


Research in the Religious Realm: Intersectional Diversification and Dynamic Variances of Insider/Outsider Perspectives

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Abstract

This article discusses insider/outsider perspectives in qualitative research among religious people. Focus is on the insider researcher. Even if researcher and participants share the same overall religious adherence or are members of the same denomination, various factors can differentiate them substantially, affecting insider/outsider perspectives. The methodological implications of this phenomenon are drawn from research on the perception of gender roles among Mormon women in Belgium. The mutual perception of researcher and participant can influence the data collection phase as value-laden issues are being discussed. To ensure the validity and objectivity of research in this context, positionalities of researcher and participants need to be clearly defined and methodological safeguards put into place. The analysis of the interactions between researcher and participants led to the identification of seven intersecting insider/outsider perspectives: denominational, congregational, social, religious, topical, lingual, and academic. Moreover, as compound insider/outsider positions move on several continua, various factors can change the perspectives during interviews. This article adds to the methodology of qualitative research by uncovering perspectives which researchers can consider or adapt when interviewing religious participants.

Keywords

qualitative research, sociology of religion, insider status, outsider status

Introduction

Insider/Outsiderness in General

The complexity of the insider/outsider roles in qualitative field research is now well recognized. The dichotomous view of two separate roles has been supplanted by refining analyses and maturing insights. The history of participant observation since the 1900s reveals this growing awareness of the researcher's challenges (McCall, 2006; Platt, 1983). Adler and Adler (1987) diversified the “membership roles” for researchers, from “peripheral” over “active” to “complete” in their relations to the target group. Further inquiries have illuminated the multipart continuum from role to role or the dual position of the researcher as both insider and outsider (for example, Breen, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Knott, 2005; Van Mol et al., 2013).

The advantages and disadvantages of the “more insider” versus the “more outsider” roles have been the subject of much valuation among theorists of qualitative research. Overall, the benefits of the insider are well recognized, such as immediate

access to the group being studied, easier communication, more openness, better understanding, and more accurate assessment of participants' answers. Disadvantages include lack of distance for objectivity and reflexivity, the potential impact of preconceptions and prejudices, and sometimes a participant's reluctance to disclose private matters or controversial opinions to an insider. In weighing benefits and impairments, overall scholars recommend to gauge the best approach, or combination of approaches, according to the topic, aims, and situation (Beals et al., 2020; Breen, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hodkinson, 2005; Irwin, 2006). Supplementing the discussion are the reports of researchers who experienced the

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predicaments of their own insider/outsider roles (DeLyser, 2001; Hockey, 1993; Johnst, 2019; Kanuha, 2000; Kydd-Williams, 2019; Louisy, 1997; Moosa, 2013; Taylor, 2011).

Insider/Outsiderness in the Religious Realm

The study of religious people adds particular dimensions to the insider/outsider roles. Even if the researcher and participants share the same religious adherence, their religiousness may greatly vary in intensity and significance. Also their participation and experience in familial or communal rituals may diverge considerably, as well as the involvement in the social life of a congregation or community. Sharing the same world, religion does not guarantee equivalent insidership for adherents from different places as religious identity is often tied to regional, national, or ethnic distinctiveness.

For a general introduction to the insider/outsider challenges of studying religious subjects, McCutcheon's reader (1999) offers a number of classic essays. More recent studies include O'Connor (2004) who experienced the unstable nature of religious insidership when interacting with Irish immigrants in Australia. Knott (2005) analyzed the religious insider/outsider relations in four role conceptions on a continuum, from the "complete observer" who eschews any kind of religious participation to the "complete participant" who is fully involved in religious activity. In between are the "observer-as-participant" who tries "to put himself in other people's shoes" and the "participant-as-observer" as the religious person able to reflect sensitively on the own faith (p. 251). Knott discusses examples of all four approaches. Ferber (2006) questioned the insider/outsider dichotomy as an appropriate filter because in religious matters the subjectivity/objectivity debate struggles with the fuzzy boundaries of religious truth. Couture et al. (2012) examined their insider/outsider experiences from interviews with Muslim and Hindu youth on the religiously sensitive issue of sexual relationships. One of the researchers being Muslim, the authors analyzed the fluidity of their insider/outsider roles depending on how they were perceived by the participants. Van Mol et al. (2013) noticed how participants struggling with their religion were more at ease with an outsider researcher. Kapinga et al. (2020) explored how non-Muslim researchers can optimize insidership through reflexivity in "positionality meetings" with Muslim participants.

My contribution to this insider/outsider debate in the religious context comes from a doctoral research project on the perception of gender roles among Mormon women in Belgium. In the first part, I sketch a number of factors in Mormonism that are relevant for the insider/outsider discussion. I next clarify, for this particular project, the positionalities of researcher and participants by referring to the factors discussed in the previous part. The main part analyzes how I came to discern multiple modalities in the insider/outsider roles, both from the researcher's and the participants' positionalities. In the last part, I draw conclusions and express recommendations and suggestions for related research.

Mormonism and Factors of Insidership and Belonging

My research pertains to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As a distinctive denomination, it is commonly referred to by its shorter moniker of "Mormon Church," due to its belief in an additional Scripture, the Book of Mormon. Though church leaders ask to use only the official name, it is not feasible to reiterate the long name in extensive texts. For practical reasons, many scholars continue to refer to the belief system as "Mormonism," with "Mormon" as the identifying adjective. I follow that practice while also using the single noun "the Church" and "church members" for its adherents.

Best known for its dominant presence in the American State of Utah, the Mormon Church actually counts more members outside of the United States. Assiduous missionary work has indeed established Mormon congregations or "wards" in almost every country of the world. In most cases, these church members form small religious minorities in their home country. The Church does not allow local adaptations: everything must be handled uniformly. The strict hierarchical structure of the Church, from the church president or "prophet" at the top to the local bishop who leads his ward, as well as precise guidelines, guarantee this uniformity in ward organization, worship schedule, programs for age groups, curriculum for gospel teaching, and more. Individual church members, however, can be distinguished on various factors. These factors affect degrees of insidership and belonging. I list them here as applicable to Mormonism, but comparable factors are valid in any religion.

The first factor deals with membership as such, in which Mormonism is well formalized. Each member is attributed an 11-digit id-number, comparable to a national number or social security identification. It provides the member access to a personal account with information such as dates of birth, baptism, and marriage. As long as members do not formally resign their membership, they remain on the roles. Every year in April, the Church announces with precision the number of members at the end of the previous year and posts it on its website: 16,663,663 as of December 31, 2020. However, of these members, approximately 65% or some 10 million are not practicing or, in Mormon terms, not "active" anymore. However, being active or not does not correlate with insider/outsidership. Also "inactive" members retain their background and experience. Some slip quietly away but may keep loose bonds with the Church, still attending occasionally or alternating periods of activity and inactivity. Others become inactive through a struggling process of leaving, retaining an aching memory of their past insidership (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015; Knoll & Riess, 2017; Ormsbee, 2020). Conversely, scores of people, baptized long ago as a child or as a transient convert, may hardly remember their Mormon episode and are in effect total outsiders—while still being counted as members.

Second, being an active Mormon covers a range of individualities, tied to the degree of congregational and social involvement. To be perceived as active requires regular attendance at the Sunday sacrament meeting and the subsequent Sunday lesson. Since congregations have no professional clergy but all is done by volunteers, activity also shows from the willingness to give a prayer, a sermon, or a public “testimony.” It is further enhanced by accepting a “calling” to fulfill some task in the complex organizational structure at the local church level. Moreover, each ward directs a pastoral system of “ministering” where members are assigned to attend to others’ needs. All this implies intense social interaction, making a ward more a community than a typical congregation that meets weekly under the direction of limited clergy (Alder, 2018). Another criterion characterizes a separate group in the membership: those who have a “temple recommend,” which entitles them to worship in a Mormon temple, a separate building where higher ordinances are administered. Temple worship makes one an “endowed” member—a token of higher insiderness. A temple recommend is obtained through an interview with a church authority who verifies commitment to the faith and obedience to church rules, such as the paying of tithing. The admission card is valid for 2 years, renewable through another interview. Although, within the ward, no formal difference is made between members, not having a temple recommend and not joining a regularly announced “temple visit” with others exclude one *de facto* from the privileged group (McBride, 2007).

Third, the degree of congregational involvement does not always reflect similar religious conviction. Social belonging or familial loyalty may keep a member visibly active in the ward, but such does not necessarily correlate with conviction as enfolded in faith, personal prayer, religious literature study, or adherence to church rules such as paying tithing or abstaining from alcohol or coffee (Knoll & Riess, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018; Riess, 2019). In other words, a congregational/social insider may be a (partly) religious outsider as to conviction. Conversely, strong and dutiful believers may struggle with congregational belonging due to disagreements over norms or personalities. For converts, the passage from outsidership to insiderness requires both congregational integration and the incorporation of multiple religious novelties. It can be a challenging process as converts often retain part of their pre-convert identities (Bryant et al., 2014; Decoo, 1996).

Finally, the range from conservative to more liberal outlooks among active members usually mirrors their use of information about Mormonism. The more conservative draw from official church sources and from apologetic writings, the image of a thriving and expanding Kingdom of God. They avoid information that could be detrimental to their faith. The more liberal members (also) turn to independent, intellectual sources—books, journals, blogs, and podcasts—which critically discuss historical, doctrinal, or social aspects of Mormonism. Both groups are insiders, but the ideological wing

one is attracted to is going to affect conversations in research. Note that being conservative does not necessarily correlate with greater religious conviction. Likewise, being more liberal does not preclude strong faith.

In short, degrees of insiderness and belonging in the religious realm can be quite varied. How would this diversity affect qualitative research when an insider researcher, characterized by her own insider factors but acting from a capacity of academic outsidership, interacts with participants whose identities are also characterized by divergent individual factors?

Positionalities of Researcher and Participants

As part of a doctoral research project, I interviewed 13 Mormon women in Flanders (Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) as to their perceptions of gender roles. The main objective was to assess to what extent their perceptions would lean towards the conservative, religiously determined gender roles the Church upholds or rather to the secular, West-European, and equality-focused gender roles prevalent in Flemish society and how participants would deal with ambivalence in cases of tensions. Suffice it to say here that from the results, the secular perceptions and the equality-focused gender roles prevailed. Participants used various arguments and strategies to avoid or defuse tensions. For full details, see Decoo, 2021. The focus of this paper is on the methodological experience related to insider/outsider perspectives. With reference to the factors discussed above, I first clarify where I stand and next my participants’ positionalities.

The Researcher

An insider researcher should make an autoethnographical disclosure. For the factor of church membership as such, I have been a Mormon all my life. I was born in Flanders as the only child in a Mormon Belgian family. My parents were active church members in local leadership positions. They maintained a liberal outlook. I grew up in the ideological mixture of my extended family—from Catholics to agnostics—and attended a Catholic elementary school where I was the only Mormon. On Sundays, I took part in the local Mormon ward. In 1999, when I was 11, my father accepted a teaching appointment at Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah. BYU is the flagship university sponsored by the Mormon Church. Our family moved to a 100% conservative Mormon environment. During my high school and college years, I was fully immersed in the dominant Mormon social and religious life. In my early twenties, I slowly disengaged from church activity. It was a quiet and non-confrontational process and I kept familial and friendly ties intact. A high percentage of Mormon Millennials are in my position (Riess, 2019). Moreover, I kept an excellent relation with my mentors at BYU, one of whom was on my doctoral committee.

I am well familiar with Mormon congregational/social involvement. From my earliest years, I attended church, fulfilled church callings as a teenager, had many Mormon friends, and saw how my parents and others served in their respective church callings. In Utah, I participated in activities for teens, including proxy baptisms in the temple. However, I am not “endowed” like most adult church members who participate in the higher temple ordinances.

Though my childhood religious conviction waned over the years, I am well aware of Mormon history, doctrine, and spirituality, not only from years of listening to church talks and lessons, but also from numerous religious courses in the Mormon seminary program for adolescents and in BYU’s mandatory religious curriculum. Also at our home, Mormonism has always been a standard topic for discussion, including with frequent Mormon visitors.

My outlook on Mormonism has always been liberal, nourished by my parents’ interest in independent sources and our family’s interaction with Mormon scholars. At the same time, since for more than a decade, I was part of wards in Utah where religious and political conservatives dominate, including our neighbors, I am well informed of their perspectives and arguments.

During my studies in sociology, my academic interest turned to gender issues. I wrote my master’s thesis on changing attitudes regarding homosexuality among American birth cohorts. I keenly followed how the Church handled gender-related issues over the years. After obtaining my MA, I was asked to teach sociology courses at the Salt Lake Community College and at Westminster College in Salt Lake City. My familiarity with Mormonism, gender issues, and Mormons in Flanders led me to the doctoral research project among Mormon women in my original home country.

The Participants

For the research project, a purposive sample of 13 women was constituted from a larger group of 32 potential participants, based on comparable qualitative research which sets sample size for saturation between 12 and 16 (Ando et al., 2014; Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017). Moreover, the background information I had on each participant allowed me to stratify the sample for maximal variation. It first pertained to measurable items: age (from 28 to 93), marital status (2 never married, 8 married, and 3 divorced), membership type (7 converts and 6 raised in a Mormon family), family size (from 0 to 5 children), employed or not (but no participant could be found without an occupation), and level of education (1 secondary education, 5 bachelors, and 5 masters and 2 PhD). Considering that 10 to 20% of a Mormon congregation in Flanders consists of non-white immigrants, the sample included two women of color—1 black and 1 mixed race—who had been living for years in Flanders. For sexual orientation, at least one participant was openly lesbian, for the others, it was unknown. An important aspect for the selection

was that I knew nearly all of the women personally from my childhood years. Some were from my age group, others had seen me grow up. All were familiar with my parents, which added to their willingness to be interviewed.

For church membership and congregational involvement, participants needed to have a common profile as the constant factor: adult members, with substantial experience in the Church in Flanders, and still active as regular attendees at Sunday meetings. Some were highly visible from their calling in their ward, others less. It was not known beforehand how many of them had a valid temple recommend, but it was surmised most had one in view of their church activity.

The factor of religious conviction was considered a variable but it was not possible to assess completely beforehand. For some participants, a high religious conviction could be deduced from their sermons, testimonies, and participation in church lessons. For a few others, I was aware they (had) struggled with problematic church issues. Where their faith stood by the time of the interviews was uncertain, but the purposive sampling avoided selecting only participants with an apparent high religious conviction or, conversely, only those known for their doubts.

Variation from more conservative to more liberal outlooks was fairly well identifiable among participants, based on their informal conversations among themselves and on their messages on social media. Conservative members frequently express their satisfaction with all aspects of their faith, emphasize “follow the prophet,” quote church leaders, and dutifully adopt church viewpoints. Liberals, not always publicly but certainly among themselves, are interested in critical topics in broader perspectives. From my own and my parents’ experience, it was possible to position participants evenly on a continuum from quite conservative to quite liberal.

Methodological Safeguards

With those various factors involved, and in particular my own positionality, it was incumbent that a qualitative approach would elude any bias and warrant objectivity. Methodological safeguards had to be put in place. These concerned the neutrality of the data collection instrument, the choice of the interviewer, the interview procedure, and the processing of the results.

For the data collection instrument, an interview guide was developed in three steps: from generic research questions to neutral topics, from each topic to debatable issues, and from each issue to interview items. All topics and issues were drawn from the extensive research literature on gender roles, both in conservative religions in general and in the numerous gender-related studies in Mormonism, and as far as relevant for the situation of Mormon women in Flanders. Since the study of gender roles in conservative religions can easily be marred by a secular/feminist bias that considers women as victims of patriarchal overreach, interview items were carefully formulated in order not to “lead” participants in slanted directions. All items were open questions, inviting to longer answers.

Quite a few items made use of vignettes—depictions of a situation with hypothetical characters facing a dilemma. For example,

A young man ends his two-year mission. He is 20 years old. In his last interview with the mission president, the president told him not to postpone marriage. He returns home and soon meets a girl his age. It clicks, and after six months he proposes to her. But the girl says that she would rather wait another two to three years for both to graduate. The boy points out that church leaders, even President Nelson himself, insist not to postpone marriage. What do you think of this dilemma?

The interview guide was assessed and approved by the university Ethics Committee and by the members of the doctoral committee. The final version contained 79 items, which provided choices according to the personal interest of participants, but 25 items, specifically on gender roles, were determined to be key items to be asked of each participant.

As for the choice of the interviewer, it was decided that a trusted insider would ensure the most authentic responses. When questioned by an outsider, members of a religious minority, especially if they already suffer from misrepresentation, tend to be protective and apologetic. Mormons in particular, also as part of their missionary ethos, would rather portray the church as a flawless institution and hold back on internal challenges. Moreover, when talking to an insider whom they have known personally from within their own context, participants can immediately comment on a level of local detail, using the internal jargon, and without worrying about a broader introduction or about misunderstandings. It greatly adds to information density. As a church member from long acquaintance, I met those criteria of insiderness and closeness. On the other hand, to be assured of confidentiality and anonymity, participants also value distance and academic outsidership. It also matched my situation: I came from Utah to conduct the interviews and next returned to the United States to process the anonymous data.

Still, how I interviewed had to be free of any bias or manipulation. To ensure such controlled progress during the interview, each participant received at the onset a copy of the interview guide, with an introduction as to the objectives and next divided into topical sections with the items written out and numbered. It allowed the participant to follow the structure and reread items as needed or return to previous ones. It also enhanced her feeling of co-researching, rather than being orally interrogated by one in exclusive control of the text. During the interview, conscious of the risk to steer the conversation and lead the participant to induced answers, I refrained from reformulating items, clarifying them from personal experience, or asking supplemental questions. Such additions were not necessary since many items intersected so that a shorter answer to one item was compensated by more response to another item. Since all participants were very open and talkative, the data amply sufficed for the research

objectives. I did not take notes during the interview. I felt that writing while the participant was speaking could distract her by wondering what I wrote or if I was paying attention to what she said meanwhile. All answers were audio-recorded with the agreement of the participant (nearly 2 hours per participant on average) and later transcribed for analysis. The recordings revealed that my voice only uttered “ja” (“yes”), quite repetitively, at the short pauses the participant took, or sometimes overlapping. The tone adopted in that affirmation was one of a neutral signal of understanding and of encouragement to go on. I never interrupted the participant.

Results were processed according to descriptive protocols. After transcription of the audio-recordings, the various answers to each item were compared, structured according to the arguments and strategies used by participants, and conclusions were drawn, nuanced by the diversity participants displayed.

Diversification of Insider/ Outsider Perspectives

The various safeguards just mentioned did not prevent the interviews from being a complex interplay of insider/outsider perspectives.

Seven Intersecting Perspectives

The following perspectives could be discerned: denominational, congregational, social, religious, topical, lingual, and academic. None stands on its own. They intersect as one perspective can overflow into another, such as in the congregational/social perspectives, or as one perspective can determine the tone of any other, such as the lingual perspective. The religious perspective can take front stage at certain moments, but nearly always also remains the backdrop perspective that affects all others.

Denominational perspective. Any person formally on Mormon church rolls is a “denominational insider,” a member of the denomination, even if only on paper. Though not practicing anymore, I had never felt the need to resign my membership. Resignation is a deliberate step of disaffiliation I did not take. For the interviews, participants evidently considered me as a church member, the way they had always known me. The question remains, however, if some participants would have been as open, had they known I was “inactive.” I felt no hindrance over it since I still had many bonds with other Mormons and had no antagonistic feelings against the Church or its doctrines. My research was not controversial. One member of my doctoral committee was an active Mormon, aware of my church status. Still, the situation had its ambiguities. A peculiar exchange happened when one of the introductory items in the interview asked which church “callings” (tasks in the organization) the participant had fulfilled in the ward and which one she eventually had now. For the latter item,

one participant answered “none” and added tongue-in-cheek: “Are you now angry with me?” as a way to excuse herself for not having a calling and thus missing a sign of commitment. She evidently assumed I was an active member with at least a church calling. Another topic also created ambiguity. All participants were “temple-endowed.” In their comments, some mentioned the temple to stress the gender equality that prevails in the temple. A few months before the interviews, there had been some temple ceremony changes enhancing women’s roles (Stack & Noyce, 2019). One participant asked me, “Have you already seen the latest changes?” She clearly assumed I was a temple-attending member. I simply answered “no” and the conversation went on. Such remarks, made from the assumption that I was an active, temple-worthy member, made my position occasionally awkward. Denominational membership alone does not avert unexpected turns of insidership a researcher needs to take into account. On the other hand, my being inactive unburned me from the suspicion that I would tend to embellish results in defense of the Church—a quandary Mormon scholars can face.

Congregational perspective. Based on where one lives, a church member is automatically assigned to a congregation—a “branch” if a small unit, a “ward” if a mature unit. For my participants, I was a “congregational outsider” since I did not attend their ward. It had been almost 20 years since I was a regular church attendee in the Church in Flanders. By the time I interviewed the participants whom I knew personally, I had not seen most of them for quite some time. Though the reunion with some of these old friends was very enjoyable, I could not consider myself part of their local community. However, quite a few of my participants naturally continued to view me as a member of their ward. They referred to other members of the ward and to ward events, even recent ones, as if I were still part of the congregation. It facilitated confidence and interaction, but it also felt unnatural to still be considered part of the congregation.

Social perspective. I felt a “social insider” in view of my familiarity with most of the participants. I had known them since my earliest childhood. A markedly relevant element is that at home, even in Utah, our small family remained well informed of the weal and woe of Mormon church members in Flanders, through social media, visits during our yearly summer stays in Belgium, and sometimes a visit by one of them to Utah. Tattletale—and sometimes plain gossip—about relations, newly married couples, babies, new converts, tensions, conflicts, adultery, divorces, and changes in church callings also make up the gist of being a Mormon social insider. So I was fairly well informed of main life aspects of most of my participants. They, on the other hand, knew little to nothing about my personal life in Utah. I considered this topographical difference an advantage as participants could not be affected by their perception of my experiences. My prior knowledge of some of their experiences, as well as of the recent history of the Church in Flanders, proved vital in locating and understanding

some of their stories, especially when these were told in compact ways with numerous innuendo’s. I could well visualize the context of their “lived experiences.”

Religious perspective. In terms of “lived religion,” I am now a “religious outsider” inasmuch as I do not share the religious convictions of believing Mormons anymore. During the interviews, I meticulously refrained from bringing up my own beliefs, even if some of my participants worded opinions I could well identify with and could have confirmed as my own. I am also a religious outsider as to the temple experience of the “endowment.” Each of my participants was an endowed member, though not all, according to their own admission, were “temple-going” anymore. I may assume that all participants perceived me as a religious insider who shared the same beliefs—consistent with their perception of me as a denominational and even congregational insider. Would some have been as open as they were on certain issues, had they known my religious outsidership?

Topical perspective. I am a “topical insider” through my fairly extensive knowledge of Mormon topics—history, doctrine, organization, and procedures. Participants evidently expected this type of intrinsic insidership from my membership since childhood, my parents’ long involvement with the Church in Flanders, my living in Utah since two decades, and my college degree from BYU. The more intellectual and well-read participants assumed I had the same erudition as they had. The main effect of that perception was that they never worried about me not understanding their comments, however dense or inchoate some were. They used the lingo of “Mormonspeak” with numerous abbreviations, idiosyncratic terms, and common words with divergent Mormon connotations. On the topic of gender equality, the short references to situations were frequent. Examples, “Another change I’d wish is that at a baby’s blessing the mother can sit on a chair.” “Here a sister is never asked for the closing talk.” “With baptisms for the dead, only a man can check the data cards, but I did it once for a whole session.” Comprehending such utterances on the spot required a solid background. On gender issues, participants also frequently referred to church history, which takes a prominent place in church publications, sermons, and lessons. In the following example, the interview item had asked a participant about the right to divine inspiration for women. After explaining she felt it was an issue of common sense, circumstances, and asking God, she suddenly applied it to church leaders in a condensed explanation:

So to go back to church leaders, I think the ship is turning. Because if you don’t ask, you won’t get an answer. So if you as a person do not see a problem with women in the Church, for example, because you still live in the past, then you are not going to think about it and then you are not going to pray about it. And then I think about Greg Prince’s book, about David O. McKay, how he started that years before, about the priesthood for everyone

and when you read that, he struggles with that and he thinks about it, but he does not get all the people look in one direction yet. And Kimball, he was there and said nothing. And then comes the one after him who was absolutely against that, and then nothing happens. And then you see how after that Kimball becomes a prophet, and then, yes. Of course you had the charity status, that could all be true, but then the question is, he might have thought about it, and the Church was going to lose its charity status, maybe I should just go and ask the Lord. Yes, how does revelation work? And if you have prophets who are very old and [whispering] maybe also a bit demented, then things stagnate.

To understand the preceding passage, one must be quite familiar with Mormon history since the 1950s, the episodes preceding the 1978 decision to lift the racist priesthood ban, the presumed attitudes of subsequent church leaders, the documentation in Prince's landmark book, and the mental state of aging church presidents—and moreover figure out the implications related to women and the priesthood: the participant was actually arguing that in due time, the prophet will receive revelation to implement gender equality. Though sometimes difficult to parse, such participants' compact and vivid comments were also the most revealing as to candidness and authenticity.

Lingual perspective. Except for one in English, all interviews were conducted in Dutch, or rather in the Flemish variant of Dutch spoken in the Antwerp region, with which I had grown up and which we continued to speak at home after moving to the United States. This dialectal mastery proved to be essential in establishing from the onset an intimate register of communication with most participants, reinforcing the perception of mutual insiderness and thus of the participants' willingness to speak out. Meeting each other started with the usual chitchat about well-being, family, and reminiscences—with my language use adapting to the interlocutor's register and accent. The value of such lingual insiderness has been noted by several authors (Kydd-Williams, 2019; Witcher, 2010). It was also telling how, with some participants, more emotion led to more slang words and expressions in franker or wittier remarks, often at a high speech rate. They knew I would understand. As with the comprehension of densely presented topics, the lingual-cultural connection served candidness and authenticity.

Academic perspective. From my own research perspective, I am an academic insider, trained to apply professional standards. For this project, the aim was to register objectively the insights and opinions of Mormon women on gender roles, following a strict methodology. Both in the contacting of participants and before starting the actual interview, I informed each participant of objectives and procedure, with the usual document of informed consent to be signed, including assurances of anonymity. But from the perspective of my participants, I was an outsider from academia who would

return to the United States after the interviews and next process the data. I am convinced that the prospect of my academic and topographical distance after the interviews was conducive to more openness. True, I was “one of their own” to confide in, but they knew I would not be in their ward next Sunday. I did not query how my participants perceived me and my objectives. Such an outlook could convey interesting information as to the way participants' own perceptions may influence their replies.

Variables Causing Shifts on the Insider/Outsider Continua

As mentioned in the introduction, compound insider/outsider positions move on a continuum. Hellowell (2006, p. 492) even pluralized the movement as “a series of insider/outsider continua.” I experienced these variances according to participants' personal attitudes and comments and their effect on my positionality. Reliving the interviews while listening to the recordings, transcribing them, and reflecting on the data enabled me to better map the insider/outsider implications. The analysis revealed that the various insider/outsider perspectives were constantly shifting according to a number of variables. I list the most significant ones here, but more could be discerned.

Variable of social relationship. The more participants had known me personally and referred to shared experiences, the more their convivial attitude bolstered my social insider's position, as well as their willingness to comment candidly on interview items. These participants talked to me as if I was “one of them” even after years of physical absence. Conversely, the interaction with the few participants who had not known me or my parents so well altered my perspective to more social outsidership. These participants themselves tended to answer more guardedly or more closely to church orthodoxy on some items.

Variable of congregational involvement. All participants were active church members, but differed in terms of being involved in callings, attending church every Sunday, or going to the temple. Some participants talked openly about their lower level of activity and related personal challenges in the ward. Such forthrightness confirmed my social insiderness, but it also tilted my position toward congregational insiderness as participants saw me as a kind of ward confidante. I had to admit to myself that such an intimacy was undeserved, reminding me of my outsidership.

Variable of religious fervor. As mentioned above, all participants seemed to perceive me as a religious insider, while in fact, I had become an outsider in terms of sharing the same beliefs. This discrepancy did not affect the way the interview was handled since I strictly followed the interview guide and refrained from personal interventions. However, for a few of the more religiously dedicated participants, their fervor when talking about their intimate faith rubbed against my

positionality. The quandary raised the ethical question: should I have disclosed my difference in religious conviction at the onset of the interview? The matter branches out in various mitigating considerations. First, I could still very well understand a participant if she spoke from a perspective of deep religiousness—having experienced such feelings myself earlier in life and having observed and even felt them numerous times in others' public testimonies. So when a participant saw a religious insider in me, and spoke to me from that perspective, I could relate without feeling deceiving. Second, such an interaction between a religious and a less religious church member is not unusual in the Church: all members stand somewhere on the continuum of faith, and those differences do not impede sincere exchanges on the topic. Third, even if participants considered me a faithful religious insider, it did not refrain some of them from disclosing their own difficult faith journey and their present doubts. So, even in my position of religious outsidership, I felt confident no ethical norms of honesty were breached. For other researchers, the quandary could be different.

Variable of topical knowledge related to academic insider/outsidership. Some participants showed a high degree of involvement with issues raised, understood the objectives of the research well, and provided valuable information. While they adopted to a certain extent an outsider's look at their own religion, they actually boosted my topical insider role. Viewed from my research perspective they strengthened my academic insidership. From the perspective of the participants, however, I was the observing academic outsider to whom they were able to give valuable information. The more a participant knew about church history and doctrine, visibly related to her educational level, the more I felt my role as a topical and academic insider listening to a peer. Conversely, when one participant displayed little background on a topic, answered narrowly, or even misrepresented facts, it reinforced my listening as an overall outsider.

Variable of conservative/liberal attitudes. I admit I felt more at ease with the more liberal participants as they echoed many of my own opinions. The non-involvement I had imposed on myself during the interview proved prudent for I could have easily overstepped the boundaries of controlled insidership and influence the participant with my own ideas. However, some of my participants were sometimes quite critical of certain church aspects, seemingly convinced that I would share their resentment or indignation and thus trying to force me into their own type of insidership. In such cases, I adopted a facial expression of friendly comprehension, but without showing approval. Such instances made me feel uncomfortable, reinforcing my outsider position. On the other hand, listening serenely to the insights and arguments of the more conservative participants was quite instructive and even edifying. Also here, my non-involvement prevented me from entering into exchanges that could have influenced participants in their comments.

Overall, these variances laid bare both advantages and challenges of insidership. As my doctoral committee observed, only an insider with my profile could have obtained so much candid and relevant information. However, it entailed being subjected to multiple roles during the interviews. Had I given in to the impulse to play some of these roles openly, it likely would have affected participants' responses.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to refine perspectives of insider/outsidership in qualitative research with religious participants. The findings of previous research on the insider/outsider challenges of studying religious subjects (see above) were generally confirmed as to the fluidity of role perceptions, both from the researcher and the participants. This article went further in reflexively exploring various modalities of perceptions occurring during interaction. Seven intersecting perspectives were examined as well as variables that can alter perspectives during data collection.

The overall advantages of insidership were well confirmed: more participants' openness and authenticity, more depth in bringing details to the surface, and better comprehension of dense data. Still, insider researchers should carefully gauge their degree of insidership from various angles in order to determine their positionality and how it could affect their relation with participants. They should assess their own motives and recognize if a secular-critical agenda drives them. Special attention should be paid to the neutrality of the data collection instrument. As a general rule, at least viewed from my experience, it seems advisable not to depart from prepared interview items. If these items are invitingly formulated, including dilemmas to be solved, ample responses can normally be expected. Researcher interventions, if deemed necessary for clarifying or widening responses, should be well monitored. Participants may be more at ease if they know that academic and topographical distance after the interview will safeguard their confidential contributions. In that sense, insider researchers may need to consider to what extent their own religious positionality does not breach the confidence participants grant them.

Indirectly, this article also draws attention to what an outsider could take into account when conducting interviews with religious participants. The various perspectives discussed in this article reveal multiple layers that complexify "lived religion." When talking to outsiders, religious participants may choose to answer from perspectives and layers that they feel the researcher would understand, projecting into the researcher their pre-conception of the outsider's positionality. They will use the language they expect the researcher to comprehend, but their responses may not sufficiently reflect their own insights and experiences. In many cases, they will probably hold back information, convinced that the researcher would not understand the background and the level of detail involved.

Other suggestions for further research include the transferability, adaptation, and diversification of the seven perspectives I mentioned to different religious contexts. Every religion, denomination, or congregation has its own multiple traits that determine its distinctiveness. Finally, as a pendant to the researcher's perceptions of participants, querying participants as to their perception of the researcher may provide valuable insights as to the variables that can affect their responses.

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