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Insider-Outsider Positionality in the Religious Research Setting

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the concept of researcher positionality in the context of religious research from a self-reflective and critical perspective of autoethnography. It discusses the advantages of authors' insider position in the religious research context resulting from shared linguistic, gender, cultural, religious, and ethnic or geographic markers, and elaborates on how these markers create certain challenges for research objectivity. In doing so, the authors put their own experiences from various research projects in and outside Central Asia under scrutiny. The paper forwards three main arguments. First, it concludes that a researcher's position is a dynamic state that tends to change with regards to the insider-outsider continuum depending on the individual micro-settings of the field. Access to the field depends on what messages the researcher's visible markers, such as language, visual characteristics, religious or regional identities, communicate to the outside world and how these messages are interpreted on the recipient side. Second, the researcher does not necessarily have to share the same ethnic and cultural background as the research population to qualify as an "insider." A researcher who begins the research journey as an outsider may change his or her position during the research process, just as a researcher who is considered an insider may be denied access to certain groups. Third, obtaining insider data also means accessing highly sensitive information, the handling of which requires profound ethical engagement and an informed response on the part of the researcher. Thus, insider, outsider, or changing positional affiliation is neither a blessing nor a curse, but rather an interplay of contested and shifting identities that requires constant reflexivity on the part of researchers.

Keywords

Insider-outsider position, positionality, self-reflection, markers, religious context, Central Asia

Introduction

This paper contributes to the existing research ethics discourse on insider-outsider positionality in social science research (Adler and Adler 1987; Acker 2000; Asselin 2003; Brannick and Coghlan 2007; Floyd and Arthur 2012) and presents insights from the reflexive analytical perspective of autoethnography. The authors chose to explore this complex topic from an autoethnographic angle given their understanding of the concept of positionality as the researcher's personal position in relation to the objects of study and its influence on the process and outcome of the research. Depending on whether the researcher is a member of the research population and whether he or she shares certain identities with it or not, his or her position may be located differently along the insider-outsider continuum. This paper is based on self-reflective and critical discussion by two researchers, spouses who began their academic journey jointly, conducted most of their fieldwork together, and have continuously exchanged their lived experiences.

The discussion develops mainly around the question of how the authors experienced and reflected upon their insider position while conducting research on issues related to Islam in Kyrgyzstan and beyond. Both authors were born into families of non-practicing Muslim parents, adherents of the Soviet rural intelligentsia. Unlike their parents, the authors had the opportunity to access uncensored religious knowledge and the opportunity to internalize some of the Islamic practices into their daily routine, with emphasis on "some of the Islamic practices." If to be a practicing Muslim is to perform all five pillars (core beliefs and practices) of Islam, then neither author can be defined as such, *per se*. Instead, although both are convinced of the overall importance of upholding all five pillars, they perform these practices selectively: one prays daily but does not fast, the other does not pray regularly but does fast. This brief reference to the religious background of the authors should facilitate the reading of the rest of the text.

The authors wrote this paper primarily because researcher positionality in the Islamic religious context has not been discussed thoroughly enough in the research literature to adequately handle the challenging variability of the relationship between researchers and their subjects. What factors play a special role in gaining and maintaining access to the field in a religious setting, and what pitfalls and virtues can the identity of the researcher bring with it? The authors lead the discussion dialectically: on the one hand, they reveal the benefits of their insider position gained through shared socio-cultural, linguistic and other markers, and on the other hand, discuss the ethical challenges associated with research objectivity and bias. If a particular experience is relevant to only one of the two authors, his or her name will be mentioned. Should the reported experience or perspective be shared, both authors are named in the first-person plural.

Insider-outsider positionality: balancing identity traits

The insider-outsider positioning has been much discussed in social sciences in recent decades, shifting the discourse perspective from a rigid dichotomous separation to a more fluid positioning on the insider-outsider continuum (Floyd and Arthur 2012). A growing number of scientists argue in favor of a more nuanced conceptualization of outsider-insider positioning to reflect researchers' complex identities, changing contexts and power relations (Dhillon and Nest 2019; Thomson and

Gunter 2010; Carling et al. 2014), whereas still others promote the idea of fluidity in researchers' positions, suggesting that a researcher's position can change from an outsider to "inbetweeners" (Milligan 2016) through the development of a third space between these positions (Kanuha 2000). Building further on this argument, we assume that the researcher's position can be adjusted dynamically along the insider-outsider continuum depending on the research setting. Each setting represents a multi-layered construct of shared or non-shared markers between the researcher and the research population, individual perceptions, and reasonings. Following Carling et al. (2014), who advocate for a more nuanced and dynamic approach to studying the insider-outsider divide, we argue that the individual markers – cultural, socio-economic, linguistics and other – of the insider researcher define the level of acceptance and the quality of interaction with the target community in the religious research context. The most important traits that have been relevant for us in different research settings are language, gender, cultural competence, religion, and ethnic or geographic origin. In the following, we will first elaborate on how certain markers defined our position while granting initial access to the research population, and then will continue the discussion with a focus on the challenges of staying 'objective' once access to primary data is obtained.

Language

Knowledge of the spoken language of the target community is an indispensable qualification for contemporary social researchers. It enables researchers to understand the world view of their informants and hidden interpretations of their speech in combination with their body language. In our experience, however, being able to speak the target language alone is not sufficient to get access to the community under study. Aybek, who researched the Tablighi Jamaat, a Sunni missionary movement in Kyrgyzstan and Russia, quickly realized how difficult it would have been for him to understand and interact with his Tablighi Jamaat members without his previous knowledge of their special working vocabulary, which is heavily laden with Arabic terms. He knew such words as "*masjid*," "*await*," "*tawakkul*" and "*mashvara*" (which belongs to the daily lexicon of the Jamaat) from his childhood visits to the local mosque and conversations with elderly people in his home village in the South of Kyrgyzstan.

These and other words originating from Arabic have already been integrated and adapted into the southern dialect of the Kyrgyz language (although they were used passively) so that he had a rough understanding of what the group leader meant with such an announcement as "*We first need to perform usuli gasht to make awaat to this masjid*" (or, in the original Kyrgyz, "Усули гашка чыгып, биринчи ушул масчитка аваат кылып келишибиз керек"). Without previous knowledge of most of these foreign-sounding words, he would have had difficulty understanding what the group leader wanted him to do. This announcement of the daily activity plan for the Tablighi Jamaat more-or-less gave the group members the task of "reviving" the local mosque by going out to the streets in groups and inviting people to visit their mosque on that day for a sermon. Thus, even local Kyrgyz researchers without Arabic language skills, such as those who had not been exposed to "Kyrgyzified" Arabic expressions in their routine lives before, would need extra time, frustration,

and stress to learn the Tablighi vocabulary since the Tablighis usually expect their regular participants to know their basic lexicon. Thus, in this particular case, insider researchers who can share national, ethnic and cultural features with the target group will still have interaction issues common for outsiders.

Gender

The influence of gender on the researcher-participant relationship has been widely reflected upon by many authors (including Herod 1993, Gutmann 1996; Kusow 2003; Galam 2015; Holmes 2020), who emphasize the relativity and dynamism of gender as a cultural category that contributes to research on the one hand and draws boundaries on the other, especially in the cultural contexts where strict gender boundaries prevail (see Brandes 1992). In that spirit, the authors' fieldwork experience has shown that whether a researcher is female or male is a crucial issue when it comes to appropriate access and quality interaction with an Islamic community. This does not mean that a male researcher would not be able to talk to practicing Muslim women about their religiosity, or a female researcher would not be able to interview an Imam in the mosque. What truly counts here is the quality, depth and intimacy of interaction, exchange and personal connection, which is of immense epistemological and analytical value in social science research.

One of the key examples in the authors' experience took place in Moscow during Aikokul's fieldwork on labor migrants from Central Asia. She needed to conduct non-participatory observation of religious practices among migrant groups of different nationalities and interview practicing Muslim migrants. Whereas she had no problem studying practicing Muslim ladies in different field settings due to the shared Islamic identity and religiosity, she was not able to reach the same level of richness and quality while collecting data among male Muslim migrants. For example, while observing the human and socialization dynamics during the Friday prayer in the central mosque of Moscow, Aikokul saw that, immediately after prayer, the men would gather in small groups of ten or more Tajik-, Kyrgyz- or Uzbek-native speaking people, and go to a nearby square, park, or mosque, where one of them would offer a *dars*.¹ It was always fascinating for Aikokul to learn which topics they addressed during the *dars*, why and how they selected these topics, how migration-related issues are discussed, and many other related questions. However, the moment she (in decent clothes and coverings) would approach the group and ask for permission to listen to the lesson, even if from distance, her request was politely declined, and she was referred to the various female meetings. She was also not really welcome to stay in the men's part of the mosque for longer than usually permitted.

Of course, Aikokul expected certain problems with access, especially to Muslim male migrants, due to her visible gender, so she requested that Aybek, who had accompanied her to Moscow, enter the role of *mahram*² when studying the male segment of her research sample. The result was obvious. Accompanied by Aybek, who would first approach potential informants and

¹ From Arabic meaning "lesson, teaching, study"

² From Arabic meaning "a family member whom it is forbidden to marry"

negotiate access, Aikokul was suddenly able to participate in the male migrant *dars* (sitting at an acoustically discreet distance) and conduct face-to-face interviews with practicing male migrants. However, during such interviews, even when all the questions were put forwarded by Aikokul, the male interviewees would look to Aybek (who sat beside Aikokul) as though Aikokul were merely acting as a moderator between Aybek and them. Aybek, being an experienced researcher himself, knew exactly how to behave (through mimicking, motioning, and sometimes short comments) to encourage the interviewees to go on.



Figure 1: Aikokul waiting for Muslim men to finish their evening prayer in a mosque, Moscow, photo by the author

In contrast, Aikokul profited immediately from being a member of the Muslim women's group. She was easily accepted by Muslim migrant women of different ethnicities and easily gained their trust and openness. In the same token, Aybek would most likely be unable to observe Tablighi women's groups and conduct in-depth interviews with them, just as Aikokul would most likely end up with rather superficial interviews with male Tablighis, if they were granted at all. To sum up, we would argue that, in certain settings, the researcher's visible gender marker comes out as an essential factor defining the insider-outsider position of the researcher with little regard to shared culture and language. An opposite gender marker in combination with a shared religious identity can even create an additional communication barrier between the researcher and the research population. Muslim men (informants) would most likely try to avoid direct and profound contact with a Muslim female researcher out of respect for her since a non-*mahram* interaction between men and women is not encouraged in Islam except for in certain circumstances such as while seeking medical help, learning about Islam, or escaping from life-threatening situations. Informants might have acted differently if the interaction had taken place in a different setting (for instance, not in and around the mosque).

Religious affiliation

Religious affiliation is another important marker that defines the researcher's position in the context of religious studies. Here, we speak about adherence to different intra-Islamic trends, communities, and groups within the Hanafi Islamic school and beyond. While collecting pre-field data for his research on the Tablighi Jamaat among Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow, Aybek was often confronted with a situation where his informants would continue to claim that the Tablighi groups had ceased their activities in Russia until he decided to tell them about his previous membership in the Tabligh.³ The decision to reveal the information about his religious affiliation and related experience mostly positively influenced the interview dynamics. After a few validation questions, the interviewees would start opening up and providing classified information, for example, about how male Tablighi groups, mostly consisting of Kyrgyz migrant workers from a certain village or district, managed to continue their undercover missionary activities and how all the networking worked logistically.



Aybek (4th from left) as Amir Sap (leader of the Tablighi group) in Özgen district, Kyrgyzstan, photo by the author

Another example can be found in Aikokul's attempts to gain insight into how the migrant followers of the Fethullah-Gülen movement transmitted and lived their ideologies in Russia, which were not entirely successful. She had information that this movement's members in Moscow were organized into small groups of friends who normally know each other from a Turkish school or university. They met regularly for *plov*⁴ evenings or football matches. It remained unclear if these were just private meetings among friends or if they also had certain background religious political

³ The Tablighi Jamaat was declared an extremist religious organization by the Russian Supreme Court in 2009 for alleged links to international terrorism and radical political goals. Its activities were subsequently banned on the territory of the Russian Federation.

⁴ A famous Central Asian traditional rice dish

agenda. Any outsider who does not conform to certain markers of the movement, such as a Turkish education, is greeted with profound scepticism and caution. These two examples, therefore, suggest that each field setting represents a different set of markers, the compliance or noncompliance with which labels the researcher as an insider or outsider for the target community, at least at the initial stage of interaction.

Ethnic and geographic origin

A researcher's ethnic and/or geographic origin is another important marker occasionally instrumentalized to gain access to the target community. Phenotypic characteristics in combination with linguistic competence usually act as strong initial identifiers, although sometimes the informants can interpret these erroneously. Aikokul recalls experiencing a few inconvenient situations while interviewing her informants on practicing religion as a migrant. When inviting an ethnic Tajik lady from Uzbekistan for an interview, she only mentioned that she originated from Kyrgyzstan and offered to conduct the interview in Russian if the interviewee found it comfortable. The interview went well. Aikokul could easily build a bond and she began revealing her experience of being a "second wife" or "wife for Moscow" to an Uzbek migrant in detail. To Aikokul's question of whether the ethnicity or nationality played a role for her in choosing a marriage partner as a migrant, she stressed that a partner should be Muslim in order to enter a *nikah*⁵ relation with him, and therefore only Uzbeks and Tajiks, but not Kyrgyz would be eligible for the role of a husband. To the question why Kyrgyz men did not qualify, she answered that Kyrgyz were not "real" Muslims for her and voiced negatively valenced stereotypes towards the Kyrgyz ethnic group. At that moment, Aikokul realized that the interviewee might have taken her for an ethnic Korean or other ethnic minority. She found herself in an ethically delicate situation as she faced the decision of whether or not to reveal her ethnic Kyrgyz identity. She decided not to as it would put the interviewee in a highly awkward position.

Another similar situation took place during an expert interview with a leader of an ethnic migrant community who took Aikokul for Kazakh because "her facial profile was too subtle for Kyrgyz girls." This time Aikokul decided to reveal her ethnicity because the interviewee had directly asked her if she was Kazakh. This helped her avoid a similar ethical dilemma, but it may also have had impact on the dynamics of that interview.

From Aybek's experience, the decision to reveal information about his noble ancestors helped him to gain access to the Uzbek Tablighi group members in Osh and to establish a trusting relationship with them.

To sum up, it is not so easy to determine the ethics around the disclosure or withholding of information about the researcher's personal background, experiences, and identities in a general sense. Researchers should have the right to decide whether, when and to whom they want to disclose private information about themselves, in particular in order to protect their personal data,

⁵ An Islamic marriage contract

privacy and security. This may be important for researchers in vulnerable situations (particularly women and those in the LGBT+ community) if the exposure of certain personal information may jeopardize their safety. Whatever context-bound decision researchers make, it must be critically reasoned and methodologically substantiated.

Intersections of insider positionality

In the section above we reflected on our lived experiences with some markers which play an important, though not always straightforward, role in determining our position in the research setting. For us, objective research delivers largely replicable findings that reveal reality without bias. Especially in social sciences, there can be multiple sources of bias. Here we reflect on the researcher-bound objectivity challenges in the religious research context. As discussed above, researchers with the “appropriate” religious, linguistic, ethnic, and gender markers have a good chance to easily access the target community, interact with it and collect primary data with a significant analytical value.

What if, however, certain research findings may expose the target community or certain members to possible harm or burden? What if these findings are an easy target for misinterpretation and abuse by politicians, journalists or Islamophobic movements, especially amid infamous Anti-Muslim moods? How does a targeted waiver of these data from reporting affect the general research validity? A practicing Muslim researcher who respects and follows the principles of both academic rigor and research ethics can face such an ethical dilemma when studying a native religious community. Aikokul is firmly convinced that it is essential for any researcher studying Islam (or any other religion) in society to have an appropriate understanding of both the primary sources of religion - the Quran and *Hadith*⁶ – and the local cultural context in order to accurately interpret the research data. In her early academic career she did not entrust herself with the task of studying Islamic themes because her knowledge and understanding of Islamic principles, concepts and fundamental content were not sufficiently profound to address these with the required academic rigor, care and sensitivity. It was only after a few years of studying the fundamentals of Islam that she began to discreetly address Islamic aspects in her research.

Even with her informed discretion, she, as an insider researcher, was told by the local experts on Islam to be extra cautious in communicating critical issues to the outside world. For example, her arguments about the steadily growing gender segregation in the public and private spheres in Kyrgyzstan, about the religiously motivated exclusion of women from politics, and about the informed withdrawal of educated practicing Muslim women from the labor market in favor of men's careers were not favorably received by some experts who were concerned that such critical conclusions could easily be used by the mass media to portray the Kyrgyz *Ummah*⁷ as misogynistic and discriminatory towards women. She disagreed with her critics and argued that her research portrayed both negative and positive tendencies in religious women's socio-economic

⁶ The tradition of the sayings and actions of the Islamic Prophet Mohammed

⁷ From Arabic meaning "community"

empowerment and that neglecting certain obvious effects of religious growth in the population would call into question the objectivity and neutrality of the entire study.

As this example shows, like any researcher, Aikokul had to be aware of the possible risks and negative consequences of her research outcomes for the target community. She carefully reviewed the unpublished results *vis a vis* possible harm to her informants and their community, weighed up the possible benefits against these harms, and identified the potential risk as weak. If the potential of harming her informants and their community had been stronger, she would have had to decide among the following options:

- to exclude sensitive findings from the analysis, something possible only if this would have only minimal effect on the analytical accuracy and quality;
- to suspend the research, a necessary step if the excluded data would have had an intrinsic impact on the methodological and analytical soundness of the research;
- to seek advice from trusted scholars and senior research methodologists as to how to handle such an ethically sensitive issue.

Aybek also faced such a situation on an occasion where he was unsure how to handle highly sensitive information that he was not supposed to have had in the first place. During one of his Tablighi trips, he and other members of the group decided to stay overnight at a local mosque. It was deep night, and everyone was supposed to have been asleep. Aybek woke up to a quiet conversation taking place between his groupmates in the far corner of the room. They were exchanging emotional statements about their grievances and distrust for a particular ethnic group, and about group revenge and political loyalty to another state. Although it was a very interesting piece of observation, Aybek decided to disregard it. Including it into analysis would be ethically incorrect for several reasons. Firstly, it was a private, confidential conversation between two people who had not given prior consent for its use for research purposes. Requesting *post facto* permission to use this information would put all parties in an unpleasant situation, and would also jeopardize Aybek's reputation and integrity within the group. Secondly, the inadvertently obtained information was extremely sensitive and the use or even indirect reference to it could provoke inter-ethnic tensions. Instead, Aybek decided to include an anonymized field note about the occurrence and the justification for its omission in the data.

Ethical dimension of data collection in conflict-settings

The situational "staking" of researchers' insider identities demonstrated above raises questions about the extent of our ethical responsibility for the data we collect. During our field research in Moscow, we got an appointment with a journalist from a migrant-run television station who also described himself as a human rights activist. During our conversation, he started openly sharing his migration story and his activities as a journalist and legal adviser for his migrant fellows. After inquiring about our country and region of origin, he stated that he visited Kyrgyzstan quite often and met with top officials there. He then suddenly started recounting how he and a group of Mujahedin militants had seized the Zardaly village of Batken in the South of Kyrgyzstan in 1999, and had taken Japanese geologists as hostages. He described how warmly the ethnic Kyrgyz villagers

received them, how much they paid their Kyrgyz hosts, how they conducted negotiations with the Kyrgyz military heads and officials over the ransom for the Japanese scientists, and other events in such detail and sincerity that we could hardly trust our ears. Were we talking with one of the terrorists who had invaded Batken in the early 2000s? Or was he bluffing – but why would he be doing so? Seeing our astonishment and a slight shock, he hastened to add that it was a youthful misadventure and he now had excellent relations with Kyrgyz authorities. This example highlights one of the issues that Floyd and Arthur describe as internal ethical engagement, which "relates to the ethical and moral dilemmas that insider researchers have to deal with once 'in the field' linked to ongoing personal and professional relationships with participants, insider knowledge, conflicting professional and researcher roles, and anonymity." (2012, p.6). The information provided by our informant about the allegedly committed crime was important, interesting, sensitive and dangerous. We did not pass it on to the competent authorities not only because of the principle of anonymity and confidentiality but also for the reasons of our security. As Drake and Health (2008) have stated, researchers need to live with the consequences of their actions. We, therefore, decided to integrate the information provided in the data analysis, but in a highly generalized form, without reference to the specific crime and the persons involved.

Speaking of doing research in conflict-sensitive settings, researchers are by default at risk in terms of their personal security. The "do-no-harm" principle is effective not only towards research participants, local assistants, and host institutions, but also towards the researchers themselves since they generate data within complex socio-political structures. Even insider researchers need to carefully map potential risks and situations hazardous to the researcher's personal security and consider appropriate methods to minimize these. Oftentimes, insiders may consider themselves well-informed and prepared for any situations in the field, and thus ignore situations that may easily translate into risks.

Aybek learned a valuable lesson about how an insider researcher with certain characteristics shared by parts of the research population can jeopardize his or her safety. During a recent field research with the Tablighi missionaries in Southern Kyrgyzstan, Aybek joined the 40-day, 7-day and 3-day Tablighi trips in areas with a long history of latent and violent interethnic tensions, religious radicalization trends, and acute socio-economic vulnerabilities. Although he tried to explain his research mission to the fellow Tablighi travelers, he was not able to build relationships of trust with everyone. Some, especially those who had a lower level of education and spent only 3 days with him, must have suspected him of spying for intelligence services. To reduce their suspicion, Aybek tried not to use his audio recorder or to make entries in his field journals while they observed him.

Once, after returning from a lengthy journey, Aybek and a fellow Tablighi, an ethnic Uzbek, decided to go a community bath to take a shower. The bath was located in a monoethnic Uzbek part of town. Once the fellow Tablighi had finished bathing and left the room, a group of young Uzbek men surrounded Aybek and started questioning whether he was ethnically Kyrgyz and what he was doing in their part of town. Aybek, an ethnic Kyrgyz man, felt threatened as the young men's reaction to his true ethnic identity was unpredictable. In an attempt to avoid giving a direct answer

to their question, Aybek threw at the inquirers a remark about Muslim dress code in public baths in fluent Uzbek. The remark included a *hadith* for Muslim men to wear trousers of a certain length. The clothes of the young men did not correspond to this dress code. In doing this, Aybek signaled to them his authority as an elder Muslim brother with more Islamic knowledge and claim to respect. Luckily, this worked; they humbly admitted the legitimacy of the *hadith* and immediately stopped harassing Aybek with further questions. He was not sure whether it was his fluency in the Uzbek language or knowledge of a *hadith* tailored to this situation, or a combination of both, that kept him out of physical danger. As depicted in this story, an insider researcher who shares certain identities and markers with the research population can put himself or herself in danger precisely on account of these common identities.

Intellectual honesty is another important aspect of a researcher's ethical engagement. This is especially true when a researcher works individually, not in a team; he or she needs to be prudent in collecting primary data, processing and analyzing it, and reporting the research outcome for multiple reasons. In most cases, the researcher alone has access to primary, non-anonymized and unprocessed data, which means that only he or she can verify the completeness of the research material. To improve reliability, researchers can share their data with other researchers to check for accuracy and correctness at different stages of the process. Ultimately, it is up to the researcher to interpret the data, draw conclusions and formulate recommendations. Although peer review is a fairly well-known practice, it cannot ensure the complete accuracy of the results, which means that a researcher has some leeway to manipulate the final results to plant certain ideas that do not necessarily emanate from the findings. To give an example, Aikokul has received requests from some agencies that intended to commission her to analyze existing primary data on the social and political consequences of religious revival in Central Asia. After pre-contract consultations with the potential customers, Aikokul was under the impression that the agency had strong expectations of finding certain evidence of religious radicalization of labor migrants in Russia and of the role of religious educational institutions in radicalizing women. It was unacceptable for Aikokul to embark on data analysis with biased assumptions and the anticipation of arrival at certain conclusions, possibly based on latent findings. "Bending the truth" to interpret it in a certain way is immoral and contrary to academic integrity. In particular, if the researcher was not involved in designing the study and primary data collection, it is difficult to ensure the methodological rigor of the study and data integrity. On top of this, as a non-academic and non-research entity, the agency showed little understanding of and interest in conducting peer reviews during data analysis and reporting. Thus, Aikokul declined these consultancy requests. To the best of our knowledge, no reports on these studies have yet been published.

Conclusions

In this article, we first presented several key markers or identifiers that make a researcher an "insider" and discussed the benefits and pitfalls they offer in building initial rapport with a research population. The authors then elaborated on how they have experienced and put into practice the ethical principles of academic objectiveness, intellectual honesty and do-no-harm. Without

claiming that the choices they made in their own research were entirely correct, they tried to critically reflect on and draw lessons from them. In doing so, the authors forwarded three main arguments that feed into the researcher positionality discourse.



Figure 3: Chilapchyns in grey and orange (vessels for water used for minor ablutions before prayer) symbolizing the similarity and dissimilarity of objects serving the same purpose, photo by the author

First, they argue that an insider-outsider position is not a static state which remains stable through the research process. Originating from and/or sharing certain easily identifiable markers with one's own research population (e.g. language and phenotypic characteristics) may facilitate initial communication with them, but does not automatically grant access to all the necessary information sources. The researcher's position is sensitive to the micro-settings of the field, and access depends on what messages his or her visible markers, like language, visual characteristics, religious or regional identities, communicate to the outside world and how these messages are interpreted on the recipient side. If recipients recognize the researcher as trustworthy and safe, he or she may be granted access to the anticipated insider information. Should those markers trigger suspicion, resentment, or mistrust among the recipients, the researcher can be quickly pushed into an outsider position. As shown in the following figure, the position of the researcher is fluid and depends on how certain markers that identify the researcher interact with the researcher population. The latter is not a homogeneous whole, so the researcher cannot be expected to share the identities of all research participants.

Second, to obtain an insider position, the researcher does not necessarily have to originate from the research population, speak its languages fluently, or have the most profound knowledge of the local culture. A researcher who begins the research journey as an outsider can change his or her position throughout the course of the research process, just as a researcher deemed an insider can be denied access to certain groups due to specific markers, deeds, or mistakes.

Third, obtaining insider data also means accessing highly sensitive information, the handling of which requires the researcher's profound ethical engagement and informed reaction. This means that the researcher must carefully consider possible data handling options and related risks. Sensitive data must be handled in such a way that it cannot be used to harm the research population, sub-groups, individual informants or the researchers themselves. If the original field data is to be stored in a shared data repository for use by other researchers, all sensitive components must be previously anonymized to prevent their possible misinterpretation or dishonest misuse. Research, particularly on religious, ethnic, racial or cultural identities, requires extreme sensitivity when generating, processing, analyzing, interpreting and sharing data, as it can easily be instrumentalized for purposes that are not necessarily ethically sound.

To round up the present discourse, a researcher's position in the religious research context is a dynamic state that tends to change with regards to the insider-outsider continuum depending on the individual micro-settings of the field. The research population reacts to the researcher's markers. If the researcher shares common markers with the research population, this can facilitate quick initial access to the field, but it does not ensure access to the desired depth and quantity of information by default. In some micro-settings, the common markers may have an adverse effect on recipients if these markers trigger negative feelings, grievances, or distress towards a particular population group. Being an insider researcher comes along with access to sensitive pieces of information, the correct handling of which requires intensive ethical engagement and responsibility. An insider, outsider or changing positional affiliation should therefore not be considered simply as a blessing or curse for researchers but should rather be viewed as an interplay of contested and fluid identities that requires constant reflexivity on the part of the researchers.

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