

The homecomer and the stranger: Reflections on positionality and the benefits of an insider-outsider tandem in qualitative research

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*Based on the experience of conducting field research in Kazakhstan, I reflect on the challenges of working in a cross-cultural insider-outsider differentiated team. My work with my colleague Eva Kipnis on this research project highlighted that the research team dynamics not only needed detailed attention in a research design, but also required consideration during data analysis. I realise that being an insider or an outsider is not a dichotomous relationship, and that applying particular methods, such as debriefing and memoing, helped give each other equal weight in the collection and interpretation of data. Besides memoing and debriefing, it is the informal conversations between the two researchers, talking about any questions, thoughts or ideas in detail between interviews that helped us do greater justice to our research and our participants, write **Aurelie Bröckerhoff**.*

“... the homecomer’s attitude differs from that of the stranger. The latter is about to join a group which is not and never has been his own. He knows that he will find himself in an unfamiliar world, differently organised than that from which he comes, full of pitfalls and hard to master. The homecomer, however, expects to return to an environment of which he always had and-so he thinks-still has intimate knowledge and which he has just to take for granted in order to find his bearings within it. The approaching stranger has to anticipate in a more or less empty way what he will find; the homecomer has just to recur to the memories of his past” (Schütz 1945: 369)

On a 15-hour train journey across Kazakhstan, Eva and I review the interviews we had just conducted during the day. Reflections on the last interview with high-ranking policy officials (‘interview 5’) end in a heated discussion on our interpretation of what we had just heard. This is partly due to the fact that Eva, a Kazakhstani who speaks Russian (the lingua franca) and grew up in the country, has different insights into the subcontext of our conversations to myself, a complete newbie to Kazakhstan.

More specifically, during this interview, Eva perceived the many questions about her upbringing, her family and friends, as veiled threats posed to ensure that we comply with the interviewees’ strict rules of not linking interview data to the organisation interviewed. I, on the other hand, saw these essentially as opening ‘small talk’. Our different interpretations may be down to the fact that Eva is what Schütz (1944/45) has referred to as a ‘homecomer’, and I, on the other hand, am a stranger; in short, Eva, as a national, has more sensitivity in picking up situational cues and interpreting these.

As another example of the impact of the differences in our positionality on interpretation, a point made by several of our study participants regarding the cultural aspects assigned to marijuana consumption (also referred to as *anasha* in Kazakhstan) proved a particularly challenging data point for us to reconcile. Specifically, participants (even in one same interview) voiced conflicting opinions and views on the role and meaning of marijuana in society: while on the one hand, our participants expressed highly negative views on marijuana and clearly viewed it as an entry drug, they



Visiting Karaganda in Kazakhstan (2). Photographed by Aurelie Bröckerhoff

also, on the other hand, referred to marijuana as part of the Central Asian cultural landscape. For Eva, this conflict was a natural one that did not need particular attention in the data analysis, whereas to Aurelie it raised some issues around perceptions of drugs that from her own experience and perspective would benefit from further analysis.

The notions of ‘homecomer’ and ‘stranger’ put forward by Schütz 50 years ago are in need of updating to reflect, for example, modern means of communication and travel. Despite this, they still resonate with the on-going debate about insider and outsider research in ethnographic fieldwork.

Since returning to the UK, Eva and I both feel that our discussion on the train points in part to the particular methodological challenges of conducting research in an insider and outsider team. But we also feel that it highlights the importance of addressing data analysis and interpretation of findings based on each researcher’s positionality in relation to the research context and the research participants. This has been also addressed by colleagues who reflected on how our own background (see [Chandni Singh’s post](#) on social capital) or our emotions (see [Kanchan Gandhi’s post](#) on managing emotions) affect field research experiences and potential outcomes.



Visiting Karaganda in Kazakhstan (1).
Photographed by Aurelie Bröckerhoff

Importance of one’s cognisance of position in relation to the research context has long been addressed in qualitative research. Traditional approaches to insider and outsider positionality, such as Schütz’s, see the status of insider and outsider as an *a priori* attribution of a researcher’s relationship to the research context and the researched (Merton 1972). More recently, researchers have highlighted that both of these statuses can be vastly influenced by contextual specifics and circumstances, and the local social, political and cultural values embedded in each interview.

Being seen as ‘one’s own’ or as external observer to one’s reality can bring different benefits and disadvantages both to the researcher and to the research. For example, a problem with “insiders” can be that they seek to confirm pre-existing assumptions (Cousin 2010), a problem with outsiders is that they cannot reach empathetic understanding of the context (Kusow 2003).

In another interview we conducted a few days later with heroin users, a female participant was quite openly hostile to us, saying that she did not believe our research, or any other research like ours, would help her or her peers. At an earlier stage we were informed about other international research teams who had come to visit the project she was a part of. We interpreted her dismay of being seen as a “data source”, rather than a person who wanted her participation in research to have an impact in her community. However, because she trusted Eva as a fellow Kazakhstani, she was willing in the end to participate in the discussion.

Conversely, our first interview was with an international non-governmental organisation, whose director had just joined the Kazakhstan team from another posting in a different country in Central Asia. Being relatively new to the context of Kazakhstan, it was evident that he felt hesitant in answering questions about Kazakhstan to a homecomer. In consequence, I ended up leading on the interview –so that it became a conversation between two people of non-Kazakhstani origin. This helped the flow of the interview and allowed the



Drug prevention posters at a charity for drug users. Photographed by Aurelie Bröckerhoff

participant to speak to the researcher who was in a similar position. For another take on how role can affect field research, read [Yang Shen's post](#) on gender and field research.

The examples of our experiences discussed above align with some considerations for collecting data as insiders/outsiders, and how the positionality of each researcher affects this process highlighted by previous research (Merriam et al 2001). However, our post-interview debate on the train in Kazakhstan reinforced our awareness of deeper challenges in data interpretation to reach consistent findings when research is conducted in cross-national, insider/outsider differentiated research teams. We found that the steps outlined below have helped us to address these challenges while in the field as well as during data analysis.

In order to establish a robust framework for interpretation, we followed the advice of Bartunek and Louis (1996) in conducting insider/outsider team research: we, as much as possible, refrained from exchanging opinions and views on the field context of research prior to the interview, we gathered data as a team (i.e., both of us actively participated as interviewers), we reflected in advance on our connectedness to the context, setting the main questions, and we both contributed to research design. Equally, we agreed to analyse data independently while having regular debriefing sessions to compare and combine our interpretations, with both of us having equal authority in decisions about interpretation of findings. Finally, a third member of our research team who did not participate in the data collection is involved in the data analysis.

What we did:

1. I, the 'stranger', was responsible for researching and writing the pre-departure brief on the drug situation in Kazakhstan, thus providing me with relevant knowledge from secondary sources.
2. We also travelled with predetermined research questions and interview topic guides that were co-developed between the researchers, meaning that either of us could have led the interviews, or fill in any gaps.
3. We engaged in 'memoing' (Miles and Huberman 1984), writing detailed reflections recording our impressions and specific details of how the interview progressed –often I would go first, so as not to be influenced by Eva's interpretations. Eva was conscious in her responses to avoid saying things that would cloud my own interpretations. We found that memoing supported our engagement with the research context when in the field and the material when reflecting and analysing the data.

What we found challenging:

- Eva was also translating during the research process which put a lot of pressure on her, but also meant that at times, I was not fully in the picture. At the same time, it also relayed some of the power back to me, as I was able to think and reflect on the spot, not being burdened with the task of translation, and thus ask any additional questions we might have.
- We also found it difficult initially to agree on our interpretations of findings, when we saw things differently. In one case, I went back to a research participant to ask additional questions. Following our debriefing, I would also be able to ask questions about Eva's interpretations and we would discuss these until we had reached a shared understanding.

Besides considering how we could mitigate the above effects, we also wondered how working together as a team consisting of a 'homecomer' and a 'stranger' would affect our relationships to the participants. One of these elements was that, to many participants, Eva might have been seen as the field assistant, which then balanced out the power and cultural imbalances between the two researchers—a methodological challenge identified as particularly significant for cross-cultural research (Craig and Douglas 2001, Malhotra 1996). Further, we found it helpful that the 'stranger', in this case me, had prior experience of working in non-Western contexts. The intercultural competency developed during previous projects helped me immensely in picking up on cues beyond the words that were spoken. We also found that it helped being able to speak openly about any points of differentiation that might have arisen as a result of cultural differences.

Conclusion:

Insiders and outsiders are not in a dichotomous relationship with one offering perfect insight, while the other offers pure reflection. Rather, working in a team combining both of these elements, time for reflexivity and triangulation (as embedded in our research design) has helped us address our own subjectivities and “keep each other honest” (Bartunek and Louis 1996), ultimately doing our research greater justice. We both feel that the debates about insiders and outsiders, as well as positionality, require a deeper engagement both with ontological and epistemological considerations of studying the social world and we will explore this further in future research.

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About the authors:

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[Eva Kipnis](#) is a senior lecturer in marketing at Coventry Business School, UK, and a doctoral candidate at University of Durham, UK. Her research is focused in three interrelated areas, namely multicultural people – their identities, experiences and consumption; cultural and multicultural branding – approaches and implications; and organizations in multicultural marketplaces – development of organizational capabilities to create multiculturally competent advertising and communication. Eva’s work has been published in the *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Journal of*

Business Research, Consumption, Markets & Culture, Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, Marketing Theory and others. Prior to joining academia, Eva has worked in industry as a marketing executive in Europe and Central Asia.

Project background:

Our project is titled LINKSCH and is funded by the European Commission (For more information on the project, please visit the project website, <http://linksch.gla.ac.uk/>)

Our experiences are based on a two-week field research trip to Kazakhstan as part of a major European-funded project investigating the unintended consequences of international drug policies. In total 37 participants were formally interviewed, either through in-depth interviews or workshop discussions. Eva was born in Kazakhstan, but is now based in the UK. She is bilingual in Russian and English, Russian being commonly spoken in Kazakhstan. I am a French-German, also fluent in English and also living in the UK. Together we spent two weeks travelling to 4 locations within Kazakhstan. Interviews were conducted in Russian with Eva interpreting as the interviews were being conducted. During the visit, after each interview, we would talk through what we had just heard, write reflections/memos and discuss our notes taken during the interview and initial findings.

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