

**“INSIDERS” AND “OUTSIDERS” : REFLECTIONS ON HIERARCHIES, PRIVILEGES
AND POSITIONALITIES IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH**

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**“INSIDERS” AND “OUTSIDERS”: REFLECTIONS ON HIERARCHIES, PRIVILEGES
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Abstract:

This working paper addresses the interrelated notions of positionality, the (self-) perceptions by and about researchers, as well as global inequalities in knowledge production. It presents the experiences of four individual researchers who introspect on issues of insiderness, outsiderness and privilege in academia. The paper first introduces the questions and origins of this piece, then presents the experiences of each researcher in four separate sections. Each contribution uses the first-person narrative and presents the background and topic of study of each researcher. The paper builds on the four researchers' experiences of conducting empirical research in Australia, Brazil, China, Ecuador, Denmark, Germany, Ghana, Indonesia, Peru and Turkey, all while being affiliated with academic institutions from the so-called Global North. The final section offers some concluding remarks and insights for the way forward.

Keywords:

knowledge production, qualitative research, global inequalities, collaborative scholarship, reflexivity

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Introduction

The co-authoring of this joint working paper was initiated by an invitation to a panel discussion that was part of the symposium “Dear White People... – Check Your Privilege!” that took place in Freiburg (Germany) in January 2020.¹ The interdisciplinary symposium included a series of critical discussions on racism and the privileges of being white. The events of the symposium had different formats, such as workshops, lectures and discussions, film screenings, drama and concerts and offered different approaches to the topic, including discursive, aesthetic and experience-oriented approaches. The symposium aimed to create an open space for the exchange of knowledge and experience on the topics of critical whiteness, intersectionality and the decolonisation of development policy.

The regional focus of “Dear White People...” in 2020 was Ghana. Due to the fact that the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI) is one of the main German partners for the Maria Sibylla Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA), an international research centre at the University of Ghana in Legon, Accra,² the organisers approached the ABI with the request to actively participate in the symposium of “Dear White People...”. We decided to bring four researchers from different regions of the world and with different positionalities, who carry out research in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa, in order to gain comparative insights. All of them are currently based at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute.

In a first round of internal discussions, we discussed potential foci of the panel discussion and decided collectively to concentrate on issues connected to *“Insiders” and “Outsiders”*: *Racialised power hierarchies in academia and field research*, the title of the panel. It was also collectively agreed to tackle thorny personal and political questions that arise while conducting research in and being involved in knowledge production about the so-called Global South,³ rather than just offering impersonal, purely theoretical accounts. Throughout the panel discussion the panellists agreed to explore some of the many challenges and

¹ <https://ewf-freiburg.de/blog/Veranstaltung/dear-white-people-check-your-privilege/>

² <https://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/en/about-miasa>

³ We are aware of the diffused meanings of the terms Global South and Global North. Despite the valid criticism of this artificial divide, we continue to use this terminology as a shorthand for pointing to the existence of global inequalities, also in academia (Burchardt 2009).

complexities of doing research across boundaries and borders. The global context of racialised power hierarchies that structure academia and the contexts of empirical research significantly influenced those considerations and preparations. With the help of a number of guiding questions that were deemed relevant for all researchers who conduct field research, it was hoped to stimulate individual reflections, from which the audience could learn something new. Those guiding questions included:

- Why is important and what is to be gained from critically reflecting on our positionalities and the way we conduct research?
- What constitutes an insider (or outsider) perspective?
- How are you perceived and how do you perceive yourself in relation to other researchers when conducting fieldwork?
- How do you reconcile your own research interests with other people's expectations of what you should research?
- When and how has our position as insiders or outsiders mattered in regard to obtaining funding?

In a second internal meeting at the ABI, we selected a moderator and four panellists to share and discuss their own positionalities while conducting field research and beyond. It soon became obvious that the context of where they come from and where they conduct the bulk of their field research very much shapes their perceptions of outsidersness and insidersness, not only the perceptions held by others but even their own. In preparation for the panel discussion all panellists agreed to reflect not only on challenges but also on privileges when it comes to accessing the research site, collecting data and publishing findings. An additional set of questions was added to help structure the panel discussion:

- What are the structural constraints and barriers that researchers from the so-called Global South and people of colour face within academia?
- Which approaches have you used to overcome existing obstacles in fieldwork and in academia?

The panel discussion was well attended by approximately 50 participants. After the researchers' individual reports, a lively and stimulating discussion with the audience developed that further deepened and expanded on certain aspects raised by the panellists. This exciting panel discussion led to the idea of co-authoring a joint working paper, which would help to further deepen our reflections and also allow us to make further connections to academic debates currently taking place. This joint working paper is the result of an 8-month collaboration among five researchers (including the moderator), which also benefitted from individual feedback and wider discussion with other colleagues.

The individual experiences of and reflections on asymmetric knowledge access, production and dissemination around the world are the starting point and invitation for further discussions. While it is very difficult to derive generic "lessons learnt" that could easily improve future developments in how to better deal with the challenges of being an insider or outsider, we hope to offer a few suggestions on how to instrumentalise privileges and positionalities for developing more equal collaborations among researchers – regardless of origin or current location.

Thus, the main purpose and intention of this joint working paper is a) to come to terms with our own positionalities and privileges in different academic settings and b) to break up the binary dichotomies of insider-outsiderness by emphasising the shifting positions that can be occupied by the very same researcher depending on context. The personal reflections of the four panellists will follow, before a joint conclusion in which we point out some of the most important lessons we learned during this collaboration.

Fabricio Rodríguez: Managing bias, privilege and other people's expectations

I was born in Ecuador, where I grew up between the highlands of Quito and the Pacific Coast of Manabí. I identify as a Latino of Indigenous and European descent. However, by South American "standards", or prejudiced ideas thereof, I am a relatively tall, white male, so that people cannot always tell where I actually come from. I left Ecuador at age sixteen to attend Pearson College UWC of the Pacific, which later led me to Trent University, in Peterborough, Canada, on the basis of two generous scholarships. At a later stage, I came to Freiburg, Germany, where I became interested in the field of international politics and development. Between my MA and my PhD, I spent six years working for a German organisation in the

field of local governance and economic development in Guatemala, Central America. Given this pathway, for me to be both an “insider” and an “outsider”, sometimes simultaneously, perhaps constantly, sometimes consciously, at times accidentally, is far from an unusual situation. Here, I reflect on my experiences conducting empirical research at different times and in different cultural settings.

In my current research, I want to understand how different geographies of resource extraction are assembled into global struggles over wealth, power and status. A central question is how different social actors make sense of and shape transnationally entangled processes of economic transition in light of pressing ecological constraints and the need for multilateral action. In my PhD I studied how the rise of China affected oil and mineral extraction in Brazil and Peru while asking if and how these contested processes are reshaping the terms of South–South relations.

My choice not to conduct my doctoral research on my country of origin continues to surprise friends, family and colleagues in Ecuador and beyond. Funding institutions in Germany as well as interviewees in different countries have also reacted with a sense of bewilderment. In these situations, I have had the impression that it is totally acceptable for scholars from the Global North to study basically any region of the world, while Global South students or researchers are (often) expected to learn “something” in the Global North and then go back to “improve” some aspect of society in their home country. While going back to one’s country of origin is a perfectly legitimate choice, why not consider the fact that scholars from the Global South can also contribute to learning processes in the Global North?

The problems related to this question reflect the persistence of unequal structures of privilege in academia. For instance, I have encountered spaces of discussion at international conferences where scholars from the Global North are “natural insiders” to global issues, while scholars from the Global South, including myself, trigger a sense of “positive” surprise when we engage with the same issues from what seems to be an “outsider” perspective.

However, I have also run into similar situations when speaking with people in the Global South. For example, two Brazilian diplomats asked me prior to an interview in Brasilia why I decided to focus on Chinese–Brazilian and not Chinese–Ecuadorian relations for my PhD: “You could do a lot of great things when you go back to your home country!” Since

these two young diplomats were genuinely interested in my experience, I responded that I considered it important for Ecuadorians – and Latin Americans – to understand the broader picture of China’s relations with the heterogeneous landscape of “our” region. Besides, I added, it can be crucial for a social scientist to actively take the role of “outsider” to minimise potential nationalistic bias in studying a particular issue. Nonetheless, I mentioned that as a “Latino” I felt like a Latin American “insider” in the study of Chinese–Latin American relations, and that it was very important for my research to understand Brazil’s changing status in world politics, from both a regional and global perspective. My interview partners could understand that point, which opened up a series of enriching conversations.

In fact, bias, prejudice and positionality are fluid, contested and contingent issues. The first time I was greeted as an “outsider” took place in my home country, which I visited while studying in Germany. At the time, I was conducting several interviews for my Master’s thesis on the political dynamics of decentralisation in Ecuador. Since Ecuador is considered a “developing” country, politicians, natural scientists and some family members I interviewed or spoke with noted that “the country does not necessarily need political scientists but rather people who contribute to the ‘lifting’ of the country, such as doctors, engineers, managers or lawyers”. Instead of taking offence at such commentaries downplaying the importance of social science, I found that they helped me find more meaning in my research. Such ideas are a reproduction of the modernisation paradigm, which still defines what kind of knowledge matters to whom on the global ladder of power and privilege. And yet, I have also experienced the advantage of being a Latin American scholar conducting research in Germany, which I think has been helpful, yet by no means decisive, in obtaining post-graduate research positions and funding.

Today when I do fieldwork in Brazil I am acknowledged as a non-Brazilian Latino, probably also as a non-Indigenous, non-Afrodescendant South-American. In my experience, being a member of German academia has certainly been an important door opener for conducting research. However, Brazil is changing very rapidly and the current government is an active opponent of social science, which has led to financial cuts in academia and to political repercussions as well as the stigmatisation of critical researchers, with Indigenous and Afro-Brazilians suffering the most from substantial cuts in previously established scholarship programmes.

In Peru, different conditions apply. Since Ecuador and Peru had a longstanding war that was finally settled in 1998, my interview partners (bureaucrats, NGOs, business people, diplomats, scholars, indigenous organisations) react mostly in a positive way to my interest in “their” country despite the fact that I come from Ecuador. However, I am conscious that my condition as a comparatively white scholar from a German university has granted me privileged access to high-ranking officials who would not necessarily tolerate the same critical questions if they came from someone who looked different or had a different social background.

In my experience, fieldwork in China has certainly had very different connotations. As a foreign scholar, I face more challenges in China than in Latin America, Europe or North America, given the higher levels of intercultural complexity and linguistic barriers. Having to apply for a researcher’s visa is obviously the first step towards identifying as an outsider, as is the case in any visa application process. Interestingly, once in China, my fieldwork has definitely benefitted from the “Third-Worldist” and “South–South” mantra of the (official) Chinese–Latin American discourse. This means that many scholars have welcomed me as a “peer” from another “developing” or “emerging” region. In this context, my origins in the Global South translate into a presumed feeling of shared frustration with the history of domination by “external powers”. In the case of Latin America and China, this refers most notably to the US, as a common “foe”. The fact that Latin Americans are now studying China’s presence in the region is – at least at first – a sign that China is advancing its global presence in what many Chinese scholars, businesses and policymakers regard as “America’s backyard”. The awareness of this historical context has been particularly important in approaching my empirical research in this setting.

When talking to scholars and policy makers – these two roles are not always separated in China – I am openly acknowledged as a Latin American scholar with the “merit” of holding European and North American academic credentials. Since meritocracy is a key aspect of Chinese academia – with European and North American universities seen to represent the industry standard for higher education – this is also a way of recognising, welcoming and validating foreign scholars from the Global South to conduct research in China. This condition has compensated decisively for my limited language skills and has facilitated my fieldwork in an academic setting that suffers from the increasingly authoritarian scrutiny of a one-party system.

While my work focuses on thorny issues regarding China's presence in the extractive sectors of Latin America, I have nevertheless experienced an authentic interest in my research, especially from Chinese think tank scholars. For example, I provided a talk at a prominent research centre focusing on energy transition in China. The six highly qualified Chinese researchers sitting in a comfortable room with a spectacular view – which I was kindly told was reserved for foreign visitors – expressed sound interest in my discussion of how China's energy transition is entangled with Latin American realities. I spoke about how China's demand for oil, minerals and food was fuelling extractive development pathways and deepening previous chapters of external domination, which represent, I went on, a great challenge to the future of South–South cooperation. After a very enriching and technically challenging discussion, my Chinese counterparts expressed their gratitude for an eye-opening conversation, which I also recognised as exceptionally enriching.

However, with a largely ambivalent and uncertain future regarding China's international behaviour, research conditions can change very rapidly. For instance, China's increasingly assertive presence in the Global South may indeed be triggering new waves of discrimination and racism against students and researchers from abroad. During my interviews, I heard Chinese scholars complain about the government's mistaken practice of handing out too many scholarships to students from Africa and other regions of the Global South. Some Chinese scholars criticise these programmes as populist “giveaways” in exchange for contracts along the Belt and Road Initiative. In their view, Chinese leaders are incentivising other governments to handpick people to come study or conduct research in China who lack any interest in attending classes or learning about Chinese culture. In contrast, they contend that Chinese students who travel abroad are always expected to perform well at university and learn the language of the foreign country and university they visit.

In my view, discrimination and racism are not confined to one specific nation or region, although they take different forms and have different levels of intensity according to specific contexts. Instead, these two elements go back to the colonial legacies of modernity, which, despite some advances in the increasing levels of knowledge circulation from the South to the North, are still constitutive of largely unequal relations of knowledge production in the world system as a whole. No doubt, however, there are spots of the world in which racism and discrimination are much more acute than in other places. This

problematic situation speaks right to the heart of social science, its concerns and its ethical duties: to influence the public discourse by shedding light on these phenomena, and to foster a favourable environment for change within its very own institutional structures.

In this light, universities should promote the internationalisation of research and teaching to their full extent. In the case of Germany, for example, there is a pressing need to build stronger ties with universities and research institutions in all world regions, independently of their economic importance to the nation's exports. Universities cannot claim to be authentically "global" because of their partnerships with a few centres of knowledge production in Asia or the US while leaving Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean off of the map. Governments must increase their efforts to intensify and diversify academic exchange programmes between different world regions. The aim would be to transform cultural diversity from the exception to the norm, reaching out to professors but also lecturers, students and, importantly, administrative staff. In achieving this objective, universities could promote international alliances and funding mechanisms with the clear objective of reducing asymmetries in knowledge production and guaranteeing research independence while especially protecting scholars working under the adverse conditions of discrimination or even persecution due to race, gender, religious or political background.

Dilshad Muhammad: Shifting between insider and outsider perspectives and perceptions

As part of my PhD thesis I have been studying the ways in which municipalities in Turkey (dis)engage in the ongoing developments of the migration regime in Turkey. Both while doing research inside Turkey and arranging the necessary logistics to do such research, I have experienced the importance of freedom of mobility, as well as examples of how insider/outsider positions intermingle, and how some people in the field, municipal officials for example, view non-Turkish (junior) researchers.

Migration, as a field of study, was not among the topics that appealed to me as an MA student in a political science department. One reason for this was probably the fact that my interests were oriented towards more traditional topics of the discipline, such as the study of nationalism, political parties and foreign policy. The specific conditions of my previous stay in Istanbul in 2014 and 2015 were, however, a crucial factor that drew my

attention to migration as a complex domain where local, national and international politics are configured. At the same time, it was equally interesting for me to follow the ways in which differentiated migration policies in Turkey were being developed at the national and local levels. Thus the choice of my current research subject was greatly informed by such observations, as well as by my general deep interest in Turkish politics. I began work on my dissertation in March 2019. From my experience thus far, it is clear to me that doing research is greatly influenced by the conditions in which the research is taking place and by the positionality of the researcher.

My wider research area of study, migration in Turkey, was very timely. It was proposed when Turkey became host to the world's largest number of refugees. At the same time, different institutions in Europe have financially encouraged research on forced migration in the Global South for different reasons. While financial support for forced migration research has always been a necessity, the sudden increase in financial resources and schemes for targeted research since 2015 has had negative consequences on both the quality and the aim of research in many cases. This dynamic has led to the establishment of an entire industry or sector for forced migration research, in which the main, if not only, aim of many of the researchers involved has been simply to develop their careers (Nimer 2019; Sukarieh and Tannock 2019).

The most important conditions of having a scholarship and having an academic affiliation have been fulfilled in my case. Without these two major factors, pursuing my doctoral studies would certainly not have been possible. But there are also other factors that have the potential to cast a shadow, at least temporarily, over the process of research or doctoral studies in my situation.

I have recently encountered one technical issue that caused a delay in my time plan. Travelling to Turkey was an essential part of my research. As a holder of a refugee travel document, I needed a special visa to enter Turkey and to be able to do field research work such as interviews. Fulfilling the special requirements for the visa took around four months longer than the period of one month I had initially estimated. I arrived in Turkey in early March 2020 and had to cut my trip short because of the Covid-19 pandemic. I had to take this decision particularly hastily because I was not entitled to any form of legal or consular assistance from any country. My official status in Turkey was "stateless". In Germany I am a recognised asylum seeker only within the country and not entitled to any consular

assistance when abroad. For the Syrian regime I am a fugitive from conscription, besides which any contact with a Syrian authority would legally undermine my refugee status. My trip from Turkey to Germany, just few days before the border shutdowns, went very smoothly. However, this twofold incident – the difficulty in obtaining a visa and the uncertainty of statelessness while abroad – is yet another example of the mobility inequalities across the globe. The incident directly speaks to the wider phenomenon of the global mobility divide, where my (inactive) Syrian citizenship and the type of travel document I had at the time, created additional mobility difficulties (Mau et al. 2015).

As far as the positionality of the researcher is concerned, I have not experienced being an absolute insider or an absolute outsider. These positions are usually dynamic, and they change according to the context. In my experience, however, it was not this shifting – between being an insider one moment or an outsider the next – that was remarkable, but rather being insider and outsider at the same moment, or in fact a mixture of both. This situation has, most likely, arisen from a combination of factors, such as the nature of the research topic, the geographical places involved, as well as my personal background.

As a Syrian refugee researcher studying a Syrian-refugee-related topic, I have enjoyed an opportunity to have an insider perspective. By this, I mean that the shared experience of refugeehood (between me and my refugee interviewees, who have shared similar experiences) and other items of shared culture and geography render my ultimate endeavour to produce an original piece of scholarship more fluid and efficient. During my face-to-face and virtual interactions with the Syrian communities related to my research, I have, on many occasions, noticed how easy and “natural” those interactions have been for me. I have also noticed, on other occasions, how comfortable and confident some of my interviewees have been. They would openly discuss my topic, its relevance and its value, and they would suggest what is important and what is not. This detail is important as it signalled that the interviewees would apparently trust me and say whatever might be on their minds. Talking and agreeing with some of my interviewees about basic issues, such as who we would consider responsible (i.e. the Syrian regime) for the terrible war in Syria and its unimaginable consequences, seemed to have worked as a kind of an ethical framework that produced an additional level of trust between us.

This glimpse, however, is only one part of my field research experience; there is another interesting part that I encountered during the physical field work in Turkey, as well

as in online interactions. Some local bureaucrats and officials have, if indirectly, questioned my position as an “insider” a few times. Here, I was considered an outsider not in the sense of being a rigid researcher who applies (scientific) tools while ignoring the very subjects of the research, but rather, as someone who is not insider enough to be an (ideal) insider! This situation, from my perspective, has stemmed from the specific constellation of being a Germany-based refugee researcher who studies “his people”, but in another country, Turkey, where I once lived as a refugee myself, from 2011–2015. This particular circumstance may have shaped how I was perceived by my Turkish interviewees, although it is difficult to state in what exact ways. For radical “insiderists”, so to speak, only a refugee researcher based in Turkey who studies her/his fellow refugees inside Turkey may be considered as an insider. Correspondingly, a refugee researcher based in Germany should study refugee topics inside Germany to qualify as a real insider.

Thus, as mentioned above, while there were some elements, such as shared refugeehood, language and origin, that better equipped me to have the necessary insider perspective, I remained aware that I could simultaneously be perceived as an outsider by municipality officials, at least on some occasions. What was interesting was that those who viewed me as more of an outsider were mostly not refugees but a few individuals working in the public sector and academia in Turkey.

This issue does speak, somewhat, to another phenomenon that has been trending within some of Turkey’s academic and intellectual circles. For different reasons, Turkey has always been very attractive as a country/region of focus and specialisation for many Western scholars. Among these scholars there happen to be those who would address Turkey-related topics superficially, Eurocentrically and/or from an Orientalist angle. Such cases have triggered well-deserved criticism from many Turkish scholars. The Westerners’ lack of knowledge of the Turkish language and context, including their not having spent much time in the country, are recurrent elements of this criticism. Such a criticism is certainly legitimate, especially in the context of the social sciences and humanities.

However, this critical stance, while having every reason to be very plausible, has at the same time generated a serious by-product of overgeneralisation and suspicion of any non-Turkish scholars and scholarship connected with Turkey. This phenomenon not only makes the field of studying Turkey-related topics a trickier space, but also, in some cases,

demonises non-Turkish scholars to the extent of framing them as intruders or spies (“ajan” in Turkish).

Junior and early-career researchers are especially underprivileged in this context, as they have not, due the very fact of being junior, accumulated “enough experience” of knowing about and living in Turkey to cover their Turkey-related research. This trend is serious because it renders the field less pluralistic and undermines what can be called the basic right to specialise. Against this backdrop, as a non-Turkish junior researcher who studies a topic inside Turkey, I have always tried to take precautionary steps to overcome such hindering structures and constructs – by, for example, initiating or joining familiar conversations about daily news such as football, general issues such as food, etc. On many occasions, I have seen myself making sure that my interlocutor would know that I had spent a few years in Turkey, that I can speak Turkish (by initiating the first contact/email in Turkish) and that I keep up with different types of social developments in Turkey.

Finally, the more I delve into my topic, the more I value the importance of shedding light on the different levels and types of environments where research takes place. The site of interactions (the workplace, a shawarma food stand, on public transportation or in a private home) and the time of interactions (in the evenings or at weekends) are, for example, two important variables that may affect the answers of the interviewees. A young male refugee chatting over a coffee on a Sunday morning would not be the same person (in terms of his answers) if he is interviewed in the evening after long hours of tiring work. Similarly, an official with a relatively large Turkish flag in his/her office might be more assertive than if I met that same person at an event hosted by an international organisation. This kind of reflexivity should be given enough space in the methodology section of any research work or be published separately. Because in the end, it is the context that shapes, or at least influences, the research topic, process and results.

Michael Cobb: How I became an outsider in my home country

As a scholar researching on a subject within my home country, Ghana, it would be expected that I would not experience the usual problems of inclusion and exclusion that many Global South researchers have faced. Yet my experience has proved just the opposite. In my PhD project, I research indigenous institutions that have survived both colonial and modern forms of governance in Africa, focusing on the chieftaincy among the Nanumba of Northern

Ghana. The chieftaincy is one of the extant African traditional institutions that coexist with modern forms of governance in post-independent Africa. Even though the institution continues to enjoy support from the people, serving as a rallying point at local and even national levels, the institution has generated numerous conflicts in the form of succession disputes in recent times. The Nanumba chieftaincy institution, which is supposed to be a focal point for the cultural identity and the traditions and customs of the Nanumba people in Ghana's north, has over the years been mired in succession disputes that have claimed several lives, destroyed property and brought about abject poverty. My research focuses on establishing how an institution that is presented as beneficial to social peace has instead constituted a source of several violent conflicts.

As a researcher I have also drawn on my experience of previously serving as a lead mediator at a peace and reconciliation centre – Yendi Peace Centre – in the northern region of Ghana. As a lead person in spearheading mediation efforts in this part of the country, I observed how the absence of documented customary laws and chieftaincy succession plans or laws for succession in the Nanumba Traditional Chieftaincy has led to violent disputes. My research addresses the extent to which such laws or succession plans, based on the shared beliefs of the people, could serve as an impetus for conflict management for Nanun and other traditional areas in Ghana. Furthermore, I explore whether the formalisation of traditional institutions could serve the cause of conflict prevention and management and thus bring about sustainable peace in areas experiencing chieftaincy-motivated conflicts in northern Ghana.

As one who hails from a royal family in northern Ghana and with previous working experience in chieftaincy conflicts, I am presumably an insider and one would expect that such a background would generate some level of confidence and accessibility of data and information during my research work. However, I have discovered in the course of the research that studying a subject with which one is as intimately connected as in my case, affords an African scholar no special advantages. Indeed, in my case, the very selection of northern Ghana as my case study was itself determined by the limitations that an African scholar faces in research – the selection of the subject of study was circumscribed by factors such as available funding, which is extremely limited, and the difficulty of travelling, even within the African continent. In the beginning, I had hoped to conduct a comparative study of cases in more African countries, including South Africa and Uganda, where the chieftaincy

institution is also common. Considerations of funding and difficulties of travelling to those other countries led me to restrict myself to the single case of Ghana. In this sense, the asymmetrical distribution of research resources and travel capacities rendered me an “outsider” even within my home continent. These challenges are not faced by scholars in the Global North to the same degree. I have known researchers from the Global North who have been able to conduct more research in Africa, because of the immense research resources they can acquire. Paradoxically, it is even easier for researchers from the Global North to travel across Africa than for African scholars. A German scholar, for example, will not require a visa to get into South Africa, whereas Africans from several other African countries must obtain a visa to travel to that country. Indeed, during the application for research scholarships, I had to present a “reasonably fundable and researchable” programme, taking into consideration the limitations imposed on me by being an African, which meant essentially, a modest case study, to be eligible for funding. Others such as Joseph Carens have elaborated particularly on the mobility restrictions faced by the majority of the world’s population, including academics from the Global South, in contrast to citizens of the Global North (Carens 1987).

Furthermore, even within my current research programme, my experiences in the research site have not been exactly different from those of “outsiders”. The trip to the research site was marked by painstaking preparations that included seeking permission from Ghanaian authorities for the research before leaving Germany. I had to present reference letters from my research supervisor and the University of Ghana. The fact that I was a Ghanaian did not give me all the advantages of an insider. The local authorities viewed me as an “outsider” because I was based at a German University.

Yet, at the research site, I also experienced the kind of resistance an “outsider” – particularly from the global North – rarely faces when seeking access to similar fields for research. Most institutions and communities in Ghana are known to defer to foreign researchers, often because the latter are more willing to pay for the research, but essentially because scholarship from the Global North is presumed to inspire more respect. In my case, my attempts to access officials and bureaucrats at institutions in the major cities were often unsuccessful or took too long. There were occasions when, despite securing appointments for interviews, I was forced to spend several hours waiting for the respondents to turn up. Sometimes I did not get to meet the respondents at all. On a few

occasions, the appointments were cancelled when I had already arrived for the interviews, with the excuse that my interlocutor was busy. My impression was that as an African scholar I simply did not receive the kind of respect that is always accorded our counterparts from the Global North, even when we had similar resources.

I faced similar challenges when I sought access to individuals at local institutions in rural Ghana. However, the difficulties at the local level accrued from the sensitive nature of my subject of research. Here I faced a peculiar insider-outsider problem. Because I am Ghanaian with a background from a traditional chieftaincy, my respondents, who were mostly local traditional authorities (chiefs, sub-chiefs, kingmakers and all those close to the corridors of traditional leadership), treated me with suspicion and – at least at the initial stages – were quite reluctant to speak with me. Some respondents expressed fear of reprisal, or even of losing their lives if the information they gave me ended up in the wrong place. Some of the concerns were genuine, as my subject touched upon issues at stake in violent conflicts in the region. People have been known to be killed just for speaking out. Others had simply been traumatised by the devastating effects of the conflict and were not yet ready to talk about the past. Hence, despite my assurances of confidentiality and promises to conceal the identities of the respondents, their fears were hard to assuage. Here I was considered to be an outsider both for having come from outside the community and also because of my connection to a foreign university. One respondent accused me outright of espionage, suspecting me of being an agent of the German government sent to empower one party in the chieftaincy dispute against the other. Other respondents, who wished me to side with their cause, had difficulty accepting my impartiality. Some referred to my previous work at the Yendi Peace Centre in northern Ghana and were grieved that the centre had played a significant role in their side's receiving an unfavourable judgment in the apex court. Thus, my identity as a Northern Ghanaian, with connections to some of the phenomena I was examining, impeded my ability to have a complete insider perspective on my subject of research. Rather than providing me easy access to the phenomena I was studying, my identity rendered me an outsider. The quality of the information that I received was therefore sometimes laden with biases, which resulted from my respondents' general lack of trust in the process because of who I was. Yet I had no option but to rely on these personal relational networks, in combination with opinion leaders drawn from either

side of the chieftaincy, and government and local authorities, for the success of my work at the research site.

Furthermore, one other factor that renders most scholars from the Global South as “outsiders” even in their homelands is their limited funding and frequent inability to meet the financial expectations of respondents. In my case, this problem was made the more acute because it is customary in Ghana that during a visit to a chief’s palace one presents a present – something small – usually in the form of money (called “kola”). This is a requirement of royal protocol. For me as a researcher, this customary token would go a long way toward easing my access to the palaces and the local communities. Also, apart from traditional rulers, many people require that you offer them some gifts that would benefit them directly. While this, *prima facie*, contravenes research ethics, the respondents were often hard to convince. My unwillingness to pay for the interviews affected the number of people I was able to meet. And those who turned up were never that happy when they had to go away empty-handed.

From the foregoing, the challenges that a scholar from the Global South faces are quite clear. But what is striking is the fact that a Global South researcher faces the problems of an “outsider” even in cases where they are presumably “insiders”. In my experience, even on occasions where I should have had an advantage as an African researching in Africa, I was often treated as an outsider. In Ghana, as I have noted, people tend to defer to those from the Global North, and particularly those of white extraction. I learned that local Ghanaians were more welcoming to Global North researchers and more readily shared information with them than they did with non-white researchers. This was even clearer when I sought to gain access to top government institutions in Ghana, such as the National Parliament, government ministries and local organisations. Our (white) Global North counterparts readily obtain appointments for interviews with individuals in all these institutions without having to go through all the trouble experienced by a Ghanaian or African researcher. While my requests to interview officials at these institutions were frequently rejected, my counterparts from Europe and America were granted such opportunities with ease. Hence, my identity as a Global South researcher did not confer on me the benefits of an “insider” even in my own home country. This confirms the observation already made by others: ironically, African scholars are alienated in their own countries by their fellow countrymen and women who they seek to interview. To make matters worse they also become alienated

by the non-African researchers from the Global North who specialise on Africa and tend to dominate the relevant academic institutions (Nderitu 2020).

My experience is by no means unique. Many of my colleagues from the Global South, and especially Africa, who are researching in Africa, have faced similar challenges. At a seminar by the Katholischer Akademischer Ausländer-Dienst (Catholic Academic Exchange Service – KAAD) in November 2018 for scholars from Africa, or those doing research in our home countries, several young African researchers shared how they had all been treated as “outsiders” while conducting their studies. A colleague studying the African Union (AU) shared how while researching at the AU headquarters, he repeatedly sent requests to access institutions and bureaucrats at the organisation, without much success. Yet a German colleague who was doing similar research had access to almost everyone and every institution. It took the intervention of this German researcher to get the African researcher some appointments at the AU. Later when my colleague inquired why it was easier for non-African scholars to be granted access and an audience at the AU, someone intimated to him that most AU bureaucrats do not have time for research interviews, but they are forced to grant them to non-Africans, especially white non-Africans, because they might have contacts with AU’s external donor-countries. Indeed, when researching in Africa, it has often been easier for African researchers to access non-African respondents. My colleague remarks that in Addis Ababa, he had easier access to the GIZ and UNECA officials than those at the AU and other African organisations. Many young African scholars have confirmed that despite being “insiders” they face numerous challenges when they try to collect data or do field research in Africa because few people are usually willing to be engaged by fellow Africans (especially junior scholars). Top institutions, in particular, deliberately frustrate African junior scholars because they understand that there is nothing to gain from them and they know that junior researchers from Africa cannot take any action against them. In contrast, bureaucrats at top African institutions fear that scholars from the Global North might expose them for improper behaviour and report them to the donors.

In some cases, many officials in institutions and organisations feel threatened when they see an upcoming African scholar trying to gain knowledge or find out information about how an institution works. As one official told me “when they give you the information you may become knowledgeable in your field and therefore gain more expertise than them and would compete with them for their positions”. It is thus a daunting task for a junior

African scholar to collect data in Africa. As I have noted, I have observed American and British scholars spending time among communities in Northern Ghana collecting the type of data that I would probably never have the privilege of accessing because those communities would never grant me the same confidences they share with our counterparts from the Global North. As Nordling (2020) has argued, fundamental imbalances remain in the field. Such experiences have brought a strand of literature to the fore that enumerates the very good reasons why Global North scholars remain dominant.

The asymmetrical distribution of power within research is such that scholars from the Global North have several advantages in the collection of data and publication. This is, indeed, a reflection of the structure of global society, and the organisation of the international political economy certainly affects research. To do good research one needs substantial resources for travel, visa, accommodation and interview/appointment fees, among other things. Some scholars from the Global South such as myself have been lucky to obtain funding for research. With the support of KAAD, I was able to do fieldwork in Ghana for several months. Even though the funding was modest, I was still able to carry out the kind of study that many African colleagues would not have the opportunity to do. The lack of funding for research may affect some African scholars and limit their capacity to fully achieve their research objectives. Scholars from the Global North or scholars located in the Global North are better placed when it comes to funding opportunities. They are often more capable of travelling to multiple global destinations and staying in communities while conducting research. Most of the time they can obtain more information even on phenomena in the Global South than scholars from those regions. Many have enough resources to pitch tents in the remotest regions of the world and carry out their studies for longer periods. More radically, scholars from the North are accorded greater respect from their subjects in the South, as Nderitu notes: “in the villages, our people would answer questions, providing confidential information they hadn’t even been asked” (Nderitu 2020).

These are opportunities that are rarely available to scholars from the Global South. Even with sufficient funding, an African scholar must still contend with other challenges, such as travel permits. Whereas a scholar from the Global North can access most parts of the world without a visa, those from the Global South have to navigate complex visa regimes if they want to research multiple countries. Researchers from most Western European countries are able to travel to almost all African countries without a visa, a

privilege that is not available to an African. These limitations have ensured that scholars from the Global South are locked within the “outsider” bracket, even where they are supposed to be insiders. I am usually amazed at how much knowledge Global North scholars have on Africa due to their privileges. Quite intriguingly, citizens of the Global North are not the only beneficiaries of the mobility chances and mobility privileges as put forward by Lessenich (2017). More systematic and profound collaborative research between scholars of the Global South and North have gained ground – the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies partnerships being one such positive counterexample, thereby making it possible for scholars particularly from Africa to navigate their capacities with ease and not be hampered by physical and cultural geographies (Nyamnjoh 2019).

Antje Missbach: Outsiderness in different places: extractive research, random privileges and perpetual soul-searching

I was born in East Germany before the Berlin Wall came down and I did my undergraduate studies in Southeast Asian Studies and European Ethnology at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Since 1995, when I lived as an exchange student in Indonesia, I have developed a strong personal and later a professional interest in Indonesia and the country continues to grab my interest and attention. Already as a student I would travel there as often as I could afford, to travel or to do internships. In many regards my early sojourns to Indonesia were driven by *wanderlust* and a kind of juvenile escapism, the urge to see something completely different and yet to better understand oneself through the encounter with the “other”.

While these travelling encounters with Indonesians were mostly coincidental and short-lived, in the early 2000s, I became part of a group of German and Indonesian youth who organised a reciprocal visiting programme. Each summer a group of German students would spend time in Biak, a small island in the most eastern part of Indonesia, and the next year a group from Biak would stay with us in Berlin, Hannover and the Thuringian forest. This exchange programme went on for four years but when we graduated from university it came to a sudden end. Nonetheless, this time had a lasting impact on me. Rather than just discussing in class how to overcome essentialised perspectives on culture, this was the first time I had to actively explain my daily life, political ideas and particularly gender relations to people who came from a very different way of life. I noticed that some things, such as describing the background of traditional German festivities or recent political events, were

easier to explain than others, for example explaining to our deeply religious friends from Biak (which was mainly introduced to Christianity by German missionaries) why some churches charge entry fees from tourists on all days but Sunday. The expectations that I would be a proper insider with sufficient familiarity with my surroundings often created a feeling of estranged insiderness with me, particularly when having to reflect about my own values and orientations while breaking them down and making them graspable to others.

When it came to taking up graduate studies I decided to move to Australia. At the time, I had become very interested in the conflict that had taken place in Aceh, in the very north of the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Having had the chance to get to know a number of exiled Acehnese (in Europe) who were very involved in driving the struggle for independence from Indonesia, I thought that studying the influence of the Acehnese diaspora on the course of the conflict would make for a suitable research topic. I was lucky enough not only to receive a scholarship for my PhD, but also to obtain additional fieldwork and conference grants. I had no teaching obligations and thus could fully concentrate on my research, which after all required a fair bit of travelling, given that the Acehnese diaspora is quite dispersed. Multi-sited fieldwork took me to Malaysia, where I spent seven months, and also to Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the USA. While based in Malaysia through being affiliated with a local university, for the remainder of my fieldwork I became a travelling anthropologist. With no proper alternatives available, I usually stayed with my interlocutors, particularly if they happened to live in small Danish villages or places that were hard to reach by public transport. There had been one other researcher who had visited some Acehnese families in Denmark a few years earlier, so in a way I was able to benefit from the path that that researcher had cleared and yet my visit was still unique enough to inspire a bit of excitement on the part of my research subjects. I was often impressed by their hospitality and the ease with which I was integrated into their lives. Overwhelming was also the care with which they planned my next moves to make sure I would be able to meet many others and particularly the “right kind” of interlocutors. As I was unable to speak Danish or Swedish they really wanted to make sure I wouldn’t get “lost” when travelling to my next destination on my own and made sure that somebody would pick me up from the train, bus or ferry terminal. Staying with interlocutors was perfect as it offered so many chances for informal conversations and observations of their daily interactions with other Acehnese, but I remember how I sometimes longed for a day off in order to have time to

reflect and also have a bit of distance. Later I learned that the Acehnese diaspora was rather factionalised along political lines and that staying at one person's house meant that it was almost impossible to talk to the other factions, and I had to come back a year later in order to reach out to some new interlocutors, this time without the live-in comfort.

For most of the time I was very comfortable with my role as cultural outsider doing fieldwork. While some interlocutors told me straight to my face that they thought it was strange that a young unmarried woman would travel on her own and study a topic which, in their eyes, was so far removed from her everyday life context, I sometimes felt that they were also pleased that someone would come all the way to talk to them about their activism. At least those activists who were not in the international limelight, which had started shining after the Aceh peace talks took off half a year after the tsunami had ravaged long stretches of the Acehnese coast in 2004, appeared eager to engage in my research. Although it was often implied that as an outsider, I would have only a limited understanding of why they were doing what they were doing, it was also conveyed to me that as an outsider who would eventually publish an English book, I was an important vehicle for communicating "the truth" and that I therefore bore a lot of responsibility for what I was writing.

After a memorandum of understanding had been forged between the separatist movement and the Indonesian government and when it became safer to travel to Aceh, I went there, as well. I was curious whether some of the Acehnese activists I had met abroad were interested in going back to Aceh to help rebuild the place or whether they preferred to remain overseas and continue to campaign for a different political future, outside of the Indonesian nation-state. Arriving as a PhD student in Aceh, at a time when the province was crowded with NGOs, consultants and all kinds of fortune seekers, was a different story. Instead of getting the special treatment as the lone researcher that I had experienced before, in Aceh there were dozens of researchers and PhD students and all wanted to talk to the same people and publish as soon as possible. I remember how some Acehnese even joked about a third tsunami: first the water, then NGOs and now the academics. In a way, I was glad to keep this stint to Aceh short, but later, shortly after I had finished my thesis, I felt inclined to write a piece that I entitled "Ransacking the Field" (Missbach 2011), in which I reflected about my role as extractive researcher, someone who came to Aceh for a short time to collect data and then ran off with it, to refine it and finally publish it in an outlet that

most likely remained inaccessible to the people in Aceh. I remember conversations in which interview data was compared to cocoa and coffee beans, grown locally, but processed and consumed elsewhere. While this metaphor has its shortcomings, it clearly depicted the frustration of many local scholars, who knew far more of what was going on in Aceh and shared their insights often very generously with the non-Acehnese researchers but yet were rarely cited as authors.

In order to deal with these frustrations, which very much reflected what Syed Farid Alatas (2003) has labelled “academic dependency” and which are certainly not unique to Aceh but rather concern many researchers in the Global South, some international donors have created new options for Acehnese researchers, such as the International Centre for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies (ICAIOS), which was tasked to train local scholars and also bring together local and international researchers in a series of biannual conferences. One key intention of the centre was to support local scholars to pursue their own research interests and get published or even find ways to continue their studies overseas, not least with the help of visiting international senior scholars. During a visiting fellowship that allowed me to stay in Aceh, I attended a few research seminars by local colleagues but I definitely prioritised my own research agenda at the time. Although I have since shifted my research, it would be very interesting to return to Aceh and take a look of what has become of this centre and whether the collaborations it was supposed to forge remained sustainable even after Aceh stopped being flooded with international attention.

While I felt usually very comfortable in my temporary role as outsider in Indonesia and during fieldwork elsewhere, after returning to the campus in Australia, it started to annoy me to be a different kind of outsider there. I had been lucky enough to obtain a three-year position as a postdoc. But more important for getting that job was perhaps the fact that although I was the product of Australian tertiary education, I could still count as “foreign talent” because I had applied for the position from abroad. I would have to leave Australia after my student visa expired. Yet back in Australia, for the first time, my outsider status as a temporary immigrant started to give me sleepless nights. I was reminded of my outsider status each time I paid taxes but got no public health insurance and each time I re-entered Australia and had to wait for hours to be cleared by immigration.

Part of me wanted to belong to Australia and the Australian academic system that seemed to offer me more academic autonomy to set my own research agenda than the

German academic system, which felt rather feudalistic to me after my time away from it. Not least because Indonesia-related research back then was still better funded in Australia, the country also appeared to hold better opportunities, particularly if I was to deepen my scholarly engagement with Indonesia. But the other part of me considered the price that needed to be paid – to transition from being an immigrant on a precarious short-term work visa to a permanent resident to a proper citizen with full voting rights – too high. The longer I lived and worked in Australia, the more I felt estranged from my surroundings. Particularly some of the political developments with regard to asylum seekers' rights from 2010 onwards, the new restrictions for work visas and the general increase in xenophobia fed into my discomfort. Whenever possible, I would leave Australia and spend time in Indonesia, to take time out from being an unwelcome outsider and embrace the much more comfortable outsider position in Indonesia. The time spent outside of Australia, needless to say, did not help with my citizenship application, which was rejected twice and thus manifested my sense of being a perpetual outsider. The irony of those rejections, however, was that I was punished for doing the research work in Indonesia that the Australian Research Council was paying me to do. It did not take long to come across situations that helped me put these repeated citizenship rejections into perspective.

Back in Indonesia, I had shifted my attention to asylum seekers who came there in order either to launch maritime crossings to Australia or to await resettlement through the UNHCR. Seeing, speaking and listening to asylum seekers, some of them stateless and some of them regarded as “illegals” because they had no valid paperwork, initiated a new kind of soul searching on my part and especially an awareness of my “imperial mode of living” (Lessenich, 2017: 137). How was I to come to terms with the fact of my “undeserved” mobility privilege and how to interact with people who lack the very privileges which I take for granted and come to enjoy so naturally just because I was born in the right spot of the globe? The lottery of birth made me a citizen of a country that equips me with a passport that allows me to travel to most countries without a visa.⁴ I can come and go as I please. In the words of Mahmoud Keshavarz and Shahram Khosravi (2020) my identity is linked to the

⁴ According to the Henley Index: a person with a German passport currently gets visa-free travel to 91 countries, will receive a visa on arrival in 32 countries and must apply for a visa in advance only for 75 countries. By comparison, a holder of an Indonesian passport can travel without a visa to 39 countries, will be given a visa on arrival in 45 countries but will have to apply for a passport in advance for 114 countries.

right to mobility and also very much determines my access to rights, security and resources. None of the asylum seekers I researched in Indonesia ever confronted me with this discrepancy in privilege, but I noticed about myself that I became more apologetic when interacting with some of them. Who was I to write about their misery, their struggles, their resilience? Being based in countries that have pioneered some of the most mean-spirited deterrence policies to keep asylum seekers at bay, who was I to criticise Indonesia for its lack of integration options for refugees?

While it had been important to me before to have my publications translated and to share them with those who wanted them but could not access them, nowadays I am becoming more interested in connecting with Indonesian academics, particularly those interested in asylum issues and those who are activist-scholars, on a mid- to long-term basis. I want to use my outsider status to access funding from the so-called Global North and then use it together with insiders in Indonesia for more collaborative projects and non-conventional approaches. A very first step was taken into that direction when colleagues from Universitas Indonesia and I were lucky to win a grant that allowed us to make two documentaries about refugees in Indonesia and their interactions with Indonesians, hoping that those films would be able to reach a wider audience than that usually reached by academic papers and op eds. Seeing these documentaries, in which my part was either to initiate contacts in the field, provide background information, do fact checking or write reports, helped me realise that the images, voices and affects captured are so different from what I could have done on my own and from my outsider perspective. The sustainability of this group, and whether or not more such ideas can be realised in the future, depends however very much on the kinds of career paths people in this team will choose next.

After 12 years in and out of Australia, it was time to close that chapter and I moved back to Germany hoping to reconnect with academia here. Facing the depths of the German academic system, and particularly the bureaucracies in the different federal states, occasionally reminds me of my new official outsider status as a *Bildungsausländer*,⁵ which becomes relevant when needing to get degrees and qualifications obtained overseas recognised here in order to become a licensed member – and insider – in the German job

⁵ *Bildungsausländer* is a person who received the bulk of his or her tertiary education outside the German academic system.

pool. Despite its many structural deficits, the German academic landscape, which has changed significantly since I left and has also become a lot more cosmopolitan, seems to offer a number of interesting options that need to be tried and tested. If I ever grow tired of being an insider here again, I can always visit Indonesia and find some respite in temporary outsidership.

Conclusion

Our working paper has shown that there is no easy definition of what it means exactly to be an insider or an outsider when conducting empirical research. While sharp definitions are central to scientific debate, this paper – born out of a panel discussion at the symposium “Dear White People... – Check Your Privilege!” – has led us onto a different yet fruitful pathway. Instead of conceptualising insidership and outsidership a priori, these categories have developed over the course of many conversations and provided us with space for personal exchange and reflection on our positionalities as researchers working in and across very different places and cultural settings. In this process, we have actively chosen to reflect the way in which our research has been shaped by specific forms and structures of privilege, including a self-reflecting exercise about our own social positions of privilege and/or disadvantage while conducting fieldwork in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Our concluding remarks are not intended to wrap up this conversation but rather to open up a conversation with researchers who are raising similar questions and looking for exchanges on how to deal with challenging circumstances on the ground. Regarding the question of what it personally means to be an insider or outsider, all researchers recognise the mutually constituting, at times conflicting but also fluid dynamics of these two categories. In the social sciences, becoming an insider and/or outsider is part of an open-ended learning process, which can be nurtured through critical dialogue and scholarly exchange. Personal pathways, places of education and direct experiences with distinct social issues have shaped each researcher’s interest in and approach to their field of study. Consequently, each research pathway is unique; there is no blueprint on how to conduct empirical research in a context-, place- and people-sensitive manner.

Yet, we coincide on some general ideas of how to equip ourselves for this task. For example, we do not think that being an outsider is an inherently disadvantageous position to be in. Indeed, we find that it is important to cultivate a critical sense of distance to the

research subject in question. In this sense, we share a sense of necessary “outsiderness” with regard to scientific knowledge production. Researchers are of course required to have deep knowledge of and familiarity with the elements and the subjects of their study, and to develop an insider perspective in the sense of being able to walk the complexity of trails, nodes and interconnections regarding a particular issue. However, while, the level of this sufficiency may vary according to the nature of the study, insiderness may lock the researcher into their own topic and hinder reflection, if the researcher were to become too close to or even part and parcel of the topic of study. Such a situation could potentially obstruct instead of adding possibilities for new insight. This is what anthropologists have tagged as “going native”, referring to a situation in which someone over-identifies with the subjects and sites of research and loses all critical distance. Hence, a researcher should have control over the research subject and be able to consciously move between – and if necessary out of – ascribed positionalities and perspectives.

Further, our experiences show that there are no guarantees regarding the question of who counts as an insider, in what moment, and where. Indeed, insiderness and outsiderness are not ontologically given but are rather analytically moving categories. The boundaries between insiderness and outsiderness are unclear; in fact they are often contradictory and can shift very rapidly for uncertain or undisclosed reasons. For instance, scholars are not “natural” insiders simply because they conduct research in their country of origin. Bearing in mind that there might be myriad cultural settings alongside barriers of class, age, gender, religion, unspoken codes and formal education within one country or region, the fact that academics conduct their research in their own country cannot guarantee that they will not be considered “outsiders in their own place of origin”. This can happen without previous warning, even involving disrespectful treatment or discrimination on the part of people of the same ethnic and social background.

The fact that academic research is embedded in structural inequalities also becomes identifiable through concrete issues including language, mobility and funding. At the same time, these issues are often linked with problems of migratory regulation, citizenship, ethnicity, gender, class and/or skin colour. Hence, questions of insiderness and outsiderness relate to positionality as well as being bundled with social perceptions and structures of privilege. Through this paper we have come to see “privilege” as a contingent condition. Whether one comes into a position of privilege – either as a perceived insider and/or

outsider – depends on social, economic, cultural and political factors. At the same time, being perceived as an outsider does not automatically translate into exclusion, disadvantage or discrimination. Depending on the context, especially in certain academic situations, being an outsider to the social environment in question can be an advantage, because novel perspectives are central to science, and these are oftentimes developed at the intersection of diverse worldviews and cross-cultural experience.

Being aware of these factors is central to the cultivation of a privilege-sensitive approach to academic work, in which getting in touch with people, institutions and data, sometimes over long periods, is key. Moreover, being able to conduct empirical research across different cultures requires scholars to travel long distances. This fact makes the availability of financial, access to visas as well as research and working permits a fundamental necessity. These key assets, as we have shown, are neither evenly nor equally available. Universities in the Global North have usually more means at their disposal to fund research activities than many of their counterparts in the Global South, which in turn affects the options available to individual researchers.

In this sense, researchers are constantly confronted with questions of positionality flowing between insiderness and outsidership. Indeed, we see this as a mutually constitutive process. While our positionality shapes our research, our research shapes our positionality. Hence, qualitative research involving social contact through interviews, participatory observation, focus discussions, etc., reveals itself as a complex, case-specific and contested undertaking that requires a continuous cycle of personal orientation, adaptation and, possibly, constant reinvention. A proactive exchange can be central to professional and personal growth in this undertaking, particularly when it comes to reflecting the way our academic work is acknowledged by peers in scholarly communities in and beyond the established university centres of Europe and North America.

Another aspect we have recurrently acknowledged in this paper is the structural hurdles that constrain research. While conducting our research, all of us have found ourselves navigating and dealing with multiscalar structures of power, where local or national officials, politicians and less tangible forms of authority, including social norms, can open or close the troublesome doors of research *in situ*. In many cases, the skin colour of researchers from the Global North, for example, has been associated with preexisting structures of privilege (institutional credentials, meritocracy) and ascribed authority (i.e.

scholars as experts) but also prejudice (scholars as spies) and rightful criticism (data extraction).

Indeed, both researchers and their non-academic interlocutors may experience a sense of social alienation and injustice in and through the research process. Why and to what extent are social scientists entitled to “extract” data from people, places and social phenomena, and then make them publically available for academic audiences and beyond? What is the real purpose of academic publishing? While difficult to answer, these questions need to be openly acknowledged, discussed and reflected in order to enhance a privilege-sensitive approach to social science.

For instance, the increasing use of the English language in scientific contexts limits the possibilities of non-native speakers to publish in “high-ranking” journals. As long as non-English publications remain less visible in the centres of knowledge production, both linguistic and cultural diversity are structurally put at risk. In addition, English as the lingua franca allows Anglo-American systems and theories to dominate one-sidedly. This results in deep relations of inequality between those who master the English language and those who lack the instruments to engage in the ostensibly global discourse of knowledge and science.

The inequalities in academia are many, between the Global South and the Global North, between men and women, and also between senior and junior academics. In some cases, early-career scholars may receive earlier institutional support and recognition as “fully entitled academics” in universities outside the Anglophone world. All of this has practical consequences for how we conceive and conduct research, since the structural inequalities that permeate academia within and across the Global North and the Global South are unlikely to disappear by themselves. Scholars working in the Global North should not rejoice in their relative privileges and ignore/resist attempts to reverse the phenomenon. In fact, scholars from both sides should seek to collaborate on an equal footing so that scholarship is truly enriched on a global scale.

In order to bridge these rifts one has to walk the extra mile. There are no shortcuts. This presupposes the need to be transparent about who we are, what we want and where the funding of our research comes from. In other words, the people that we interact with, i.e. our research interlocutors and colleagues in other settings, have a right to know, just as we have a duty to foster transparency while critically reflecting on where we stand in terms of our shifting conditions of privilege in academia. This includes the mobilisation of the

means available to us as a way to reach out: by actively inviting researchers from the places we study to become involved, not as content providers or assistants, but as speakers, editors, authors and contributors in publications (such as edited volumes and/or special issues). There are also daily and non-bureaucratic ways through which researchers in a privileged position can make a difference – by writing recommendations, providing contacts and forwarding calls for papers, as well as by passing on news and advertisements for jobs, scholarships, fellowships, conferences and grants that would not be available through random internet browsing. In addition, the emergence of new formats of digital collaboration offers opportunities for mutual support and constructive feedback, which also opens up the opportunity to keep track and intervene in different fields of scientific debate.

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