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ARTICLE

Insider, Outsider or an In-Betweener? Epistemological Reflections of a Legally Blind Researcher on Conducting Cross-National Disability Research

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Researchers have long debated the perils and possibilities associated with being an insider or an outsider while conducting qualitative research. This paper revisits this insider-outsider debate by drawing on the experiential insights of a legally blind researcher who, as a part of a comparative study, conducted qualitative interviews with 29 young adults with visual impairments from Oslo and Delhi in 2017 and 2018. It inquires into how the researcher's positionality and identity influences the process of knowledge production while conducting Global North-South comparative disability research. Based on critical reflections across different stages of the research process, the paper problematizes the simplistic binaries, such as insider-outsider, Privileged-Oppressed, Us-Them and Native-Foreign. It argues for the adoption of an in-betweener researcher status located somewhere on the insider-outsider continua. Comparative disability research entailing Global North and Global South countries is scarce. This paper offers valuable epistemological insights for other researchers working with marginalized groups.

Keywords: insider research; outsider research; Norway; India; comparative disability research; in-betweener

1. Introduction

The question associated with insider and outsider researcher positionality has been vociferously debated in social research (Bridges 2017; Crossley et al. 2016; Griffith 1998; Hellawell 2006). In structural terms, researchers who consider themselves insiders are the members of 'specified groups and collectivities or occupants of specified social statuses; outsiders are the non-members' (Merton 1972: 21). Researchers' insider status entails that they share common characteristics, such as impairment status, race and sexual orientation, with the marginal group they are studying, whilst outsiders stand at a distance from the marginal group and therefore are considered as non-members. On the one hand, the researcher's positionality of having an insider-outsider status has significant ramifications (Hellawell 2006), because the researcher who is perceived as an insider by the participants could secure privileged access and undertake co-construction of knowledge (Chaudhry 2018; Humphrey 2007). On the other hand, if the researcher is perceived as an outsider, they might be able to ask naïve questions to the vulnerable group and thereby push the envelope of understanding for the researcher, the marginal community being researched and the general public (Bridges 2017). Critical awareness about insider-outsider positionality is extremely important while conducting research on marginalized groups such as disabled people, as historically they have been objectified, othered and oppressed during the research process (Barnes 1996; Barnes 2008; Oliver 1990; Oliver 1992; Stone & Priestley 1996). This paper has a unique empirical and epistemic vantage point because of two factors. First, it is based on the observations secured from the fieldwork conducted in Oslo and Delhi entailing young adults with visual impairments (henceforth YAVI). Although vital, comparative disability research entailing Global North and Global South is few and far between (Chhabra 2020). Knowledge production and its dissemination is predominantly unidirectional, flowing from Global North to South (Grech & Soldatic 2016), thereby constituting a challenge of 'scholarly colonialism' (Meekosha 2008: 2) and perpetuating the power imbalance across the Global North-South divide (Crossley et al. 2016). Second, this comparative research is conducted by a person with a severe visual impairment endeavoring to surface the hitherto marginalized voice of YAVI who are economically excluded and socio-culturally othered across countries belonging to the Global North and Global South (Chhabra 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to lay bare my critical reflection process associated with questions of identity, positionality and reflexivity to discuss the complex methodological issues associated with conducting either insider or outsider research. Although I initially considered myself, and was intuitively perceived as, an insider by the youth participants because of my impairment status, nonetheless, I was othered on distinctive vectors associated with biographical

experiences and social location. Therefore, the paper challenges the dichotomous construction of insider-outsider positionality (Bridges 2017) and argues for the adoption of a more nuanced researcher position of an in-betweener (Chaudhry 2018; Crossley et al. 2016), predicated on increased reflexivity and critical awareness.

2. Insider/Outsider Research

In common parlance, an insider is an 'Insighter' who has access to and an understanding of the history, culture and social life of a marginal group owing to his/her 'continued socialization in the life of a group' (Merton 1972: 15). Insider-researchers acknowledge that knowledge is intimately tied to experience. They acquire tacit knowledge owing to their in-group socialization; align themselves with the values, interests and commitments of the group; and they employ sensitivity to achieve empathic understanding (Fay 1996; Corbin Dwyner & Buckle 2009). Insider-researchers have built a trust-surplus and therefore could secure access to the group easily (Corbin Dwyner & Buckle 2009). In addition, they could ask difficult questions and acquire thick, authentic descriptions on sensitive themes. The researcher could undertake data dissemination, which could assist in the advocacy efforts. Insider-research is considered to be less exploitative and more empowering as it prioritizes giving voice to the previously silenced perspectives from marginalized groups (Bridges 2017). All these features cumulatively make insider-research more ethical and valuable for the marginal group and the general society (Bridges 2017).

Although being an insider might seem epistemologically fruitful, there is a persistent threat of individual and group solipsism while conducting insider research (Fay 1996; Merton 1972). Individual solipsism contends that 'each person has privileged access to his or her own mental states and processes' (Fay 1996: 10). However, researchers have to be adequately skeptical, as knowledge predicated exclusively on individual experience could be deemed subjective and unreliable (Fay 1996: 21–22; Bridges 2017: 345). Therefore, researchers ought to exercise requisite caution while comprehending and interpreting the knowledge-claims exclusively emerging out of individual experiences. Similarly, group solipsism argues that each group eventually 'have a monopoly of knowledge about itself' (Merton 1972: 14). It is problematic, because if knowledge and its production is rigidly reduced to the parameter of group-identity then 'we all would be epistemically trapped in our own little homogeneous worlds' (Fay 1996: 10) and run a risk of being 'epistemologically and morally isolated' (Bridges 2001: 355). Therefore, the insider-researcher has to guard against these individual and group solipsistic pitfalls during the process of data collection and analysis.

Moreover, for insiders it might be more difficult to manage the expectations of the members from the marginal group, wherein they might be interested in the data production that is more aligned with their values instead of having empirical fidelity. They might also expect favors in the form of friendship, financial help and counselling support (Humphrey 2007). This in turn can lead to serious ethical dilemmas (Hellawell 2006). In addition, insiders possess tacit knowledge of the marginal group and a shared understanding, which might cause them to take the primary issues for granted. Their immersion with the group life could cause difficulties in achieving adequate analytical distance (Merton 1972). Furthermore, it is very hard to be an absolute insider to a group, because there is a pernicious challenge linked to group heterogeneity and intersecting identity (Crossley et al. 2016; Humphrey 2007). An insider might have distinctive personal and social features coupled with multi-layered identities, which might 'render them outsiders in certain respects and insiders in others' (Bridges 2017: 341).

In light of these complex challenges associated with being an insider during the research process, it is epistemologically expedient and methodologically prudent to be an outsider who is far from 'the corrupting influence of group loyalties' (Merton 1972: 30). Outsiders experience more freedom from particularistic expectations and group loyalties, which facilitates them to ask novel questions and challenge accepted explanations (Fay 1996). They tend to minimize 'the presence of the researcher in the research product' (Griffith 1998: 361). They could rely on 'Verstehen', empathic understanding to more rigorously comprehend and explicate the social phenomena (Merton 1972), as they do not seek to achieve 'subjective psychological identification' with the marginal group they study (Fay 1996: 24). The outsider-research is particularly valuable as it could enhance the understanding of the researcher, the marginalized community and the wider public (Bridges 2017; Humphrey 2007). Yet, the ambition to conduct outsider research is problematic, as an outsider might have an identity-marker or biographical experience that overlaps with the group they study, and achieving so-called objective distance and value-neutrality might be an elusive goal (Griffith 1998; Chaudhry 2018; Corbin Dwyner & Buckle 2009).

It is apparent that both the insider and outsider researcher positionality have their inherent benefits and intrinsic limitations. The researcher's positionality is rather fluid, and it is futile to regard a researcher exclusively as a culturally embedded, subjective insider or an objective, detached outsider (Crossley et al. 2016; Griffith 1998). In order to better comprehend the nebulous space existing between the insider-outsider dichotomy (Corbin Dwyner & Buckle 2009: 60; Humphrey 2007), the paper leans on a conceptualization of the researcher as a stranger who purposively wanders (Simmel 1950). A stranger's purposefulness is in part grounded in 'Wertbeziehung', which determines the foci of research interests and value orientation (Merton 1972: 16). Based on their personal, social and situational factors, a stranger could leverage 'distance and nearness, indifference and involvement' while studying a group (Simmel 1950: 404). The non-committal stranger could be an in-betweener (Chaudhry 2018) who could transcend the strict binary of insider-outsider researcher positionality. The stranger could occupy the hyphenated third space (Corbin Dwyner & Buckle 2009). By adopting the positionality of being an in-betweener vis-à-vis their interlocutors, they could offer a more nuanced understanding, which is contingent upon multiple identities, complex biographies and layered social

locations (Crossley et al. 2016). However, the in-betweener's fluid researcher positionality could be a methodological 'tightrope' to walk on (Humphrey 2007: 16), because a researcher can neither retreat as a distant outsider, nor be preoccupied with group solidarity as an intimate insider.

3. The Research Project and My Positionality

This paper belongs to a comparative case study (Yin 2012) wherein I interviewed YAVI from Oslo and Delhi in 2017–2018. The interviewees belong to the age group of 20–35 years with an almost equal gender representation. Most of the interviewed youth had previously secured higher education and were either actively seeking jobs or were engaged in part-time or full-time contractual employment in Oslo or Delhi (see the characteristics of participants in **Table 1**). Before commencing the interviews, I secured ethical clearance from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (research project reference number 51653).

Table 1: Characteristics of participants.

	Total	Norway	India
Gender			
Male	15	6	9
Female	14	6	8
Age			
20–25	3	1	2
26–30	20	9	11
31–35	6	2	4
Highest level of education			
High School	7	4	3
Bachelors	9	6	3
Masters	13	2	11
Employment status			
Employed not seeking job	16	6	10
Employed seeking job	5	3	2
Unemployed seeking job	6	1	5
Unemployed not seeking job	1	1	0
Disability pensioner	1	1	0
Nature of employment			
Full-time	16	5	11
Part-time	5	4	1
Employment sectors			
Government	7	3	4
Private	7	3	4
Non-profit	7	3	4
Level of visual impairment (based on ICD-10, 2006)			
Moderate vision impairment	4	2	2
Severe vision impairment	13	7	6
Blindness	12	3	9
Nature of visual impairment			
Congenital	13	6	7
Progressive	8	4	4
Adventitious	8	2	6
Geographical parameter			
Raised in the capital city/region	7	2	5
Migrated to the capital city	19	7	12

The Global North-South research foci entailing the comparison of Norway and India was intuitively relevant for me, as I am both a person of Indian descent and have lived and worked in Norway for many years. Initially, I considered myself as an insider because, firstly, a significant identity-marker (i.e., vision impairment) overlaps between the interviewed participants and me. Secondly, I had previously lived and worked in Delhi and had moved in and out of the labor market in Oslo. My employment history could potentially correspond with the labor market experiences of the youth participants. Thirdly, a majority of the participants have geographically relocated from different parts of India to Delhi and Norway to Oslo in order to seek employment. This could coincide with my biographical experience from the formative years. Finally, I am 33 years old, which maps with the participants' age group (20–35 years). This biographical affinity could offer a common experiential point of departure and endow me with an insider status.

However, in spite of a few overlapping factors, I realized that my biographical experience and social location often distanced me from the participants, who partly othered me on the vectors of gender, class, level of education, language-skills and nationality. While conducting Global North-South research, it is vital to acknowledge the complexity and multiplicity associated with the researcher's identity, the inherent challenges concerning power imbalance linked to the researcher's position and their subsequent influence on the research process (Crossley et al. 2016). The cross-national fieldwork made me realize that I was an in-betweener with partial overlapping identities in relation to the participants (Chaudhry 2018).

4. Locating Insider/Outsider Debate in Disability Research

Disability research is no stranger to the insider-outsider debate. Historically, there has been a wedge, wherein medical professionals, public bureaucrats and non-disabled researchers have presented the outsider perspective predicated on medical diagnosis, administrative categories and sociological constructs (Oliver 1990; Oliver 1992; Pothier & Devlin 2006). Whilst the disabled scholars, disabled people and disability organizations claimed to present the insider perspective based on a shared identity-marker (i.e., impairment status and a similar experience of societal exclusion) (Barnes 1996; Barnes 2008).

In the early days of disability rights movement, disability organizations and disabled scholars have sparked a disability rights movement globally based on materialist perspectives, amplifying the economic subordination and social marginalization of disabled people by the non-disabled society (Charlton 1998; Thomas 2006). Disabled scholars have argued for validating the experiences of disabled people, while the research done by non-disabled scholars has been considered 'as a violation of their experience' resulting in their disempowerment' (Oliver 1992: 105). In 1981, Paul Hunt, a British disabled activist, labelled non-disabled researchers as parasite people and put forward the radical claim that these non-disabled researchers benefited from or exploited the disabled subjects while conducting research. He considered that researchers were neither detached nor objective and their self-imposed obsession with detachment was intrinsically hypocritical and flawed. Due to such ethical and epistemological concerns, disabled people became wary of non-disabled researchers (Stone & Priestley 1996). Furthermore, disabled scholars have concluded that 'researchers should be espousing commitment not value freedom, engagement not objectivity, and solidarity not independence' (Barnes 1996: 110). Disabled scholars, in conjunction with disabled people and their organizations, demanded to take full control over the process of the research production concerning disability (Charlton 1998; Oliver 1990). In addition, disabled people and their organizations advocated to set the research agenda and they asked questions such as *What type of knowledge is being produced*? *How is it being produced?* and *Who is producing it and benefiting from it?* (Oliver 1992; Barnes 2008).

In the early 1990s, the concept of emancipatory disability research was introduced (Oliver 1992). The slogans 'Nothing About Us Without Us' (Charlton 1998: 3) and 'No participation without representation' (Oliver 1992: 105), which emerged as a consequence of a vibrant disability rights movement and vigorous disability scholarship from the 1990s, have had significant epistemological and ethical consequences for conducting disability research.

Undoubtedly, the identity-based disability politics, disability rights movement and disability scholarship has achieved relative success in promoting rights for disabled people and broadening the disability research agenda. Nonetheless, it has been thoroughly critiqued on multiple grounds. First, it perpetuates separatist notions of 'us', the disabled people, versus 'them', the non-disabled people (Shakespeare 2014: 106). Second, it overlooks the shortcomings of identity-centered research as there exists 'multiple and intertwined strands in our identities' (Thomas 2006: 179). Third, it is rather unidimensional and fails to resonate with the gender dimension (Ghai 2015; Morris 1996; Traustadóttir 2006). Furthermore, the recent turn towards social, linguistic and cultural constructions of disability (Goodley 2017; Gustavsson 2004) coupled with the popularization of critical disability theory (Pothier & Devlin 2006) have further problematized the notion of identity-based disability research.

Alongside the poignant critique of disability research coming from the European and North-American disability scholars, it is worth noting that disability research has predominantly been Global North-centric, as the perspectives of disabled people from the Global South largely have been overlooked and failed to shape the disability research agenda (Chhabra 2020; Goodley 2017; Meekosha 2008). However, in the last few years, active efforts are being made to challenge the unidirectional flow of knowledge production from Global North to Global South (Grech & Soldatic 2016) and to move beyond the 'liberal, identity-based framework' in order to acknowledge that disability identity is

complex, intersectional and multilayered (Chaudhry 2018: 72; Ghai 2015; Thomas 2006; Traustadóttir 2006). The diversity within disabled peoples' experiences and the relationship of disability with the identity markers 'of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity and social class' (Goodley 2017: 44) have cumulatively expanded the contours of the insider-outsider debate within disability research. In essence, the disabled scholars have challenged the outsider perspective and problematized the researcher's identity and position based on three arguments: epistemological, ethical and ethico-political (see Bridges 2017: 344). These interconnected arguments have influenced the epistemic priorities within disability research.

5. Insider/Outsider Perspectives at Different Stages of Research

The researcher's positionality of being an insider, outsider or an in-betweener significantly affects the different stages of the research process, as both insiders and outsiders have 'their distinctive assets and liabilities' (Merton 1972: 33). Similarly, being an in-betweener (Chaudhry 2018) and occupying a fluid hyphenated space (Humphrey 2007) somewhere across the insider-outsider continua (Hellawell 2006) entails epistemic and methodological implications.

5.1 Research Design

The primary factor that shaped my research interest was the fact that I am a person with visual impairment, whilst the secondary factor was that I had a firsthand experience of applying for, failing to secure and eventually gaining employment in both Oslo and Delhi. Therefore, I chose the theme of comparing employment experiences of YAVI from Oslo and Delhi.

From the beginning, I was immersed in this comparative research project, and my previous knowledge, prior experiences and intimate familiarity with the theme enabled me to ask pertinent questions, such as what similarities or differences exist among employment experiences of YAVI from Oslo and Delhi. These questions have hitherto never been raised within the comparative disability research. *Wertbeziehung* vindicates the prevalence of distinctively different foci of research interests predicated upon subjective position and social location of the researchers (Merton 1972; Fay 1996; Griffith 1998), and it is straightforward to acknowledge that my biological constraint and biographical parameters shaped my research interests, questions and the interview-guide. Notwithstanding *Wertbeziehung*, outsiders (i.e., researchers who do not have a visual impairment) could definitely design a similar research project, entailing YAVI from Oslo and Delhi. The recent comparative research entailing youth with disabilities conducted by non-disabled researchers vindicates this observation (see Halvorsen & Hvinden 2018).

5.2 Recruiting Participants

The participants for this study were recruited in a purposive and opportunistic manner through a snowball sampling technique. In the first phase of this comparative project, policy-experts were interviewed and some of them enabled in seeking contact with the disability organizations working with employment and rehabilitation issues of YAVI in Oslo and Delhi. At the beginning of the field-study in India, the qualitative data was collected from participants and a European assistant accompanied me throughout this process. I was able to gain access, interact with and build rapport with YAVI as they initially perceived me as an insider, owing to my visual impairment. My impairment disclosure was pivotal during this phase of data-collection, as the participants became more willing to share their intimate life-stories, reflect upon their difficult employment experiences and recommend their friends and colleagues to participate in this comparative research project. They felt comfortable as I could offer a safe space for them to express their employment experiences without any inhibitions. The boundaries between the participants and me as a researcher were initially blurred. Being an insider allows achieving privileged access and facilitates in building trust with the oppressed group (Bridges 2017; Corbin Dwyner & Buckle 2009). Because the insider socializes within the group, they can easily leverage professional networks and pull the social levers to gain access and to understand the issues faced by the members of the marginalized group (Crossley et al. 2016; Griffith 1998). The disabled people have previously viewed non-disabled researchers through reluctance and skepticism, as they have been portrayed as victims fulfilling a preordained tragic role (Oliver 1990). In addition, the non-disabled researchers have been accused of objectifying and exploiting the disabled people in order to further their academic or research careers (Barnes 1996; Barnes 2008; Stone & Priestley 1996). Indeed, accessing the marginalized groups and comprehending their world-views could pose a data-collection challenge for outsider-researchers (Bridges 2017).

It was relatively easy to gain access, build trust and interview YAVI from Delhi, as I shared a significant identity-marker in the form of my biological constraint. However, throughout the interviews, the veneer of me being an insider was ripped off, as questions were raised concerning my identity and social location. The following incident pointedly encapsulates the issue of multilayered identity. Before commencing an interview at the premises of a prominent disability organization, one blind participant asked his sighted colleague if I was Indian, as I spoke English so well. His sighted interlocutor described my features: light-skinned, long hair, accompanied by a European assistant. While this conversation was transpiring in Hindi, and I could fully understand the content of it and interject with my explanations linked to nationality, I felt I was being socio-culturally othered and treated as an outsider. In spite of the fact that I

have an Indian name, I understand and speak Hindi, and the brief introduction prior to the interview categorically stated that I was a person of Indian descent who was working in Norway, this youth participant could not initially accept that I was Indian and distanced himself from me, as, in his assessment, our sociological reality did not intersect. Furthermore, in subsequent interviews, the use of the word 'Sir', or phrases such as, 'I don't speak good English like you' seemed to create an unanticipated distance between the participants and me as a researcher. Although I shared the identity marker of being vision-impaired, many participants treated me as an outsider whose biographical experiences and social location were far removed from their lived worlds (Griffith 1998; Corbin Dwyner & Buckle 2009). Some participants had lived their formative years in rural India, and when they realized that I was born in a middle-class family in an urban city, at times their responses muted and I felt a peculiar sense of estrangement from their narratives. For example, while reflecting upon the work-responsibilities undertaken to support his mother during the initial years one participant remarked:

> My mother pushed me to do something … [household] work. …In our village, we are lacking water facility. Previously we had too [much] difficulty that in the village we need to bring water from one or two kilometer far, that means we need to pick pot or something and go and get the water. So I was helping her in that. … [Also] the cooking work and etc. for the home.

The mother of this youth participant with visual impairment expected him to do household chores, relatively common for a rural Indian setting. This stands in stark contrast to my late mother who relentlessly advocated to include me within a mainstream school, expected me to secure good academic grades and could afford to keep me away from the household chores. The glaring disparities of my formative experiences are punctuated by the privilege of being born in a middle-class urban family. In part, my social location precluded me from intuitively understanding the biographical stories of many participants who had experienced a greater degree of marginalization and exclusion as compared to what I had witnessed. In essence, descriptive factors, such as class-specific formative experiences, English language skills and lighter skin tone, distanced me from many of the participants and problematized the simplistic binary between insider-outsider and native-foreign. In addition, being accompanied by a European assistant further complicated and colored the data-collection process and made it easier for participants to ascribe the outsider-status to me.

Similarly, the data-collection process in Oslo was facilitated by contacting a prominent disability organization working with blind and partially sighted people. Because I had acquaintances who worked in the organization, it was quicker to secure contact with potential participants to conduct interviews. Moreover, like the counter-parts from Delhi, once the participants consented to contribute, they recommended their friends and colleagues. However, the data-collection process had its fair share of challenges. The language barrier seemed hard to circumnavigate, as I wanted to conduct the interviews in English and most of the prospective participants preferred Norwegian language. It was possible to purposively recruit acquaintances who had visual impairment and were willing to be interviewed in English. However, it was difficult to follow through on their potential participant leads.

Notwithstanding the language barrier, like Delhi, the participants in Oslo primarily consented to contribute in the research project owing to the presence of a common identity-marker (i.e., visual impairment). Furthermore, they were keen to share their employment experiences, as relatively little attention has been given to their exclusion from the labor market and they felt that I could comprehend better the exclusionary mechanisms because I was an immigrant to Norway. Youth with minority ethnic status and disabilities encounter significant employment barriers in the Norwegian labor market (Halvorsen & Hvinden 2018). Moreover, I had a nominal membership of a prominent disability organization, and through their social and cultural events I interacted with many YAVI from Oslo. This initial familiarity and name recognition made me neither an intimate insider nor a distant outsider for the participants. This lukewarm in-betweener position facilitated me to gain the unexplored and underreported employment insights of the YAVI from Oslo. Furthermore, several interviewees were curious about the comparative research project, as it is unheard of to contrast the employment experiences of YAVI from Oslo and Delhi. The initial curiosity-factor coupled with my impairment-status facilitated in the recruitment of YAVI from Oslo.

To accentuate further the diverging layers of identity, I will describe the identity markers of a youth participant and contrast it with mine. One of the participants was a young female with low-vision, relying on magnification solution. She was a disability pensioner and had recently resumed her higher education. In addition, she had a Norwegian nationality and had difficulties conversing in English, whilst I am a young male, legally blind, relying on screen-reader solution, employed as a researcher holding an Indian nationality and possess relatively good English proficiency skills. At the level of gender, the degree of vision impairment, employment status, nationality and language skills, my biographical experiences and social location diverged considerably from that of the young woman. Therefore, although I shared a similar biological feature with the interviewee, nevertheless, there was a dissimilar sociological reality that distanced me. Perspectives linked to intersectional identity and plurality of individual experiences (Goodley 2017; Pothier & Devlin 2006; Thomas 2006) problematized the researcher position predicated on a simplistic insider-outsider binary, as during the recruitment process I frequently found myself to be an in-betweener (Chaudhry 2018; Crossley et al. 2016).

5.3 Data Collection and Analysis

One of the stated objectives of my research project was to give voice to and validate the experiences of the hitherto marginalized group of YAVI. This gave them the confidence to express their employment challenges and discuss pragmatic solutions. During the course of interviews, they often relied on the pronouns 'we', 'our', 'us' to indicate some of the perennial employment barriers, such as employers' discrimination, which are encountered by people with visual impairments in the labor market (see Chhabra 2020). The boundary between the participants and me as a researcher often blurred when they forgot about my diverging biographical experience and social location, and they incorporated me within their employment narrative. Also, the usage of phrases such as 'you understand', 'you know what I mean', 'you believe this thing', 'you must have noticed' suggests the presence of trust and open communication, resulting in thick, authentic and rich employment narratives. However, not all participants relied on the common identity parameter of visual impairment. A case in point is the experience of female participants who were raised in rural India and migrated to Delhi for work. They often used phrases such as 'I don't know how to explain this', which reiterated the distance between the participants and me as a researcher and nudged me to ask clarifying questions.

In addition, some participants from Oslo who perceived me as an insider felt that we had common overlapping experiences of exclusion from the labor market in Oslo. This perception of being an insider contingent on my employment history was problematic, as they often did not explain the mechanisms of their labor market exclusion explicitly. They presumed that I possessed implicit understanding. Often I had to ask clarifying questions to the participants in order to be certain that I understood correctly what they meant. For example, one participant was seriously bullied during her schooling years and she frequently contemplated to stop studying. This experience was rather novel for me, as I had not encountered bullying whilst concluding my education in India. This participant expected me to know about the problem of widespread bullying in the Norwegian education system against disabled youth, which leads them to drop out from education and subsequently results in their labor market exclusion. I was taken aback by the problem of bullying and encouraged her to talk more about it through multiple clarifying questions such as 'was [this bullying] just because you could not see and you were different?' Therefore, being perceived as an insider could create liabilities during the data-collection process (Merton 1972), as shared experience, implicit understanding and common value-orientation could result in investigative impediments (Corbin Dwyner & Buckle 2009; Hellawell 2006). In order to circumnavigate these issues, culturally sensitive outsiders might be able to explore the experiences of marginal groups more objectively, as they are not enmeshed within the group's activities and the group participants might feel the need to explain more thoroughly their standpoint (Bridges 2017; Hellawell 2006).

My researcher positionality and identity influenced both the data collection and its analysis. I was able to promptly grasp many employment narratives that discussed the barriers encountered by YAVI. The thematic analysis was influenced by my personal, social and situational factors (Bridges 2017). Often while listening to the transcript with my screen-reader (Job Access with Speech) I vigorously nodded along, while on other occasions I was astounded afresh by some of the harrowing employment stories. The two factors that assisted the data-analysis were, first, I took preliminary field-notes after conducting each interview, which outlined the salient features of the interview, participants and the issues that surprised me. Second, working on the interview-transcripts with Dragon speech recognition software accompanied with my reading-assistant enabled me to nurture more analytical distance from the transcribed interview-data. Listening and re-listening to the interview-transcripts with my screen-reader's voice in part diminished the sense of overwhelmingness, which I encountered when I listened to the distressed stories and soliciting voice of some participants. Similarly, as the data-analysis process proceeded, I felt a peculiar sense of distance from the more positive and success-oriented employment narratives. As I juxtaposed them, I realized that the role of serendipitous contextual factors, such as where the youth participant was born, what was the family's attitude towards vision impairment, whether the youth participant could access mainstream schools and participate in disability organizations seemed to significantly affect their employment narratives. Therefore, during the data-analysis stage I could gradually move beyond the position of being enamored by the individual biographies to a state of a more nuanced and culturally sensitive understanding of collective narratives. In essence, although commencing the data-collection and analysis as an insider, I realized that I was an in-betweener (Chaudhry 2018) who pragmatically leveraged the insider status and incorporated the dynamic, malleable researcher's positionality and identity.

5.4 Ethical Research

There are grave ethical implications for both researcher and the participants when the researcher is perceived as an insider. The members of a marginalized group (i.e., disabled people) might be more interested in knowledge production, which could lower the participatory barriers and enhance their social inclusion (Oliver 1990; Oliver 1992; Charlton 1998). It might be challenging for the researcher to carry this burden of high expectations. Moreover, if the research findings contradict the group's interests and values, then the insider researcher might be in an ethical predicament either to conform to the empirical data fidelity and its dissemination or to succumb to the pressures of group-solidarity and interests (Merton 1972). In addition, if the boundaries between the researcher and the participants are blurred, the insider researcher might be ascribed the additional roles of a friend, counselor or mentor (Humphrey 2007). The researcher might find it difficult to fulfill these additional responsibilities associated with the ascribed role. In addition

to this, the challenge of confidentiality becomes more pressing, because the insider researcher and the participants might socialize within the same social circles. There could be unanticipated challenges with fully concealing information across personal settings (Corbin Dwyner & Buckle 2009).

The question of high expectations associated with the research output was felt more acutely in Delhi, wherein many participants were intrigued by the comparative nature of this research and the fact that I was travelling from Norway to conduct it. Many of the participants thought that if they told me about their employment challenges, I would be able to intervene in the form of a job-offer or introduce them to influential people who could assist them in securing better employment opportunities. Their perception that I had access to networks of power and influence (Chaudhry 2018) partly fueled their expectations and resulted in ethical quandaries. This misplaced expectation was quite perplexing as in the consent forms it was categorically stated that 'the voluntary participation in the interviews means that you will not be paid or compensated in cash or kind'.

I often was expected to fulfill the role of a mentor or counsellor, as the youth participants assessed that I was financially independent, socially mobile and relatively successful. It was exceedingly difficult to fulfill the responsibility of this unexpected role. This challenge is best encapsulated by one poignant case of emotionally charged discourse when a youth participant in Delhi claimed that if she would not have a job in the future she might consider committing suicide.

> If one day you hear [participant] is no more, really I will tell you, you have to be sure [participant] was facing financial problems. So if you ever come to hear something like this, then there is only one reason: because I have no work, I have no job, I did not get support from anybody.

During the course of this intensive interview, the participant expected me to directly or indirectly help her with securing a stable job in the future. However, the best I could offer was to lend my ear to her narrative, reassure her that she had tremendous grit and talent, dissuade her from undertaking negative catastrophizing and wish that she would find steady employment. Contrasting the experience of misplaced expectations and undeserved ascribed roles, there were other participants who used the word 'yaar' (friend), and they wanted to socialize with me along with the European assistant. Often I had to politely extricate from these expectations from the participants and decline their requests to join a common social network. In part, I felt a heightened sense of responsibility towards the European assistant, as she had never travelled outside Europe, and the city of Delhi has witnessed a resurgent wave of sexual assault against women. Therefore, I had to exercise additional caution while processing the socializing requests from the participants. I constantly tried to nurture empathic understanding and deal with the participants with cultural sensitivity; however, I did not attempt any psycho-emotional union with them (Fay 1996). Listening to the vulnerable life experiences of participants from Delhi was taking a personal toll on me, as I could witness my socio-economic privilege vis-à-vis the interviewees. Nevertheless, I felt quite limited and often encountered pangs of conscience owing to a recognition that I could not assist them in any meaningful and substantive manner.

As compared to Delhi, the participants in Oslo kept a requisite distance and considered me as a quasi-outsider, owing to my personal, social and situational factors (Bridges 2017; Griffith 1998), which frequently did not intersect with the vectors of their identities and social location. The issue of data-privacy and participant confidentiality was felt more acutely in the Norwegian context. The first youth participant who was interviewed decided to withdraw from the study, owing to a profound sense of concern for confidentiality. The youth participant realized that some intimate life experiences had been shared with me and was fearful that biographical experiences might be disclosed across social occasions wherein our paths might cross. In line with the ethical principle of 'beneficence' (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015: 95), the participant's request for privacy and confidentiality was fully respected and all acquired information was duly removed. On a related note, some interviewees were curious to know who participated in the research and what perspectives did they share. I have strictly erred on the side of anonymity and confidentiality and have accepted the predicament of these socially awkward moments, which happened when I interact with the participants in social settings. I often felt that the more proximity I had with the participants from Oslo, they felt that they had a compunction to know 'what I was discovering'. and therefore I had to more actively distance myself from them (Humphrey 2007: 18).

Although one of the primary objectives of my research project is to give voice to the marginalized group of YAVI who have previously been overlooked (Chhabra 2020), not every experiential reflection by interviewees was taken at face value and faithfully accepted. The interviewees were challenged to explain their positions and clarify their assumptions, as I was an in-betweener, not fully immersed within their employment narratives. A case in point is one youth participant from Delhi who attributed the employment barriers to structural factors and displayed outright animus against the government and its employment policies. This was rather perplexing, as the participant had been a beneficiary of the affirmative action policy of the government and was working within the public sector. I was aware that the Indian government could be apathetic towards the employment needs of disabled people; however, the participant's relatively privileged socio-economic situation predicated on the well-paid and rather stable public sector job did not justify the overt vitriol against the government's policies. Therefore, I invited the participant to clarify her position and reflect upon the employment situation to enable a critical yet balanced reflection of the employment situation.

Not only did I challenge the youth participants' employment narratives and ask for clarifications, but also my perspectives were contested and my assumptions were undermined. Before conducting the field-study in Oslo, I felt

that the Norwegian participants would evaluate the governments' employment initiatives in a positive vein, as Norway is well renowned for its disability protection system (Halvorsen & Hvinden 2018). However, many participants in Oslo stated their disappointment with the government initiatives linked to employment measures for disabled people. One youth participant stated, 'Politicians say everyone should work…how the hell should you get them to work'. This participant problematized the gap between rhetoric and reality. Participants disabused me from my sterile assumptions (e.g., high disability protection ought to mean greater socio-economic inclusion for disabled youth). In essence, the interview process based on an open and respectful dialogue facilitated me in understanding and interpreting the complex employment narratives, which in turn enabled me to present ethical findings. I listened acutely, empathized generously, dissented diligently and learned voraciously throughout my interactions with YAVI.

6. Concluding Reflections

This paper has revisited the insider-outsider debate within disability research and has put forward the claim that a strict insider-outsider researcher's positionality and identity ought not to be sustained and is epistemologically controversial and methodologically untenable. While conducting the comparative field-study in Oslo and Delhi, the simplistic binaries associated with the native/foreign, privileged/oppressed, us/them, included/excluded and insider/outsider were problematized and challenged by the participants. First, I was inadvertently assessed as a foreigner in my country of origin by some participants in Delhi. In addition, being an immigrant who spoke English endowed me with an outsider-positionality in Oslo, which was difficult to transcend. At times, the participants often incorporated me within their employment narratives predicated on a collective identity marker of visual impairment. Nonetheless, I was othered on multiple vectors linked to my biographical experience and social location. I encountered moments wherein intuitive empathic understanding emerged naturally. At the same time, there were instances wherein I felt a peculiar sense of estrangement while listening to the youth participants' employment-narratives from both Oslo and Delhi. Factors such as economic privilege and social mobility worked as an important differentiator, which made participants from Delhi distance themselves from me. Similarly, while listening to the employment narratives of the participants from Oslo, at times my labor market struggles seemed more severe whilst on other occasions the employment experiences encountered by participants appeared more harrowing. There was a dialectical tension predicated on intersecting identities, complex biographies and multi-layered social locations, which nudged me constantly to re-negotiate my researcher's position in relation to the participants of this research project.

However, it must be acknowledged, at different stages I pragmatically leveraged the insider label while simultaneously learning from the othering process encountered in the field study. In essence, I felt like a 'sociological stranger' (Hellawell 2006: 486) wandering with a specific purpose to compare experiential insights of YAVI from Oslo and Delhi. I presented the perspective from the margin; however, I was acutely and critically aware that I was not situated on the periphery.

Based on the critical reflections from my field-study, three epistemological takeaways emerged. First, there is an insider-outsider continua (Hellawell 2006), and researchers seem to be insiders in some aspects and outsiders in others. Therefore, instead of labelling the researcher as either an insider or an outsider it could be epistemologically valuable to discuss 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' of the researcher (see Bridges 2017: 343; Crossley et al. 2016: 121) as the boundaries between the researcher and the researched are consistently evolving. Second, the researcher's identity is multilayered, contingent upon biological factors, biographical experiences and social location (Goodley 2017; Humphrey 2007; Thomas 2006; Traustadóttir 2006). It is problematic to exclusively identify and predominantly rely on a specific identity marker (i.e. impairment status) while conducting research. The intersectional nature of researchers' identity coupled with group heterogeneity could add additional layers of complexity while conducting research. Third, for researchers who intend to conduct Global North-South comparative research, adherence to a stringent insider-outsider researcher's position is not feasible owing to distinctive issues associated with multicultural values, material inequalities and power continua (Crossley et al. 2016; Chaudhry 2018; Grech & Soldatic 2016; Meekosha 2008).

Thus, this paper encourages the researcher to assume the role of an in-betweener to pragmatically utilize the insider status, which enables privileged access and empathic understanding. In addition, especially while dealing with previously oppressed marginalized groups, the in-betweener status could allow the researcher not to be overwhelmed by the data-collection and analysis process. The in-betweener researcher position could guard against the accusation of grinding an ax, often attributed to the disability research done by the culturally embedded disabled insiders. In addition, it allows researchers to drop the label of an objective outsider.

This paper cautions against romanticizing the insider researcher who possesses tacit knowledge and can generate thick, authentic, rich descriptions of the marginal group, whilst vilifying the idealized outsider position, which is predicated on objectivity and value-neutrality. While conducting any social research, and in particular researching on marginalized groups, such as disabled people, it is indispensable that researchers nurture openness, respect and empathy. They ought to remain critical yet culturally sensitive, constantly undertake self-scrutiny and empower the marginalized group through responsible and ethical data production and dissemination (Bridges 2017).

This paper invites researchers with disabilities to take a new look at the simplistic insider-outsider polarity and encourages them to adopt an in-betweener researcher position instead. This critical, fluid position allows for the incorporation of biographical complexities and multi-layered identities more freely at the different stages of the research process. Epistemologically speaking, this position offers much and perhaps there is little to lose.

Competing Interests

This research paper is part of a Ph.D. study and no competing interest is reported.

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