reality that researchers must relate to, regardless of its analytical merits. Our analysis builds on the authors' experiences in twelve different fieldwork situations, where research was often conducted from hybrid positions that did not fit the archetypal insider–outsider divide. First, we discuss the relational construction of insider–outsider divides in migration research, focusing on the interplay between researcher characteristics and particular social contexts. Second, we address the specific characteristics or markers through which researchers are interpreted and positioned. These markers differ in terms of their visibility to informants, and in the extent to which researchers can modify them or communicate them selectively. Third, we examine how these characteristics are actively managed in fieldwork settings. Fourth, we identify five types of 'third positions' in migration research, positions that deviate from the archetypal insider–outsider divide: explicit third party, honorary insider, insider by proxy, hybrid insider-outsider, and apparent insider. The article explores some of the advantages and challenges inherent in different positions and argues that strategic and reflexive management of positionality should be included in ethical considerations about the research process.

Keywords: positionality, research methodology, ethnicity

1. Introduction

In migration research, the insider–outsider divide typically assumes a specific form: an insider researcher is a member of the migrant group under study, whereas an outsider researcher is a member of the majority population in the country of settlement. This divide is a discursive reality that we, as migration researchers, must relate to, regardless of its analytical merits. In this article we use two overlapping approaches to engage critically with

the insider–outsider divide in migration research: we analyse how this divide is constructed in a relational, context-specific way, and we pay particular attention to researcher positions that do not fit the typical model.

In the introduction we first elaborate on our assessment of the dominant insider–outsider divide in migration research, and relate it to the concept of positionality. Subsequently, we account for the empirical background to our arguments: our own research experiences in various positions. Throughout the remainder of the article, we draw on these experiences in combination with those of other researchers.

The main body of the article contains four sections. First, we discuss the relational construction of insider–outsider divides in migration research, focusing on the interplay between researcher characteristics and particular social contexts. Second, we address the specific characteristics or markers through which researchers are interpreted and positioned. Third, we examine how these characteristics are actively managed in fieldwork settings. Fourth, we identify five types of 'third positions' in migration research, positions that deviate from the archetypal insider–outsider divide. The article then ends with a brief set of conclusions.

We have written this article primarily with reference to research that involves face-to-face encounters between researchers and informants. Parts of our argument are specific to such ethnographic research. However, we also make points that are of broader relevance across the methodological spectrum of migration research. In particular, we call attention to the creation and privileging of specific social categories in research design and methodology. The choices made in this context have social and ethical implications even if data is obtained without any encounters between researchers and informants.

1.1 Positionality in migration research

Positionality in qualitative research refers to the fact that a researcher's characteristics affect both substantive and practical aspects of the research process—from the nature of questions that are asked, through data collection, analysis and writing, to how findings are received. In this article we focus primarily on *positionality in the field*: how researchers' positions affect access to and interaction with informants.

Others have discussed positionality with regard to insider–outsider divides more generally, including the potential advantages and challenges of different positions (Kusow 2003). We draw upon these insights in the course of our analysis, but our focus is on the particularities of positionality in research on international migration. In this field, three factors combine to shape the nature of positionality.

First, research usually addresses processes in which people who are ethno-nationally different interact as a result of mobility. Regardless of whether this interaction is a central topic in the research, it is a backdrop that informs the way in which research is framed. The object of study is often a group defined by migration between nation states, such as 'Turks in Germany' (Anil 2007), a set of several such groups, e.g. 'Asian immigrants in Canada and the United States' (Lee and Edmonston 2011) or a specific subset of such a group 'Chinese migrant entrepreneurs in urban France' (Lem 2010).

Second, most migration research is funded by high-income countries that are destinations of international migration flows, and carried out by researchers based in those countries. For instance, only 11 per cent of the articles in five main migration journals

2007–2011 had at least one author based in a non-OECD country.[1] Despite the transnational turn in migration studies, most research is focused on immigration and integration—that is, on processes in the destination country.

Third, a growing number of migrants to high-income countries, as well as their descendants, complete university degrees in the social sciences and humanities and do research on the migrant group that they are part of. The emphasis on the immigration side of migration processes appears to be the norm also in research conducted by researchers of migrant origin.

These three factors produce a research landscape with two dominant positions: (1) 'outsider' researchers who belong to the majority population and do research on specific immigrant groups; and (2) 'insider' researchers who are migrants or descendants of migrants and do research on their own immigrant group. The general literature on ethnographic practice recognizes the advantages of both positions: for instance, insiders can have linguistic or cultural skills that facilitate access and interaction with group members, while outsiders can encourage informants to make explicit and explain the things that are taken for granted within the group.

The difference between insider and outsider status is, however, not just methodological, but also political. In migration research, the 'outsider' position is sometimes referred to, with colonial connotations, as 'white research on black lives' (see also Agyeman 2008; Liodden 2010). The 'insider' position is then implicitly emancipatory. We argue that ranking positions in this way is methodologically simplistic and runs the risk of reproducing essentialism. In research on migration, positionality is intertwined with the subject matter of research. When the topic of study is defined in ethno-national terms, membership of ethno-national groups becomes decisive to insider/outsider status. This inclination merits critical attention. Ethno-national origin is simply one possible element of individual identity that should not a priori be privileged. Several related strands of research support such a critical approach. Wimmer and Schiller's (2003) diagnosis of *methodological nationalism* as a weakness of contemporary social science is a relevant reminder. Just as we should not conflate nation states with societies, we should not uncritically accept ethno-national distinctions as the primary group boundaries in migration processes. Whether and how these distinctions are important is an empirical question. Similarly, the notion of *super-diversity* alludes to 'the conjunction of ethnicity with a range of other variables' in shaping the nature of various 'communities', their composition, trajectories and interactions (Vertovec 2007: 1025). In addition to these relatively new concepts, research on *intersectionality* has, for a long time, underlined the interaction between ethno-national background and other social categories, such as gender and class (Crenshaw 1989). There are diverse conceptual approaches to intersectionality. In what McCall (2005: 1773) refers to as 'intercategorical complexity', scholars 'provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions'. In other words, we can challenge the typical insider–outsider divide in migration research simply by adding other social categories to the ethno-national ones without taking issue with the categories as such. Alternative approaches to intersectionality and super-diversity launch a more fundamental challenge to the meaning of the categories we use, regardless of how we combine them (Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah 2010; McCall 2005).

Irrespective of the researcher's approach, ethno-national characteristics are often placed centre-stage in society, framing people as, for instance, 'immigrants', 'Pakistanis' or 'Norwegians'. The us–them boundary between migrants and the majority society is experienced as real and at times problematic. Ethno-national categories appear to be straw men obscuring a multi-dimensional reality, but nevertheless form part of the reality we have to relate to. Ethno-national divides belong to a discourse that is largely beyond our control, but we can counteract essentializing tendencies by adopting a more nuanced approach to our own positionality.

1.2 Empirical background

Our analysis is based on our experiences of diverse positions in the field, summarized in Table 1. In the remainder of the article we will refer back to the table by means of the reference codes, which combine our first-name initials with a numbering of our research experiences (e.g. M1, R2). The table provides a schematic presentation of our personal backgrounds, but slightly more nuanced accounts are needed to contextualize our material and arguments.

Jørgen is born and raised in Norway, and would have been the typical outsider researcher—part of the majority population—if he had done fieldwork among immigrants in Norway. However, his fieldwork has been conducted in other countries. In those settings, his Norwegian background has been more of an oddity than a relevant factor in the migration context. Being a white male European nevertheless plays a role regardless of the specific national origins.

Marta is easily perceived as a member of the majority population in Norway, based on her fluent Norwegian and her appearance. However, she came to Norway at the age of three, and Polish is her mother tongue. In her research with migrants from South Asia, she can choose whether, how and when to introduce her own and her family's migration history. Having a mixed family background (British and Polish) and being born in Poland, her 'third position' vis-à-vis migrant informants could reflect the experiences of migrant children or the second generation, including aspects of hybridity. At the same time, her family's experience of migration has parallels to migrants' own stories. Her position can be either that of an outsider researcher (as majority population), or a third position where her migrant background means she has an in-between position. When conducting research with Poles, her third position shifts from more of an insider and co-migrant, to more of an outsider and member of the Norwegian majority population, because of her experience of growing up and living as an adult in Norway.

In contrast to Marta, Rojan's name and appearance reveals her migrant background, despite being fluent in Norwegian. She migrated from Iran to Norway at the age of nine and shares the physical traits, cultural codes and language competence of other Iranian migrants. Having spent most of her life in Norway, however, she shares more cultural competence and references with the majority population of Norwegians. Additionally, being half Kurdish and half Persian, she has a Kurdish first name, but only speaks Persian. Her migration history and personal characteristics, then, also place her in an in-between position vis-à-vis other Iranian migrants. In her research, primarily with young people with various ethnic backgrounds, Rojan has found that her visible migrant background and

Table 1. Overview of authors' fieldwork experiences

Researcher	Ref.	Topic of study	Fieldwork site	Fieldwork language(s)	Informants' migrant origin
Jørgen Born in Norway; mother tongue: Norwegian	J1	Transnationalism and immigration policy	Netherlands	Kriolu	Cape Verdean
	J2	Transnational parenthood	Italy	Kriolu	Cape Verdean
	J3	Migration aspirations and transnationalism	Cape Verde	Kriolu	Cape Verdean
	J4	Human smuggling and migration strategies	Cape Verde	English	Mainland West African
Marta Born in Poland; came to Norway at the age of three; mother tongue: Polish	M1	Remittance-sending and transnationalism	Norway	Norwegian	Pakistani
	M2	Remittance-receiving and transnationalism	Pakistan	English, Norwegian	Pakistani
	M3	Considerations about return migration	Norway	Norwegian	Pakistani
	M4	Considerations about return migration	Norway	Polish	Polish
	M5	Transnational development initiatives	Norway	Norwegian	Sri Lankan Tamil
Rojan Born in Iran; came to Norway at the age of nine; mother tongue: Persian	R1	Identity work among men of Muslim origin	Norway	Norwegian	Mixed
	R2	The development of migration systems	Norway	English, Norwegian	Brazilian, Moroccan, Ukrainian
	R3	Considerations about return migration	Norway	English, Norwegian	Mixed

child migrant history contribute to her taking an insider position more than her ethnic origins per se.

Rojan has also coordinated data collection in Norway within a large international project, called 'Theorizing the Evolution of European Migration Systems' (THEMIS). The project addresses Brazilian, Moroccan and Ukrainian migration to Norway, Portugal, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The data collection—in-depth interviews and questionnaire administration—was primarily conducted by research assistants with the necessary language competence. The research assistants' experiences were crucial for the management of data collection and adjustment to the realities of the field.[2] Some of the 27 assistants had the same ethnic background as the informants. Others had a majority Norwegian background, while yet others were in some form of third position. This latter group included assistants with a shared language but a different country of origin from the informants, and assistants with a mixed Norwegian and immigrant background. In this article, we draw upon the research assistants' experiences based on training sessions, follow-up sessions, general interaction and a focus group set up with some of them to specifically discuss their experiences of positionality.

Although we include data from research assistants, we use the term 'researcher' throughout to refer to the person who engages in face-to-face encounters in the field. We generally refer to their counterparts as 'informants', which reflects variation in the mode of data collection (e.g. interviews versus participant observation) and in the degree of participation by the people whose lives are being studied.[3]

2. The relational construction of insider–outsider divides

Insider–outsider divides are relationally constructed in the encounter between researcher and informant. Both assign meaning to the other by relating specific markers or characteristics to a mental inventory of social categories. For instance, a European researcher meeting a person who is called Khadijah, wears a hijab and has North African or Middle Eastern features might think of her as a 'Muslim immigrant woman' and interpret insider/outsider status accordingly. Similarly, the informant subjectively interprets and categorizes the researcher.

There are an infinite number of social categories in our minds; we might not have words to describe them, but still draw upon them to determine similarity or difference. What constitutes 'us' separated from 'them' changes from one context to another (Eriksen 2010). In addition to the micro-level variation between different spheres of people's lives, macro-level shifts could occur because of political developments or media coverage that makes specific divides prominent.

In many contexts, there is no well-established notion of what a social science researcher does—or at least not of the purpose or motivations behind the research. The researcher could then be interpreted through other social categories. Ethnographic researchers are commonly associated with existing social categories that they themselves do not identify with. When researchers are assumed to be connected with the authorities or other powerful institutions, potential informants can see them as sources of either assistance or insecurity.

In both cases, the researcher–informant relationship is affected. This general challenge takes particular forms in migration research.

First, the researcher can be seen as a potential source of assistance with the immigration process, either in terms of securing legal residence or for migrating in the first place. In research on particularly vulnerable migrant groups, such as undocumented residents or asylum seekers whose cases are being processed, it may be almost impossible for a majority-society member to dissociate completely from the authorities' policies and practices. Whatever the researcher says or does, the informant might—understandably—believe that the research setting provides an opportunity for influencing their own case or that of others in their situation (Brekke and Aarset 2009).

Second, the researcher can be seen as a threat to migrants in insecure situations. This is especially the case if there is an overlap between the information that the researcher seeks, and that which authorities need so as to tighten control. Knowledge about human smuggling or livelihood strategies of irregular migrants are cases in point.

Informants' expectation of help or fear of betrayal from the researcher could be greatest if the researcher is firmly placed in the archetypal outsider category: a member of the majority population in the country of settlement. When Marta did research about remittances from Pakistanis in Norway, it became essential not to be identified with Norwegian government institutions (M1). The timing and context of fieldwork made potential informants frightened of being misrepresented and associated with negative media portrayals of their community. As a researcher in this context, being openly critical of public representations of migrants, and showing knowledge and understanding of the migrant community, was decisive. Marta's own immigrant background sometimes facilitated this positioning.

The positioning of a migration researcher depends on characteristics of the researcher as well as on the nature of the relevant insider–outsider divides. In Rojan's research on young men of Muslim origin in Norwegian society after 9/11, everyday life as a person who 'looks Muslim' became a central theme (R1). In particular, Rojan's informants experienced the intense media attention to Islam and Muslims as a burden in their daily lives, since they were often assumed to be Muslims by people they did not know (Ezzati 2011). Rojan's Iranian background thus provided a common ground with the informants, despite not being Muslim herself. She had the impression that being a young female also contributed to being experienced as less threatening when engaging with research on such a sensitive topic. The combination of her age, gender, ethnicity, and not being religious provided her with a particular position along the insider–outsider continuum, which varied according to whom she spoke with.

Jørgen's acquisition of a third position during fieldwork among Cape Verdeans in the Netherlands illustrates how researcher characteristics and social context interact (J1). The archetypal outsider researcher in this setting would be a white Dutch person, while an insider would be a researcher of Cape Verdean origin. Being Norwegian implied that Jørgen fitted neither category. Dutch or Norwegian might seem to be mere varieties of outsider status, but three factors combined to create a position beyond the insider–outsider divide. First, Jørgen had never set foot in the Netherlands before the fieldwork and spoke very little Dutch. This background dissociated him from the Dutch majority society. Second, he had spent a total of twelve months in Cape Verde over the preceding six years and was fluent in Kriolu. Third, the perimeter of 'Cape Verdean-ness' in the Netherlands was blurred. The

majority of people of Cape Verdean origin were either born in the Netherlands or had immigrated as children, and the Kriolu skills of this group were variable. When children spoke Kriolu well, it was a source of pride for the parents; if they did not, it could be a source of embarrassment. In this context, Jørgen's linguistic and cultural competence was embraced by first-generation informants. Consequently he avoided many of the outsider handicaps and obtained certain insider privileges—not just because of his linguistic and cultural expertise, but because of the specific contested nature of Cape Verdean-ness in the Netherlands.

The role of internal dividing lines within migrant groups is also highlighted by Rojan's experience. Interviewing a recently arrived Iranian migrant in Norway (R3), the informant would probably be most comfortable speaking the language they have in common: Persian. However, it would quickly become obvious that Rojan feels more comfortable speaking Norwegian. This puts her in a simultaneous insider and outsider position. If the informant were Norwegian-born or had immigrated as a child, on the other hand, Rojan would have been able to assume an insider position. While the shared ethnicity remains the same, length of stay and age at time of arrival to the country of settlement makes a difference to the insider–outsider divide.

Other types of connections between social categories and the migration context can occur when fieldwork is carried out at the origin of migration flows, and not at the destination. In communities of emigration, with transnational ties to diaspora communities, the figure of 'the emigrant' is one that researchers from abroad may be associated with. Jørgen experienced this during fieldwork in Cape Verde, a country where the vast majority of people have relatives abroad (J3). Although emigrants are ethno-national insiders (unlike a Norwegian researcher), there can be strong divides between migrants in the diaspora and non-migrants in the country of origin, based on differences in resources and opportunities for international mobility (Carling 2008b). As an elderly woman in Cape Verde figuratively put it to Jørgen, referring to her own children in Europe: 'they are white and we are black'. The emigrants' ambiguous proximate and distant position thus creates some similarity with foreigners who have a long-term attachment to Cape Verde. For Jørgen, the association with emigrants was in several ways a comforting factor in the face of fieldwork challenges. First, it made his intermittent fieldwork unremarkable: coming to Cape Verde for a few months, leaving and coming back again a year or two later is something that many emigrants do. Second, the association with emigrants offered certain guidance on managing relationships in the field. There was, in a sense, a blueprint for proper behaviour involving courtesy visits, gifts and phone calls. The emic moralities of transnationalism could both complement the academic norms for research ethics and reduce the potential awkwardness of fieldwork interaction.

So far in this section, we have explored how researcher characteristics interact with the specific social environment of research. Another essential context for insider–outsider divides in research on migration is how the research itself relates individuals to social categories. A hypothetical informant, Andrzej, could have been recruited for an interview precisely because he fits the researcher's category 'Polish immigrant'. It would make a difference to the encounter—and to the construction of insider–outsider divides—if the basis for his recruitment had been another category, such as 'resident of Oslo', 'diabetes patient' or 'biotechnology worker'. There is, in other words, a form of circularity

at work: the choices we make for our research could be seen as reflections of positionality in a broad sense. At the same time, these choices shape experiences of positionality in the research process.

Among our own experiences, one stands out because of the research design. Within our research on considerations about return migration, Rojan has worked with two groups that were deliberately not selected on an ethno-national basis. The first were people who had immigrated to Norway between one and five years before the interview; the second were people who had immigrated during childhood. Both were ethnically mixed, and so, in focus group interviews, participants had to look beyond each other's ethnic background to find common experiences (R3).

3. Markers of insider/outsider status

The archetypal migrant insider and majority-population outsider are easy to imagine. In order to deconstruct these positions and consider third positions, however, we need to ask which *specific markers* define the researcher's position. We have shown that positions are constructed in a context-specific and relational way, and the markers are at the centre of this process. The markers provide informants with cues for matching individual researchers with pre-existing social categories.

We have identified a set of markers which we believe are of particular significance for researcher positionality (Table 2). The list is inspired by our own experiences and is not necessarily exhaustive. The markers differ in terms of relevance to ethno-national boundaries, which is a deliberate reflection of our argument that positionality in migration research must be understood along many dimensions. In the remainder of this section we discuss the markers in turn.

A researcher's *name* can signal a particular migrant background—as it does in Rojan's case, but not in Marta's. Depending on how informant recruitment is organized, the researcher's name may be the informant's *first* indication of his or her background, and therefore have particular importance. For many, the name is a fact over which they have little influence. However, Africans and Asians often have two given names, one native and one English (or, in francophone Africa, French). As a researcher engaging with prospective migrant informants, the choice between presenting yourself as, Akosua or Abigail, Huizhong or Henry, is a powerful way of communicating identity.

Occupation and title have no direct connection with the archetypal insider–outsider division, but affect the hierarchical dimension of the researcher–informant relationship. For instance, doctoral researchers can emphasize or downplay their 'student' identity and thereby balance humility and authority in the encounter with informants.

Gender and *age group* are also traits that have no direct bearing on ethno-national insider/outsider status. However, they are fundamental elements of social identity that affect experiences of sameness or difference within or across ethno-national boundaries. If we view intersectionality in terms of 'intercategorical complexity', as explained above, we can see that there are dynamic relationships between insider/outsider status and generic social categories such as gender. For instance, many female ethnographers in post-colonial settings have experienced that their ethno-national outsider status makes them 'honorary

Table 2. Specific markers that may influence insider/outsider status

	Markers of archetypal insider/ outsider status	Apparent to informants	Possible for researchers to adapt in the field	Possible for researchers to communicate selectively to informants
Name	●	●	○	○
Occupation and title		●	○	○
Gender		●		
Age group		●		
Physical appearance	○	●		
Clothing style	○	●	●	
Parenthood				●
Visible pregnancy		●		○
Language skills	●	○		○
Language used	●	●	○	
Cultural competence	●	○		●
Sustained commitment	●	○		○
Religion	○			●
Migration experiences	●	○		●

Note: open circles indicate that there is context-specific variation. See text for details.

males' with the capacity to transcend local gender divides and operate in male space or behave in male ways.

Physical appearance is an essential marker of insider/outsider status in some contexts, though not in others. In Europe, the surge in East–West migration over the past two decades has contributed to a large body of research on migrants who are not phenotypically distinct from the host populations. At the same time, migration from outside of Europe remains central to debates and research on immigration. Appearance is not sufficient for establishing precise ethno-national origins, but nevertheless affects perceived insider/outsider status. On a general note, Rojan's appearance signals to (potential) informants that she has an immigrant background, which can be a door-opener regardless of their ethno-national origins, for example in her research with Brazilians, Moroccans and Ukrainians living in Norway (R2). More specifically, in her research on young men of Muslim origin residing in Norway (R1) she found that for her informants having a 'Muslim appearance' affected everyday life regardless of their personal religiosity (Ezzati 2011). In the interview setting, Rojan's physical appearance could indicate to informants that she might have similar experiences. The society's perceived association between physical appearance and religious background gave her insider qualities.

Clothing style is a key identity marker along many dimensions (Miller 2010). In terms of ethno-national insider/outsider status, clothing style can reinforce or compensate for

markers such as physical appearance and language use in creating an overall indication of unobservable traits such as religion or migration background. In an interview that Rojan conducted with an imam in Norway (R1), her choice of clothing was essential to engage with the combination of not being Muslim but having an appearance that indicates she might be. An ethnically Norwegian woman might have chosen to wear a hijab as a sign of respect in the encounter with the imam. For Rojan, the combination of a hijab and her appearance would have felt deceptive. Instead, she showed respect through conservative clothing and behaviour, such as not attempting to shake the imam's hand or obtain eye contact.

In an entirely different setting, Jørgen's clothing in Cape Verde was a means of dissociation from a particular outsider status (J3). Mormon missionaries were a common sight, usually Caucasians roughly of Jørgen's age. They were all formally dressed, in white short-sleeve shirts. For Jørgen, wearing popular sportswear—the local norm for young men—thus became a strategy for averting false assumptions about his background and his role in Cape Verde. This was not simply a matter of adopting locally appropriate clothing—a well-established piece of advice for researchers in socially conservative societies, but hardly a concern in Cape Verde. Instead, it was a way of engaging with the local population's specific inventory of social categories.

Parenthood and *pregnancy* are universal experiences that can create a sense of commonality across ethno-national boundaries, be it as a basis for ice-breaking small talk or a more prominent aspect of the researcher–informant relationship. Informants' family situation typically becomes known as part of data collection. Whether, how, and when researchers share similar information about themselves can be a central element of identity management in the field. In Marta's research with Tamils and Pakistanis, the experience of motherhood was significant not only to opening up interview situations, but also in the ways that power relations were altered (M1, M2, M3, M5). One of her informants was a Tamil woman who thought that Marta would be far better off talking to her husband, since she felt he could tell her more about the situation in, and future prospects for, Sri Lanka. But when the fact that Marta was pregnant with her first child was brought into the conversation, the entire dynamics shifted. This rather insecure informant became the experienced mother and older woman who could offer valuable knowledge and advice to the young researcher. The change in power relations in the interview context later spilled over into discussion of topics that were central to the research question. When pregnancy is clearly visible, it is not a marker that the researcher can choose to reveal or not, but she nevertheless has a choice as to whether or how this fact is brought into the conversation.

Language use and *language skills* are related but separate markers of the researcher's position vis-à-vis informants. When researcher and informant have more than one common language, choosing which one to use affects experiences of the insider–outsider divide. The relative proficiency of each person in each language affects the power dynamics of an interview setting. Moreover, the choice of language can imply on whose turf the interview takes place—although the implications for insider/outsider status are variable. If the researcher belongs to the majority population, using the host-country language underlines his or her archetypal outsider position, but it can simultaneously have an inclusive function vis-à-vis the informant. Conversely, using the informant's native language can serve to give the researcher insider qualities with respect to the migrant group. The less

commonly spoken the language is, and the better the researcher's language skills, the greater is this effect. As one of our THEMIS research assistants, who is fluent in Brazilian Portuguese, put it: 'it makes [interviewees] see me more as "one of them". At the same time, I'm not.' Similarly, throughout Jørgen's fieldwork, his fluency in Kriolu was greatly appreciated also by people with whom he had other languages in common. This effect was strengthened by Cape Verde's situation of *diglossia*, the coexistence of two languages in a hierarchical relationship. Speaking the official language, Portuguese, might have served equally well for exchange of information, but would not in the same way have given Jørgen insider characteristics.

Cultural competence can be a subtle but powerful marker of positioning. Such competence includes a shared interpretation of codes and context-specific behavioural norms. It can provide ethno-national outsiders with insider qualities, in line with the examples of language skills just mentioned. However, nuances of cultural competence can also differentiate between ethno-national insiders. For instance, if Rojan were to interview recent migrants from Iran, her appearance, language and migration history would all place her as an insider. At the same time, not having lived in Iran since she was a child, she could be alien to some of her informants' cultural references. Such distinctions were apparent in Jørgen's fieldwork in the Netherlands, where young people of Cape Verdean origin were, to some extent, divided between the 'Cabo'—a self-ascribed term for Dutch-Cape Verdean youth—and the 'Cape Verdeans from Cape Verde' (Carling 2008a, b).

Sustained commitment to the migrant group or their country of origin can be decisive to an ethno-national outsider researcher's position vis-à-vis the insider–outsider divides. Above and beyond the linguistic and cultural competence obtained over time, investing years or decades of one's life adds a personal dimension. The act of *returning* to a field site—as opposed to taking what you need and disappearing—can also significantly change the researcher's status.

Religion can be a fundamental element of the insider–outsider divide. It is, in itself, invisible, but often reflected by other characteristics. In Marta's research among Tamils in Norway (M5) she found that religion played a role in transcending the archetypal insider–outsider divide. Tamils are one of the large and well-established groups within the Catholic Church in Norway, which represents a religious minority of 1–2 per cent of the population. Many Tamils, both Hindu and Catholic, gather in connection with Catholic religious events. When Marta identified herself as a Catholic, it often revealed a shared familiarity with particular places, events, people or experiences. In Marta's case, there were no external indications of her religious identity, and not all informants knew about it. However, it often emerged in the course of the interview. Religion then became a bridge between ethno-nationally defined 'insider' and 'outsider' positions.

Finally, *migration experiences*, broadly define the archetypal insider–outsider divide in migration research. They underlie ethno-national classifications such as 'Pakistani immigrant in Norway'. In addition, however, specific experiences of migration can create common ground across ethno-national divides. For instance, Marta and Rojan have the experience of growing up in Norway with a migrant background and being faced with questions of roots and identity. These experiences might be shared by informants whose parents are immigrants, but from countries other than Poland, the United Kingdom and Iran. In Rojan's case, having lived in and escaped from a conflict setting as a child adds

further layers of experience. In her research on migrants' thoughts on the possibility of returning to their country of origin (R3), she conducted interviews with child migrants like herself. Particularly in the case of those who had escaped conflict settings—whether Iran, Bosnia or Sri Lanka—Rojan experienced that the informants were interested in her own thoughts on the topics addressed in the interview.

4. Managing and communicating researcher characteristics

The preceding sections showed that who we are as researchers, and in relation to our informants, is interpreted through social categories on the one hand, and specific markers on the other. These markers are linked to the researcher's person and behaviour. They vary in terms of their visibility to informants, the researcher's ability to modify them, and the possibilities for communicating them selectively. How we, as researchers, use the possibility to modify and selectively communicate markers of position vis-à-vis informants raises methodological and ethical issues.

The researcher's immediately apparent markers can easily trump the invisible ones and reinforce assumed social categories as absolute. To some extent this is the same for all ethnographic qualitative research, where establishing rapport and balancing proximity and distance are essential. In migration research, however, it is significant that ethno-national divides are so firmly established and normalized in society at large. The corresponding insider/outsider positions are therefore easily assigned. Communicating about the researcher's invisible characteristics plays a key role in counteracting premature or misleading labelling.

In Marta's research among Pakistani migrants and their descendants (M1, M3), she would first be assumed to be an outsider and majority-Norwegian, since she is white and speaks Norwegian without an accent. She then had a choice, either to discuss her background, or not to do so. By not revealing her migrant background, she was upholding informants' assumptions of a majority-Norwegian background. By contrast, when deciding to include information about her own background in the conversations, she affected the interview dynamics. Informants' reactions were invariably positive when she chose to tell them about her background, mostly because this signalled her willingness to share something from her own life, perhaps more than as a positive reaction to the fact that she was 'not Norwegian'. Having a migrant background, and in particular having parents who had experienced arriving in Norway in their thirties and re-establishing themselves in a new country, certainly added to the credibility of asking particular questions, based on own or family experience. Both in the case of research on remittances and on reflections about return migration, personal experience meant that suspicion about the motivation for asking questions, decreased.

Both Marta's and Jørgen's experiences support the notion that communication around perceived characteristics may encourage reflection about commonly used social categories, which in migration research may produce data relevant to research questions at hand. For instance, when Jørgen's knowledge of Kriolu became apparent to first-generation Cape

Verdean migrants in the Netherlands (J1), this had an important impact in opening up his possibilities for research on inter-generational issues in these communities. In Marta's research among migrants in Norway (M1, M3, M4), where interactions of migrant trans-nationalism and processes of integration were in focus, the contested and often disliked term 'integration' could be discussed and critiqued in new ways, because of the combined experiences of researcher and informant—providing both parties with interesting insights.

Through strategic communication about characteristics of the researcher, it is possible to open up the interview situation to also question commonly accepted social categories, and to reflect on the diverse characteristics of informants, which make them part of multiple social categories. In order for such communication to succeed, a certain level of trust between the researcher and informant is necessary. Such trust can more easily be established when the researcher is willing to give as well as take as part of the conversation dynamics.

Building trust in ethnographic settings is not simply a matter of finding common ground with informants and thereby acquiring insider qualities. Outsider characteristics can also make the researcher less threatening. For instance, Mullings (1999) describes how she communicated familiarity with her informants' industry but ignorance about the socio-political context. This combined insider/outsider position reduced suspicion and facili-tated access.

Ethical considerations with regard to the researcher–informant relationship also become visible as the balance between proximity and distance is negotiated. For instance, to what extent is it more or less ethical to strategically use invisible characteristics and experiences, than it is to simply relate to the visible characteristics which are apparent in any case? Personal choices and reflections affect the way in which researchers see these ethical con-siderations, sometimes choosing to disclose particular information, at other times perhaps not. While clear-cut answers about what is more right or wrong in a particular context may be hard to define, the process of reflection is important, and should more often be discussed in writing about methodology as well as our analysis.

5. Third positions in migration research

The preceding sections of the article have emphasized the complexity and fluidity of positionality in the field. We will now provide some structuring elements by describing five ways in which researchers can be positioned beyond the archetypal 'insider' and 'out-sider' categories. In doing so, we keep relating to the socially constructed group boundaries which, even if we take issue with them, are part of the landscape in which researchers operate. These five positions are simplifications, and they are not mutually exclusive.

5.1 Explicit third party

Researchers assume an explicit third-party position when they have a recognizable identity that is clearly neither part of the migrant group nor of the majority population. This type of position implies sharp dissociation from both the insider and outsider groups. A case in point would be Heidi Østbø Haugen—a Norwegian researcher without African or Chinese ancestry—doing fieldwork among Chinese migrants in Africa and African migrants in

China (Haugen and Carling 2005; Haugen 2012). Jørgen also had this type of position in fieldwork among mainland West African migrants in Cape Verde (J4). A potential challenge with the explicit third-party position is that the researcher's interest might seem enigmatic and give rise to speculation. Jørgen discovered that his West African informants in Cape Verde had initially assumed him to be an agent of Europol, the European Union's criminal intelligence agency. This suspicion was a logical one, given his interest in human smuggling and apparent European background. His long-standing relationship with Cape Verde, which was a door-opener vis-à-vis Cape Verdean informants, was largely invisible to the West African immigrants to the islands.

Tatiana Matejskova (2014) illustrates how an explicit third-party position can provide a basis for flexible forms of 'insiderness' with different groups. As a United States-based Slovak ethnographer among Aussiedler immigrants in an East Berlin housing estate, she belonged to neither the immigrant group nor the majority population. However, characteristics such as her Slavic roots, childhood under Socialism, and academic credentials contributed to honorary and proxy insider positions vis-à-vis immigrants, native residents, and integration professionals.

5.2 Honorary insider

Researchers can partly transcend ethno-national boundaries through language skills, cultural competence and sustained commitment to a migrant group, in ways that gradually impart honorary insider status. Family ties, such as being married to, or having children with, a member of the in-group can contribute to this process. Acquiring honorary insider status is easier in some contexts than in others. Jørgen's experience with Cape Verdeans—a racially diverse, creolized group—is similar to that of Marilyn Halter, a Jewish-American professor studying Cape Verdean American history, who describes how a long-standing community leader presented her with a button that read 'I'm proud to be Cape Verdean' (Halter 1993: xv). By contrast, immigrants to Japan often lament that they will never be accepted as Japanese, even with Japanese ancestry (Murphy-Shigematsu 2006; Tsuda 2003).

5.3 Insider by proxy

In migration research, there is an obvious possibility for a position as insider by proxy: being an immigrant researcher, but from another migrant group than the one being studied. Such a background can create a sense of commonality with the insider group that transcends ethno-national divides. As mentioned above, Marta's British–Polish background formed a connection with her Pakistani informants through the joint experience of family migration (M1, M3). This connection crossed the divide between visible and invisible minorities. Neither Marta nor her informants were members of the native majority population, but they had a strong attachment to Norway. Marta's position allowed her informants to express their thoughts and experiences about integration in Norway in other ways than had she been seen as a member of the majority population. Informants were less reluctant to be critical towards Norwegian society when they trusted that the researcher would not take it personally.

5.4 Hybrid insider-outsider

The context of migration research also makes hybrid insider positions possible: researchers could share characteristics with both the migrant group under study and the majority population of the country of settlement. Marta and Rojan have such a position vis-à-vis recent Polish and Iranian immigrants in Norway. Having spent most of their lives in Norway and speaking Norwegian fluently, Marta and Rojan can position themselves on an insider–outsider continuum, rather than on either side of a divide. Researchers with one native and one immigrant parent could have similar possibilities.

Rojan's immigrant background in general, and 'Muslim appearance' in particular, perhaps in combination with her age and gender, contributed to making her seem less threatening while interviewing young men of Muslim origin (R1). At the same time, it was presumably obvious to her informants, at least to those who were the most religious, that she herself was not Muslim. Thus, they would provide further in-depth explanations about Islam-related themes than they might have if they assumed they were speaking to a fellow Muslim. The shared regional background put her in an insider position, which was important in establishing proximity and trust, while her non-Muslim belief created a distance that required further details in the responses they gave. This case illustrates how hybrid positions can contribute to striking a balance between proximity and distance in the informant–researcher relation

5.5 Apparent insider

The typical insider–outsider divide that we have been referring to implies that insider status is a matter of ethnic background or migrant origin. However, there may be other defining elements of in-group membership that throws the researcher's position into question. Cecilia Menjívar (2000: 245) addresses this in her book about Salvadoran migrant networks in the United States: 'From the outset of the study, even though my informants were my compatriots, I knew that I would be crossing boundaries of age, class, education, and gender.' More specifically, she remarks that her own migration experience was different from that of her informants: 'I was never an undocumented immigrant, never lived in the neighborhoods where my informants lived, never held the kinds of jobs they did, and never experienced most of what has shaped their lives.' Menjívar points out that the context made her 'simultaneously an insider and an outsider'. What is important in the context of this article is the different visibility of Menjívar's insider and outsider status. The insider qualities are suggested by markers such as her name and the biographical fact of being born and raised in El Salvador. The outsider element, by contrast, is something that emerges in the personal encounters with informants, and which she chooses to share with readers through methodological reflections in her book.

Compared to the other types of third positions we have identified, being an 'apparent insider' could give less flexibility to the researcher. It highlights the potential for different understandings of insider/outsider status by the researcher and the informants. It is conceivable that an ethno-national insider researcher would want to emphasize insider status as source of legitimacy and authority, but that the informants would see the researcher as a clear outsider on other grounds.

6. Conclusions

We set off by identifying the archetypal insider–outsider divide in migration research: an insider researcher is a member of the migrant group under study, whereas an outsider researcher is a member of the majority population in the country of settlement. This is a common conception, which might be criticized on analytical grounds, as we have done, but which we as researchers nevertheless face in our research.

Research from an outsider position, in this archetypal sense, often comes with particular challenges in migration research. If the researcher is perceived to be associated with, or have influence on, the authorities, informants might expect assistance or fear of negative repercussions from sharing information. Assistance in this context could be broad and indirect, such as helping provide a more positive image of a given migrant group in the media. When the researcher is associated with the society to which migrants have come, the ethnographic interaction will be affected. Research conducted by an outsider can also be met with ideologically motivated scepticism, seen as exploitative and neo-colonial.

However, the notion that 'insider' research in migration studies is inherently emancipatory or intimate must be viewed with scepticism. It is founded on a logic of 'us and them', which privileges specific aspects of identity, and upholds particular forms of inclusion and exclusion in settlement societies. Moreover, emphasizing ethno-national 'sameness' easily obscures dimensions of 'otherness'. In fact, when researcher and informants share ethno-national origins, differences in, for instance, class, education or migration history can be accentuated. Taking these differences seriously is an ethical and methodological duty that should not be veiled by ethno-national 'insider' status.

Third positions can give researchers greater freedom from undesired associations, and contribute to a focus on individuals rather than categories in the encounter between researchers and informants. Research from such perspectives can yield valuable new contributions to the field. While it is good that there is an increasing number of migration researchers with a migrant background, we therefore hope to see a greater proportion of them doing research outside their own migrant group.

Sometimes third positions are based on nuances of personal identity and characteristics—not all of which are visible at first sight. Two-way communication between researcher and informant can affect the way in which informants interpret researchers beyond the insider–outsider divide. Sharing relevant information about ourselves should not be dismissed as manipulative or deceptive, as long as what we say is truthful. If we consider the various markers that were listed in Table 2, those that are immediately apparent to informants do not give a more genuine picture of who we are than those that depend on more deliberate sharing.

In writing this article, we have depended on a diversity of experiences—three authors, each with insights from several research settings with different forms of insider/outsider status. The perspective that is missing, however, is that of our informants. We have reflected upon how we believe we were perceived, and how we experienced the interaction, but these are still our views. As we mentioned in connection with the 'apparent insider' status, the researcher's position is potentially contested and could be classified differently by the researcher and the informant. What we hope to have contributed to, however, is greater

self-consciousness about researcher positionality within migration research and the ways in which it is shaped beyond stereotypical forms.

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Notes

1. Calculated on the basis of data from Web of Knowledge. The data includes 956 articles published in *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, *European Journal of Migration and Law*, *International Migration*, *International Migration Review* and *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (i.e. all the SSCI-indexed journals with 'migration' in the title). Many of the articles by authors in non-OECD countries also address immigration, for instance to Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore and South Africa.
2. The quantitative data collection employed respondent-driven sampling, which is a form of organized snowball-sampling in which informants recruit other informants, and the consequent biases are adjusted for in a mathematical model. Since informants' inclination to recruit others depended on their own experience of the interview, we paid extra close attention to interviewer–informant interaction.
3. 'Research participants' may be an appropriate term in some contexts, but not as a generic term for people from whom researchers gather information.

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