

Discuss the relative merits and demerits of 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives in the study of religions. Is a scholar from either perspective better qualified to study/interpret/explain religions?

HPRS7010

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Introduction

The debate on insider/outsider perspectives has been a long-standing problem for academics in the study of religion (Jensen, 2011, p.29). Whilst other academic disciplines also face the same dilemma, it can be argued that this debate is most relevant in the study of religion. This essay has been divided into three sections. The first section will discuss the definition of the 'insider' and 'outsider.' The second section will examine some of the merits and demerits of each approach with the final section discussing which scholar of either side is best qualified to study/interpret/explain religions.

1.0 Defining Insider and Outsider

According to McCutcheon (1999, p.1-2), in the academic study of religion, one of the most significant challenges faced by researchers is what has come to be known as the 'insider/outsider problem.' As a result, important questions are raised regarding a researcher's accessibility to the meanings of actions, motives, beliefs, intentions, etc. of others, especially when they do not share the same beliefs nor do they partake in their practices (ibid, p.2). Alternatively, is the opposite considered to be true, that, all onlookers are not able to see beyond their prejudices, circumstances, and assumptions (ibid)? Nevertheless, scholars of religion have relied on works beyond the academic study of religion to address and take a stance on the insider/outsider problem (ibid, p.15).

Before delving into the discussion of the relative merits and demerits of insider/outsider perspectives in the study of religions, each term will need to be defined.

1.1 The 'Insider'

The definition of an insider, which some scholars have referred to as *emic*, a term coined by the linguist Pike (d.2000), is the study of behaviour from within any given system (ibid, p.17). In the field of academic study of religion, for Knott (2005, pp.246-247), an insider would be anyone who is fully immersed in a religion as a complete participant in its activities. They are scholars who write about their faith as insiders, with no need for objectivity or critical distance (ibid, p.247). Having access to an insider's knowledge, they believe that they are in a better position to provide the most accurate and informed information about their religion (ibid).

Additionally, Chryssides (2023, p.24), demonstrates that there are numerous categories of insiders. There are the "rank-and-file member, the long-standing member and office-bearers with different degrees of centrality in an organisation" (ibid). On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are those members who are uncertain about their faith, participants of schismatic movements in the religion, as well as those who have become dissatisfied with their religion (ibid, p.25). Moreover, some members are not completely committed and have joined or continue to remain in religion for non-religious reasons, such as maintaining their marriage, its social function, etc. (ibid).

1.2 The 'Outsider'

As for the definition of an outsider or as some have referred to as etic, the opposite of an insider is the study of behaviour from outside a particular system (McCutcheon, 1999, p.17). In other words, they observe the behaviour, beliefs, etc. of others. The observers then attempt to arrange, consolidate, compare, and redescribe the collected information in a system which they would create (ibid). This proposed system is then used as the foundation for comparison and analysis when they carry out and collect further information through observation (ibid).

Knott (2005, p.247), has described the outsider in the study of religion as the complete observer. They are typically scholars who research and write about the religion they are observing whilst abstaining from any form of participation with the observed (ibid). This method of observation is usually linked with the psychology and sociology of religion (ibid).

Much like the insiders, the outsiders can also be split up into numerous categories (Chryssides, 2023, p.25). There are some who are not interested, those who are interested, ex-members of a religion, etc. When speaking of the insider/outsider issue, Chryssides (ibid, p.24) very convincingly highlights that it is not simply an issue of believers and non-believers, rather there is a spectrum of commitment and non-commitment for each one.

1.3 An example of the Insider and Outsider Issue in the Islamic Paradigm

An example to demonstrate the insider/outsider perspective from the Islamic paradigm would be the reading of the Prophet Muhammad's (d.632) life from various viewpoints. There are biographies of the Prophet written from both the insider and outsider perspectives.

An insider's account of the Prophet's life is the *Life of Muhammad* by Muhammad Haykal (d.1956) (Dakake, 2018, p.346). In this book, the author spends a significant amount of time examining the scientific possibility of some of the extraordinary accounts attributed to the Prophet, such as the miraculous Night Journey (ibid). Other recent works include the works of Omid Safi and Tariq Ramadan, whereby one of their main concerns is to treat misrepresentation of the Prophet's moral and personal dimensions (ibid). Their works are not only directed at their Muslim audience, the insiders but are also aimed at the non-Muslim audiences, the outsiders (ibid, p.347).

From an outsider's perspective is W. Montgomery Watt's book *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (ibid, p.346). Watt ventures to portray the Prophet as a "sincere social and moral reformer" (ibid), however, he does not believe him to be a Prophet in the complete sense of the word (ibid), an integral factor for any Muslims. This may be due to his Anglican faith (ibid).

Additionally, there is the 1977 book, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* by Patricia Crone (d.2015) and Michael Cook. According to Qureshi (2008, p.215), this book contested the field of

early Islamic history, as Qureshi believes the authors to have implicitly charged the scholars of the field to be insiders in their approach who simply regurgitated the Islamic sources about its origin. The book was an endeavour to challenge the field's methodological presumptions (ibid). Perhaps the most evident statement of an outsider approach, in Qureshi's (ibid) opinion, is the following:

“In the first place, the account we have given of the origins of Islam is not one which any believing Muslim can accept: not because it in any way belittles the historical role of Muhammad, but because it presents him in a role quite different from that which he has taken on in the Islamic tradition. This is a book written by infidels for infidels, and it is based on what from any Muslim perspective must appear an inordinate regard for the testimony of infidel sources. Our account is not merely unacceptable; it is also one which any Muslim whose faith is as a grain of mustard seed should find no difficulty in rejecting” (Crone et al., 1977, pp.vii-viii).

2.0 The relative merits and demerits of 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives in the study of religions.

Having defined the terms 'insider' and 'outsider,' this section will focus on the merits and demerits of the insider/outsider perspective in the study of religion. It must be noted that the merits/demerits are relative to the multi-disciplinary approach to the study of religion, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc. and for the purpose of this paper, the merits/demerits will be treated generically. This will, of course, by no means be an exhaustive list and will only look to highlight some of the major merits/demerits or advantages/disadvantages of both

perspectives. The various degrees between the insider and outsider, such as participant-observer, etc. have not been considered for this paper.

2.1 Merits and Demerits of the Insider

According to Decoo (2022, p.1), the merits and demerits of the insider approach are well documented. One such merit is the immediate primary access to the people being researched (ibid). Merton (d.2003) has described the insider as one who possesses a previous intimate knowledge of the community and its members that is being studied (Hellawell, 2006, p.484). Although immediate primary access is a merit for the insider researcher, it does not necessarily mean unrestricted access. Secondary access, such as access to specific parts of the organisation – or in this case, the religion – may not be accessible to them, such as privileged information, which may be pertinent to their research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p.67).

Likewise, the status of the researcher within the group will have a natural impact on accessibility (ibid). The higher the researcher's status is within the research group, the more accessibility will be available to networking and privileged information. This, of course, does not come without its limitations. The higher status may lead to exclusion from informal and grassroots-level networks (ibid). Nonetheless, being an insider, despite having some limitations, would at the very least allow the researcher to enter through the door to begin his/her research to some capacity. Whereas, for the outsider, the first hurdle they must overcome is acquiring primary access to conduct their research (ibid).

Another merit listed by Decoo (2022, p.1) in favour of the insider is the advantage of having a pre-understanding of the religion and its people. It is believed that insiders are in a better position to appreciate the “cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts” of the group they are researching (Chavez, 2015, p.481). Moreover, they will have an intimate knowledge of the chronological and practical aspects of the discipline (ibid), the religion and its followers.

A practical example of this, stepping away from the discussion of religion, is that of a manager’s in-depth knowledge of the day-to-day running of an organisation (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p.69). They understand the everyday jargon/language used in the organisation (ibid). They would possess a working knowledge of what busies their colleagues’ minds, who to turn to for information and gossip, etc. (ibid). Due to their vast experience and knowledge of the organisation, they are able to use the internal language of the organisation and personal interactions with other members when making inquiries and interviewing, appropriately following up on discussions, allowing them to attain more reliable data (ibid). Their known presence permits them to contribute to conversations or simply observe without other members taking notice of their presence (ibid).

The ‘membership’ of the manager in the organisation grants him/her certain privileges which would not normally be granted to others. In a similar manner, an insider researcher is able to take advantage of their membership in the group they are researching. The insider will have a better understanding of the culture, expectations, language, social cues, religious nuances, religious

experiences etc. in contrast to an outsider. This, again, does not come without its own set of problems.

For instance, the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence (one of the four schools of law in Sunni Islam) insists that to attain the quality of *iman* (acknowledgement or acceptance, a quality distinct from mere belief) which leads to true knowledge, the prerequisite is to be a Muslim (Gardiner & Engler, 2012, p.240). This example demonstrates that access to additional information and interpretation necessitates specific insider characteristics (ibid) which will not be available to the outsider.

Even though insiders have intimate knowledge of their group, one clear demerit is that their involvement with the group may cause them to overlook things that an outsider would find quite evident (Lewis, 1973, p.587). Things such as the demands of everyday life, “the emotional and behavioural demands” (ibid) on their motivations, etc. However, it is also this very involvement which makes it possible for the insider to grasp the inner workings of their group to a level that is not possible for the outsider (ibid, pp.587-588).

Yet, another demerit of the insider researcher is that due to their closeness to the group, they are more likely to be held accountable for their actions (ibid, p.588), or perhaps, in this case, their research. This would mean that he/she would be subjected to some degree of restriction in

reporting their findings. As the insider will continue to reside and/or socialise with the group after the research is complete, he/she will need to, out of self-interest, exercise caution (ibid) to maintain the relationship. Stated differently, this may hinder their objectivity in the research as Alvesson (2003, p.183) has very interestingly stated that insider research is “more politically complex than is common.”

It is, again, this insider closeness which may force the research in a particular direction. The insider may not be able to look beyond what the group considers to be crucial (ibid) for their faith or religion. Innes (2009, p.442), has referred to this as the “dangers of over-rapport.” This over-rapport transpires when the insider's research becomes reflective of the group's goals, and he/she is unable to conduct the research critically and objectively (ibid).

On the other hand, a noteworthy merit of insider researchers is that they are able to clarify research issues in a unique manner (Innes, 2009, p.445). Not only are they able to assist others in increasing their knowledge but are also able to clarify and challenge preconceived misinformation of the research group (ibid) and their faith.

Generally, the primary focus of Academic research is focused on theory development (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p.60). The preconceived conception that insider research does not meet the required degree of intellectual rigour may cause it to be viewed as problematic and even lead to

it being disregarded (ibid). Insiders are seen to have a personal stake and an emotional investment in the research, hence, disqualifying all insights that the insider has accumulated from the lived experience in the setting of research (ibid). Instead of viewing this in a positive light, insiders are likely to be charged with being too close to the group (ibid). Consequently, they are not able to create any distance between themselves and the research group to be able to attain the necessary objectivity for valid research (ibid).

Despite what seems like the odds being stacked against the insider researcher, Brannick and Coghlan (ibid) argue that all people are insiders in some context or another, be it in the family context, community, etc., and the knowledge which the insider acquires of the said settings are rich and complex (ibid). As such, a researcher is able to, through the practice of reflexive awareness, express unstated knowledge that has been ingrained in the individual through socialising in that particular context and, thereafter, articulate it as theoretical knowledge (ibid).

In the study of religion, David Hufford views reflexivity as allowing scholars to recognise those moments in which they transgress their self-created authority (McCutcheon, 1999, p.290). Moreover, reflexivity is able to assist in differentiating between the researcher's personal and scholarly voices (ibid). A traditional and widely accepted understanding of reflexivity, more so in qualitative research, is made up of two ongoing activities (Walent, 2008, p.10). Firstly, the researcher's personal reflection on biases, preconceptions, and preunderstandings in addition to their own growth as the research develops (ibid). Second, critically examining how personal

commitments and theoretical inclinations may impact the integrity of the research process and the results (ibid). This is, of course, not to say that reflexivity is a tool exclusively used by the insider researcher. Rather, it can and may be necessary also for the outsider researcher. Nonetheless, reflexivity serves as a tool to keep the researcher in check to maintain the integrity of their research.

2.2 Merits and Demerits of the Outsider

One merit, if not the most significant merit, attributed to the outsider researcher in the study of religion, or perhaps in any of the other social sciences, is their ability to approach their object of study objectively. Outsider researchers view themselves to be in a superior position to provide a more objective account of their findings (Innes, 2009, p.443). Georg Simmel (d.1918) is quoted to have stated regarding the outsider researcher in relation to their research group that they are “freer, practically and theoretically...” (ibid). The outsider researcher is able to conduct surveys with minimal prejudice, with a more general scope of criterion and more objective principles (ibid). Also, the outsider would not find themselves held back in their research by custom, devoutness, and previous practice of the group (ibid).

Lewis (1973, p.585) asserts that there is a clear link between the scientific validity of research and the level of objectivity believed to be associated with the approach. This is rooted in the theory that there is only one valid reality which can be approximated by the researcher who has been given the proper training (ibid). Such an understanding of objectivity should, ideally, result

in two researchers who have received the same training, exposed to the same culture or religion (with the caveat of other things being equal), reporting more or less the same findings (ibid). However, this does not appear to be the case, calling into question the concept of objectivity.

Hence, some writers have expressed strong doubts regarding the concept of, what they have termed, scientific objectivity, more so in the social sciences (ibid). Roszak (d.2011) has dedicated a significant portion of his book, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, to discussing the nature of objectivity. Roszak suggests, as posited by Lewis (ibid), that scientific objectivity is not only a myth but also an arbitrary construct. Cultural elements including the social, economic, and political status of the researcher coupled with the level of influence they have on the hypothesis, the methodology, and the data selected by the researcher have been highlighted by writers on the topic (ibid). For example, in anthropology, one of the disciplines used in the approach to the academic study of religion, these elements feature more prominently (ibid). Along with differences in ideology and class, anthropologists also differ in the most inclusive and broad cultural traits (ibid). Therefore, making it near impossible for the anthropologist to deliver an impersonal interpretation of the object of their studies (ibid).

According to Ferber (2006, p.176), the notion of objectivity in the study of religion is central to the insider/outsider debate. Consequently, he views such terms to be, despite it being claimed by outsider researchers, a “loaded and dangerous term” (ibid). However, Ferber (ibid) insists that since objectivity and subjectivity have become descriptions by which both outsiders and insiders

have come to identify one other, the whole debate of the insider/outsider has become blurred. Whilst the outsiders claim to be objective in comparison to the insiders, the insiders do not view themselves to be completely subjective (ibid). In other words, some element of objectivity is present in the self-identification of both camps (ibid).

Complete objectivity cannot be claimed by either side and, therefore, whilst the outsider is not restrained by any former commitment to the research group as opposed to the insider researcher, their claim of objectivity is not without significant limitations. A possible method of overcoming these limitations is by exchanging a single valid objective knowledge with a perspectivist knowledge (Lewis, 1973, p.586). Whereby, the researcher can approach any research whilst acknowledging that there is an infinite amount of understanding and that their findings are not the only perspective but are relevant to their situation (ibid).

Nevertheless, according to Merton (d.2003) (Merton, 1972, p.33), the outsider is able to identify significant unfamiliar aspects of the group which is otherwise familiar to the group and the insider researcher. This will prod the outsider to formulate and raise further questions, something that may have slipped past an insider (ibid). The detachment of the outsider from the group being studied, allows the outsider flexibility to overlook the group's goals in the name of pure science (Lewis, 1973, p.588).

A demerit of the outsider perspective in the study of religions is the concept of reductionism. Reductionists are people who believe that explaining religion from outside of religion is the best method of understanding it (Pals, 1986, p.18). The aim of their theories is to demonstrate that religious phenomena, such as ritualistic acts, for example, the five daily prayers in Islam, or belief in God, are rooted in nonreligious causes (ibid). Causes include the needs of the body and psyche, pressures of society, etc. (ibid). An example of this would be the psychology of Freud (d.1939) (ibid, p.22). According to Freud, religious expressions result from urges and demands that are ingrained in an individual's psychological structure (ibid). Thereafter, in an attempt to resolve the psychological stress, a person projects these religious expressions (ibid). In this example, religious expressions or faith has been reduced to a chemical reaction in the psyche.

As a result, outsider scholars, when attempting to redescribe, systemise, and present their observations may fall trap to oversimplifying or discarding issues which are perhaps considered significant and meaningful to the insiders (McCutcheon, 1999, p.132). Reductionists have been blamed for minimising their data and for what McCutcheon (ibid) has described as “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” What he means by this is that in their efforts to simplify the explanation of religion, religion – the topic of their study – is absent, replaced by discussions of “economy, society, gender, or politics” (ibid).

Moreover, some scholars of religious study have contended that it is their responsibility to preserve that which is sacred to the common culture against misrepresentation when

redescribing the insider's religion, depicting it as faithfully as possible (ibid). In hindsight, it is not difficult to understand why a believer in a religion would not be willing to accept reductionist theories to explain their faith (Pals, 1986, p.23). According to Pals (ibid), for a believer, his/her faith is based on free, personal choice, and based on what they consider to be the truth. Reductionist theories would contradict this for the believer, reducing their faith to sheer "mental neurosis or social circumstances" (ibid). Interestingly, the argument of free, personal choice, etc. is more suitable for the believing insider as opposed to every insider as there is a spectrum of degrees of insiders, as discussed in section one.

3.0 Is a scholar from either perspective better qualified to study/interpret/explain religions?

Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. What may be perceived as a merit may not necessarily be free of limitations and what may appear to be a demerit, can be looked at as a merit from another angle. Having discussed some of the merits/demerits of the insider/outsider perspective, the question remains, who is better qualified to study/interpret/explain religions? To answer this question, firstly another pertinent question must be answered. Is there truly an insider/outsider problem?

Gardiner and Engler (2012, p.243) have considered the use of the word 'problem' to be contentious. For (Jensen, 2011) p.30, the insider/outsider division is fundamentally a "politically expedient construction" which bears no methodological value, is based on philosophically defective assumptions, not deserve the academic attention that it receives. The division conceals

more information than it reveals (ibid). Jensen (ibid) considers there to be no basis for the division, which merely establishes that knowledge is not distributed equally (ibid).

Jensen (ibid) poses the question, is there a reality to the insider/outsider division or is it how we expect things to be? What might be the nature of such a difference (ibid)? His answer to this is that for the most part, it is similar to an abstract metaphysical premise which states that there exists privileged information/knowledge only known by an individual or group of people (ibid). Simply put, it is a fact that certain things are known by some and not by others (ibid). In this regard, it is possible to argue that the insider-outsider distinction relates to a gradient rather than a divide, a manifestation of the way the world is (ibid).

This, however, does not reflect the lived reality that the insider/outsider debate continues within academic circles. For example, Mostowlansky and Rota (2016, p.321) argue that a wider outlook on the debate will be productive, and the topic requires more attention in the academic study of religion. This is because it relates to some issues that are inescapable in current research (ibid).

Moreover, the perspective of both insider and outsider research can disclose “certain truths” (Lewis, 1973, p.587). The aim and objective of the researcher will steer the research to the appropriate perspective (ibid). Intellectually and practically, each viewpoint has its merits/advantages and demerits/disadvantages (ibid).

This sentiment is also echoed by (Hammersley, 1993) p.433 who has explicitly stated that being an established participant, an insider, excludes an outsider researcher from acquiring valid knowledge. The validity of research can be increased by a combination of participation and estrangement (ibid). Yet, neither perspective can guarantee nor prevent valid knowledge (ibid). Similarly, there are no indisputable advantages to being an insider or an outsider (ibid). The advantages and disadvantages of each approach vary slightly based on the circumstances and goal of the study (ibid).

Regardless of whether the insider/outsider perspective is a problem or not, scholars of both sides can contribute to the study/interpretation/explanation of religion in different ways. To claim emphatically that one perspective is more suitable or qualified would not be a fair assessment as neither approach is free from limitations. The question of who is more qualified to study/interpret/explain religions, perhaps, can be narrowed down to 'who is asking?' If the questioner is an insider, then naturally the answer for them would be the insider researcher and vice versa. This is not to claim that an insider is not able to benefit from an outsider's research or the other way around.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that in the discussion of the merits and demerits of insider and outsider perspectives in the study of religions, there is no perfect or ultimately correct approach. Each perspective can make its contribution, allowing for a multi-faceted insight into religion and its adherents. The meeting of the two approaches, or to borrow Gadamer's (d.2002) phrase the

'fusion of horizons' (Knotts, 2014, p.233) will facilitate understanding between both approaches and also enable one to evolve in their awareness and search of the truth.

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