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To cite this article: Afaf Jabiri (2024) The continuity of Othering in feminist methodology: activist-scholar and the insider/outsider dynamics, Third World Quarterly, 45:1, 79-94, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2023.2219214](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2219214)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2219214>



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Published online: 20 Jun 2023.



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The continuity of Othering in feminist methodology: activist-scholar and the insider/outsider dynamics

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I argue for the need to nuance our understanding of insider/outsider relations and challenge self–other dynamics in the research process. Using my own research field experience to set up how Othering occurs, I engage with the rigidity of the insider/outsider dynamic and the inflexibility arising from how ‘Western’ knowledge production processes ask one to maintain objectivity and, therefore, replicate the power dynamics between the self and Other. The aim here is to unpack how this process related to my own position vis-à-vis the community researched, my positionality, and how this interacts with the practices required to ensure research rigidity in Western academia. Thus, this article argues that redefining the self in an ‘either/or’ form essentially speaks to Western questions of objectivity, cultural difference and homogeneity. This article is an attempt to problematise the Othering nature of the process of defining oneself in relation or contrast to research participants – a method that continues to define the entrenched binaries of a reality dominated by hierarchised opposites.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 February 2022

Accepted 25 May 2023

KEYWORDS

Insider/outsider
feminist
activist-scholar
research
methodology

Introduction

Feminist work challenges both accounts and the notion of a homogeneous ‘women’s experience’ in fieldwork and research – a hypothesis that assumes women researchers, merely by virtue of being women, share some features with women research participants (Rosaldo 1980; Abu-Lughod 1988, 2006; Parpart 1993; Ardner 2018; Clifford 2010). Feminists also problematise methodologies that rely on presumed binaries and differences (Collins 1986, 1989; Abu-Lughod 1988, 2006; Clifford 2010). Challenging dichotomies in feminist scholarships that, as Strathern suggests, ‘establish the rules of normalcy’ (1987, 283) is crucial for feminists, as dichotomies are ‘commodity notions that inform westernhood concepts’ (Strathern 1987, 284). In the same vein, this article problematises locating the feminist researcher’s positionality according to the insider/outsider dichotomy, particularly when researchers are rooted and have active roles in their community of study. It argues that the insider/outsider dichotomy is nothing more than a reframing of the power relationship between researchers and research participants in terms of subject/object and self/other; a dichotomy suggesting the worlds of the researcher and research participants are either different or alike.

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Perhaps the most concrete way to begin addressing the scope of the insider/outsider dichotomy is through my own personal experience. I joined academia after 15 years of activism around gender issues in Jordan and across the Arab region. I believed that – due to my long-term engagement – I was well positioned to use research to highlight the oft-overlooked issues that significantly impact women's choices, including my own. I chose to study *wilaya* (guardianship) over women, a provision in Jordan's personal status laws (PSLs) long believed to be 'out of bounds', as it was seen as closely tied to religion. Through my research, I aimed to challenge *wilaya*'s off-limits status and develop arguments to aid women's movement in Jordan, as well as those elsewhere in the region, in opening discussions on *wilaya* essential to any PSL reform. However, conducting fieldwork was not as straightforward a process as I had envisioned.

I must say that I was very fortunate to study at a centre for gender studies and in a feminist environment with a supportive team of supervisors. Still, in reading texts on methodologies, ethics form approval processes, seminar questions, and conversations with fellow scholars, I had to question myself before engaging with my research topic and participants. The question of positionality – particularly as it relates to the insider/outsider dichotomy and the intricate mix of my positionality as a Palestinian refugee, feminist activist in Jordan and the region, and scholar located in the West – was incredibly challenging for me. In order to avoid 'insider researcher bias' or 'thinking as usual', the critiques levied at other so-called 'insider' researchers, I searched for ways in which I was distinct, similar, or both simultaneously. This process is different from self-criticism or self-knowledge in the way it generates questions of identity politics, separation and difference rather than allowing for reflection. As I show in the following examples, this process resulted in the research community seeing me as an exception, a sense often producing essentialism and stereotypes. Hence, 'the act of distancing' seen as central to research in Western methodology 'was, in fact, detrimental to the research objective' (Innes 2009, 444).

Answering a question like how close to or removed from their community of study a researcher is forces the researcher to redefine their self in an 'either/or' form, which, as I argue here, essentially speaks to Western questions of objectivity, cultural difference and homogeneity. Through this, the insider/outsider dichotomy explored within the context of qualitative research methodology (Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Knott 2009; Kusow 2003; Merton 1972) draws boundaries in a way that defines, organises and structures knowledge gained in the field, as the researcher's positionality is used as a technique of either similar or distinct representation, sometimes both.

Drawing on my own activism and research experience in the Arab region, I contend that perceiving the relationship between research participants and researchers merely within this dichotomy not only leads to structural issues of inequality – such as race, class, ethnicity, and migration status – being insufficiently acknowledged, but also replicates the power dynamics between the self and Other within Western academia (Harrison 1992, 2008; Collins 1986, 1989; Abu-Lughod 1988, 2006). This dichotomy positions activist-scholars as the Other and, as such, requires them to clarify their positions of objectivity and neutrality over and over again. In this regard, feminist scholars located either in the Arab region – like myself – or outside the West more generally are less privileged, as there must be 'scientific' evidence demonstrating how their positionality has assimilated Western research methods and norms. Thus, I propose going beyond the insider/outsider dichotomy, problematising the Othering

nature of the process that continues to define binaries as entrenched in a reality dominated by hierarchised opposites.

The activist-scholar and insider/outsider positionality

In the context of the United States, Edward Said critiques humanism as often associated with a select elite and an imagined and taught 'attitude of stern oppositions' that have little 'to do with the sordid world of contemporary history, politics, and economics' (2004, 16). As Said argues, 'When these processes are turned into professional code these attitudes congeal all too easily into a routine complacency, which claims that a dispassionate search for truth, detachment and disengagement constitutes the proper pursuit for literary study' (Said 2004, 16). As Said's in-depth interrogation of an immense number of humanist writers and intellectuals in the United States shows, such claims aim to limit human knowledge to a handful of elites, as they are accompanied by 'reams of laundry-list exclusions'. Through this critique, Said posits the link between the need for exclusions and the West's new cosmopolitanism reality in which the emergence of new positionalities within humanism is seen as threatening old, homogenised Western humanism – a rejection of the modern previously reserved for those minoritised.

Since 'every version of an "other", wherever found, is also the construction of a "self"' (Clifford 2010, 19), Said proposes to first recognise the subjective aspect of humanist knowledge and practice rather than making a 'neutral, mathematical science out of it' (2004, 12). By the same token, challenging the insider/outsider dichotomy entails a critique of the making of Western research methodology and the power relationships within Western academia, particularly as these relate to the construction of knowledge about researchers who continue to live, challenge and negotiate structures of power in the process of conducting research. Akin to the question of insider/outsider is the dichotomised relationship of scholar versus activist-scholar, and what sets them apart. The insiderness status designated to activist-scholars translates into research practice, requiring them to either confirm aspects of their insiderness (ie other themselves from the research community) or determine what distances them from their own community (ie other themselves from their community) to get near the 'scientific' world. By locating oneself in a position, or rethinking or adjusting one's positionality, scholars with an activism profile and background risk alienation not only from their own community, but also from the knowledge and history-making of identity politics within that community.

Postcolonial, indigenous and Black feminist scholarship – eg hooks (1984, 1994), Harrison (1992, 2008), Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Collins (1986, 1989), and Abu-Lughod (1988, 2006) – have clearly defined the mission and duties of activist-scholars and established ground rules for decolonising Western knowledge. Through sharing a similar activist-scholar experience from a different postcolonial context, ie Jordan, it is this scholarship I seek to engage with and build upon. By doing so, I contribute to the discourse around how feminist activist-scholars sideline the value and significance of their own experience – as insiders, outsiders or both simultaneously – when defining and reproducing the self within their disciplines and research processes. This scholarship suggests a triple burden for activist-scholars: first, they must break with Western academia's prevailing epistemological paradigm; second, they must reassess and challenge structures of power, gender inequality and relations in their communities (Collins 1986, 1989; Lazreg 1988; Spivak 1990); and third, they must engage in honest dialogue that contributes to real transformation.

Faye Harrison (2008) engages with the question of the location of the 'outsider within', what she terms the 'peripheralised scholar', offering a critique of the relationships between power and knowledge in Western academia. For Harrison, the periphery is always a location of subordination and devaluation, and by critiquing the centre–periphery relationship, she aims to decentre Western knowledge and challenge the hierarchal ordering of knowledge, the value of lived experience and the weight this experience is given in critiques of Western thought. In this vein, 'the outsider within' is also of particular importance to the work of Patricia Collins (1986), as it offers insight into reclaiming self-identification and valuation. Through looking at Black feminists' experiences in sociology as 'outsiders within', Collins challenges the method of categorisation. As outsiders within the white, male-dominated research community, she argues that Black feminists

who remain rooted in their own experiences as Black women – and who master sociological paradigms yet retain a critical posture toward them – are in a better position to bring a special perspective not only to the study of Black women, but to some of the fundamental issues facing sociology itself. (Collins 1986, 529)

For activist-scholars and those outside 'white Western academia', the works of Collins (1986) and Harrison (2008, 1992) are very useful for challenging Western hegemonic knowledge production and unpacking other, non-Western epistemologies. However, Collins and Harrison's contributions also suggest that working from an outside location does not necessarily mean producing alternative knowledge or theories critical of social injustices. Through discussing my own positionality and experience, I aim to take this point further, addressing the dilemmas faced by Western-trained activist-scholars doing fieldwork in their communities. I look specifically at the effects of Western epistemology on activist-scholars' lived experience of field research in their communities, as their 'outsider within' position in Western academia can both implicate and influence their fieldwork practices, thereby limiting their potential to produce critical theories, alternative knowledge and new research practices.

Intellectual insecurity, a feeling potentially invoked when identifying as 'an outsider within Western academia', is my point of departure. For researchers, conducting research as an outsider to academia and insider to the research community comes with the inherent risk of self-categorising, and categorisation can bring the dilemma of to whom and what a researcher's in(out)siderness refers. There are two points of reference here: the first regards the researcher as a postcolonial subject learning to work within a Western academic space while studying postcolonial contexts and people, a point I address shortly; and the second relates to the feminist-activist versus feminist-scholar distinction. Researchers from postcolonial, Black and indigenous communities primarily engage with research not 'by choice but by necessity' – a statement repeated by scholars such as Edward Said and Toni Morrison – due not only to curiosity but also to a sense of injustice and responsibility. Hence, such researchers are more likely to identify as activist-scholars than those studying communities not their own or researching only out of curiosity, with the aim of producing theory.

Being an activist-researcher deepens one's involvement with their community, a fact that generates assumptions due to its entanglement with the category and associated critiques of the 'insider-researcher'. In my first year of study, for instance, I was asked questions like 'why don't you consider writing a novel of these women's stories instead of doing a PhD?' This question, which insinuates that the novel is a better form to reflect my experiences, was

posed just after I had narrated some of the women's stories that led me to study guardianship over women in Jordan. Perhaps the novel is seen as a lesser form of knowledge production than a PhD thesis, better suited to someone seen as an activist and insider. Another telling comment was made during a research seminar I audited, jointly led by male and female instructors. After I replied to a question about the pitfalls of 'being an insider', the male instructor responded: 'knowing too much and being too involved in your case may be a pitfall'. Such problematic ways of looking at feminist activist-scholars makes defining this category necessary to challenging the insider/outsider dichotomy and clarifying feminist activist-scholars' entangled roles within both academia and the struggle for gender equality.

Edward Said's definition of the public intellectual helps to identify the feminist activist-scholar's roles and definition, and counter self-categorising, a process that can involve self-orientalising or the 'participation of the orient in its own Orientalization' (Said 1978). In the context of this paper, self-orientalising happens when Western categorisation and dichotomy-making – in relation to both the activist-scholar and insider/outsider dichotomy – are internalised within academia. As Said posits, 'the moment you set down words and then publish them you have entered the public world' (1993, 12). Thus, feminist scholars are activists simply by entering the public world, as Said suggests there is 'no such thing as a private intellectual'. Nonetheless, Said also asserts that the public intellectual is 'an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business' (Said 1993, 11). Indeed, as borrowed from Gramsci, Said argues that observing the level of engagement in society, constant communication, and participation in the struggle to change minds are the criteria of a public intellectual.

The other important element is what Said calls the 'complicated mix between the private and the public worlds' (Said 1993, 12). Applying this concept to the feminist activist-scholar should translate to the private as a feminist's 'own history, values, writings and positions as they derive from experiences', while the public is how their private experiences 'enter into the social world where people debate and make decisions' (Said 1993, 12). Hence, feminist activist-scholars are those who analyse, engage with, and tie their work to their own experiences and how these relate to the experiences of others. They allow their own experiences to enter the public domain, creating channels of communication, encouraging dialogue, and generating solidarity. However, these criteria are not meant to exclude feminist scholars working with communities to which they do not belong; instead, they are meant to challenge the distinction, as one cannot draw a line between the feminist scholar and the feminist activist-scholar. Feminism bridges the gap between the world of theory and the world of praxis – a necessity, if not an imperative, for change and transformation – and hence cannot only exist in the world of theory. As bell hooks aptly put it:

When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what a process wherein one enables another... Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end. (1994, 61)

Stuart Hall reminds us that categories exist to classify people and determine their entitlements, meaning that classification has material effects on those who are not entitled/excluded based on affiliation, belonging or membership to a group, be it political, ethnic or

religious (Grossberg 1986). In academia, the existence of categories such as activist versus scholar or insider versus outsider continue to incite identity and cultural difference politics, where researchers from outside Western academia are made to feel the presence and continuity of their own Othering. Hence, embarking on Hall's suggested journey to de-categorise the self, which begins by making sense of one's own positionality (Grossberg 1986), suggesting other ways of knowing, and producing alternative epistemologies and methodologies, is a way to counter Western hegemonic epistemologies.

Fieldwork, insider/outsider, and identity politics

In my PhD fieldwork notes, I concluded I was neither an insider nor an outsider, but in fact both simultaneously. I argued, building on a wide range of literature, that insider/outsider categories are insufficient when one works within societies 'whose historical and cultural identity cannot be confined to one tradition or race or religion', like Jordan (Said 2004, 47). By making this statement, I aimed to escape self-categorisation by adopting the positionality of 'simultaneously both': insider and outsider at the same time. However, analysis of my fieldwork site and interactions with research participants revealed the further complexity of my adopted positionality. This is discussed in the below examples of positionality thinking in terms of my outsiderhood, insiderhood and both statuses simultaneously.

When I began researching *wilaya* (guardianship) over women, I was primarily concerned with *wilaya* as a legal barrier to women's independence. This focus was based on over 15 years' experience working with women exposed to family violence. During my time as the Director of the Women's Hotline and Shelter/Jordanian Women's Union (JWU), I saw many women who chose to return to abusive relationships. Such decisions were informed by women's awareness of what could happen if they rejected their male guardian's opinion of what was suitable. Often, family reconciliation was the only option available to them. Indeed, failing to reconcile or trying another way could put a woman's life at risk – a matter of great concern to me. Although the JWU established a women's shelter in 1999, the system of guardianship meant we had to inform women's families of their presence in the shelter, but not its location. By informing families, we attempted to reduce the risk of women's absence being reported to the police, which could result in a woman being imprisoned or worse, even if she was at the shelter. This was one of *wilaya*'s many legal and procedural barriers I faced while working with women.

My real aim was to find alternatives to the dominant understanding of *wilaya* over women as 'God's will'. However, my interest in the implications of *wilaya* had shifted to looking beyond the legal constraints, examining instead how women live the concept of guardianship. This shift in perspective necessitated a methodological shift, so I redesigned my ethnographic fieldwork to include interviews with women from different socio-economic classes, women not engaged in legal disputes, and women not seeking to escape family violence. My goal was to understand how women think of themselves within the framework, definition and system of guardianship outlined in the Jordanian Personal Status Law, and how this impacts their everyday practices of femininity.

My first fieldwork trip to Jordan was very challenging. At the time, I saw the difficulty of my positionality, how I located myself as the complete insider researcher, but not of reaching women from different classes. Being challenged by 'knowing too much', I embarked on my

fieldwork with the question: 'What more could I learn about women in Jordan?' I was raised and had lived in Jordan all my life, had worked with women from different classes and educational backgrounds, and had engaged in women's rights activism in both rural and urban settings and Palestinian camps. Indeed, I was frustrated by my first few interviews, as it seemed my research would not reveal anything new to me about women's lived realities. It was difficult to interview women while, at the same time, keeping my positionality in mind and anticipating what and how they would respond to my questions. What was I supposed to do in this situation? I thought reading ethnographers' experiences of researching their own community might be useful to identifying the advantages of being an insider researcher, some of which include: belonging to the community, familiarity with the customs, speaking the language, and thus having relatively easy access to the community under examination (Davis and Craven 2016; Altorki and El-Solh 1988; Innes 2009; Zavella 1993). On the other hand, however, the pitfalls of being an insider include issues of social class or category, as the researcher belongs to the research community; thus, their social life might be open to questioning, especially if a woman (Abu-Lughod 1988; Kholy and Al-Ali 1999).

Critiques such as 'thinking as usual' and questioning the validity and approach of the insider's research data – criticisms highlighting how certain practices, notions and structures may be normalised for insiders – complicated the questioning of my positionality (Zavella 1993; Innes 2009; Davis and Craven 2016). Thinking of my own positionality somehow constrained my research and engagement with my research community, as I was preoccupied with the idea of not falling into the trap of 'usual thinking'. This led to me choosing to conduct fieldwork in places where I had no previous experience, contacts, or community work. In an attempt to be objective, I sought the outsidership aspects that defined my positionality. However, locating my 'outsidership' with each group I interviewed led me to thinking about the differences between myself and my research community, engaging in conversations about identity politics, and distinguishing myself from my research community and activism.

There are a variety of communities in Jordan, as the country has been through historical, political and demographic transformations since its inception in the 1920s: as a colonial project between the Hashemite family and the British colonial power (Massad 2001); as a result of waves of forcibly displaced Palestinian refugees in 1948 and 1967, and in response to the ongoing occupation and annexation of Palestinian lands by the settler-colonial project in Palestine; and as hugely impacted by the Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the current revolution and conflict in Syria. Hence, the country is very diverse, and political, economic and social conditions implicate how identities are constructed, recognised and practised.

I conducted my research among women with Muslim backgrounds and Jordanian citizenship. In my fieldwork notes, I wrote that holding Jordanian citizenship does not necessarily equate to claiming or self-identifying as Jordanian. In the tribal communities, for example, the first issue discussed or queried was that of my Palestinian or Jordanian identities. Thus I concluded: 'the community immediately located me as an outsider. Although I knew about some tribes' rules, structures and customs, I have never lived in or been fully part of a tribal community, and therefore also felt a sense of outsidership'. In these comments, I was certainly trying to define outsidership aspects of my positionality. At the time, I did not reflect on my knowledge of the community; I was instead trying to make a methodological point with respect to my 'outsidership'. For example, the question 'where are you from?' – the root of my outsidership within a tribal community, I felt – was not necessarily intended to

externalise, make someone feel uncomfortable, or locate someone's origin and roots to incite difference, but instead to make an introduction and create stronger connections with guests. Furthermore, the manner in which this question is often asked reflects respect rather than difference: '*men wain zaratna elbarakah*', which translates to 'where is the blessing visiting us coming from?'

Nonetheless, in my mind, I translated this question through the lens of an outsider status; I was not forcing my above comments, they came out of my insecurity, the insecurity of someone trying to distance themselves from their community of study in order to be 'scientific'. This does not mean the question of Palestinian/Jordanian identity holds no significance in the context of Jordan. Rather, discussions around this question should have been linked to discussions of the making of Jordan's national identity, as a process of differentiation between Jordanian citizens based on origin, not the issue of difference and the insider/outsider dichotomy. Indeed, such a misstep risked depoliticising the historical grounds and theoretical arguments I engaged with throughout my PhD thesis, as methodology should not be distinct from theoretical, contextual and historical analysis but rather should enable researchers to reflect on how they are implicated in the history making of identity politics.

As it relates to the insiderness aspect of my positionality, I discussed my experience within Palestinian camps and communities in the following fieldwork note:

I had previously considered myself to be an absolute insider, as I am a Palestinian refugee raised in a Palestinian camp and I have Jordanian citizenship. However, I share different statuses and positions with the majority of the people there. I was not seen as an insider in the neighbourhood of Hai al-Nadhaif, a Palestinian community near Amman. While my position as a Palestinian refugee, woman, and Jordanian citizen afforded me relatively easy access to people's houses, I could only conduct interviews after answering an abundance of questions about myself, as I had chosen to do my research in an area where I was unknown to the community. Hence, while my changing situation – from refugee to well-known activist living in the west of Amman to studying in London – had been a matter of pride to the communities within which I had previously worked, this changeability led my current research participants to view me as an exception, positioning me as an outsider rather than an insider who shared several statuses with them. I tried to escape this exceptional status, as I have always rejected such a stance from wealthy and Western activists. Indeed, this sense of exception does not acknowledge the inequalities and challenges faced by refugees in Palestinian camps, and instead becomes part of stereotypes portraying refugees as limited in capacity in terms of education and work qualifications. Therefore, I was surprised that a Palestinian community would view me this way.

The above analysis was largely influenced by my intellectual insecurity. The assumption I made about people in the Palestinian camps exceptionalising me was prompted, instead, by the research-insiderness status I placed myself in when approaching women in the camps. To assume such a status reproduced rather than challenged stereotypes. Hence, although my research community and I were politically, culturally, historically and emotionally bonded at various levels, I was treated as a distinct individual when introducing myself strictly as a researcher to a community with which I had no previous experience but nonetheless assumed insiderness based on presumed shared status sets.

This presumed insiderness was based on my assumption that, due to being a refugee, a Palestinian and a woman, my research participants would automatically see my insiderness. This was truly unrealistic, particularly as I observed in my fieldwork notes how refugees still living in the camps see those who leave as no longer the insiders they once were; their

changed location leads to a change in position. Even if such people might be their sons, daughters, cousins, other relatives or close neighbours, they are seen as having a different status the moment they leave the camp. This changed status is attributed to these people's distance from the everyday details that constitute the meaning of refugeehood and daily life in the camp, including shared suffering and joy, and engaging in solidarity activities or even conflicts with people in the area. I myself experience this in discussions with family members and friends who still live in the camp, who often make comments such as: 'you don't know how things work here' or 'things here work differently than in Amman'. Such comments address the importance of everyday life rather than an intention to externalise researchers or activists based on either their insider or outsider status. Daily life and lived experience of camp conditions builds a relationship between community members based on shared experience, not shared status sets, and it is this relationship that makes people relate to each other and create collective survival strategies. Indeed, it is common to see neighbours in the camp being closer to each other than their blood relatives living outside the camp. The camp's social life and dynamics cannot be understood outside the politics that sustain these conditions, nor studied with the neutral, objective gaze of the outsider-outsider researcher.

The third example relates to adopting the 'simultaneously-both' position. While I still believe that 'everyone is an outsider to some other identity or tradition adjacent to one's own' (Said 2004, 48), what I critique in this position are practices that require researchers to change and 'activate differing statuses in the status set' based on the situation (Merton 1972, 22). Taking this position was part of how I tried to challenge the insider/outsider dichotomy, as it presupposes that researchers in social structures cannot be located differently in terms of one social status, category, group affiliation, or even several categories; hence, they can be simultaneously both. Scholarship like that of Robert Merton (1972) was particularly significant to my approach, as it argues against the dichotomy and encourages researchers to think of themselves outside the insider/outsider categorisation. However, Merton also posits that before determining one's status as an insider, it is crucial to consider the homogeneity of the research group – ie the extent to which its members erase all other differences and harmonise their identity – or whether members identify with subgroups due to distinctive features (Atal 2001, 3460). Referring to any group as harmonised or trying to define the specific distinctive features of any community revives questions of homogeneity and cultural difference. So, although Merton tries to resolve the insider/outsider dichotomy, his solution still risks falling into problematic notions of culture, difference and homogeneity when determining the distinct features that make one an insider/outsider. Such a presupposition 'neglects the crucial fact of social structure that individuals have not a single status but a status set' (Atal 2001, 3460). However, by changing my situation, activating and deactivating certain sets of statuses, I restricted myself to thinking about only one or a few aspects of commonality I had with my research participants, who did not find this convincing.

At the time, I wrote about how my present set of statuses did not qualify me as an insider in interviews with women in the west of Amman. Being well-educated, having a good career, and living in the area was not enough for middle-class and rich women to see me as an insider to their group. Other inscribed affiliations were more pivotal to determining who I was in these communities: family name, origin, class and where I was raised and studied. During one of my interviews with a woman from a wealthy Palestinian family in the Al-Rabia neighbourhood in the west of Amman, her elderly mother asked me, after my interviewee

introduced us, 'Where are you from? Where do you live?' 'I am from Hebron. I live in Tel'a al-Ali', I replied. She immediately responded: 'Where did you live before that?' 'In the Baqa'a camp', I answered. Then, she looked at her daughter and said: 'If people tell you they live in these new areas of west Amman, ask them directly where they lived before. These areas are new and mixed, they do not reveal the person's origin'. I smiled and asked her, 'Where did you live before? Al-Rabia is a new area, is it not?' She replied: 'We were living in Jabal al-Hussein, but so many refugees from the Hussein camp moved nearby and started making trouble, so it became uncomfortable for us to stay there'. The daughter was very embarrassed by her mother's comment about refugees and tried to make amends, correcting her by saying: 'Not all refugees are troublemakers. We had a neighbour who used to live in a camp. She was very well-educated and her kids were very well-mannered'. In my notes, I reflected on this encounter:

Again, the exceptional sense meant that one is neither part of the past nor fully part of the present, but somehow a combination of the two, a matter that demonstrates the lack of a clear rule for people's perception of the researcher as an insider or outsider. The past-inscribed statuses surpass any present-achieved statuses. However, while in Hai al-Nadhaif my past was not the issue, most questions related to my present, in the west of Amman any questions related to my past were more about defining me as an outsider.

The power dynamic of the interview reflected the significance of class, geographical location, and the relationship between Palestinian refugees in the camps, wealthy Palestinians, and Palestinians living in cities and urban areas. These were not personal issues against myself, as a researcher, but the structural issues of inequality in Jordan and the Palestinian case specifically, and hence should not be analysed merely from a methodological point related to my positionality as an insider, an outsider, or both. Understanding how structures of domination work in law and practice required deep involvement, not disengagement or an outside gaze. Practices of *wilaya* differed significantly between Bedouin societies and urban communities, between poor, middle and upper classes, and between Palestinians living in camps and those in urban communities. These differences were based on the politics of gender and structures of power, and looking at the varied applications of the law meant uncovering all intersecting issues related to class, colour, geography, refugee status, education and economic position within the family, nation, place of origin, etc. The choice to activate certain statuses and deactivate others resulted in distinguishing my experiences from those of my research participants, and placed me in an endless process of defining and redefining my positionality. Some of those who challenge the insider/outsider dichotomy encourage researchers to 'set out to conduct research from a position of uncertainty' (Nowicka and Ryan 2015, 2). It is this uncertainty, which the redefining and rethinking of positionality establishes, that I problematise. It was a stressful process, particularly as a researcher with an activism background seeking to understand and answer questions about issues impacting women's lives, including my own.

When working with women at the JWU Aid Centre, my status as director was the main issue of concern for women, not any other achieved or inscribed set of statuses. As an activist concerned with community issues, my position within the organisation and community helped me escape social categorisation. My fieldwork, however, was a different story, as I chose to interview women in places outside my activism community. My research participants were solely interviewees and I was nothing but an interviewer who wanted to obtain information. I was in their territory, trying to learn about them while they had no previous

knowledge of me or who I was. The power dynamics were different; I did not belong to their community, and thus had to first answer questions myself to gain their trust. This made it seem as if women's trust could only be built by questioning my identity, and I concluded at the time that, between past and present, my identity had become a matter of discussion; a matter that, depending on the circumstances, could locate me as either an outsider or insider.

In my experience as an activist, women were not concerned with what made them close to or removed from me, but with the actions that connected us. This was the result of active engagement with different groups' social, cultural, historical and political structures to make connections. I began my activism in Palestinian camps in the late 1980s, when Islamic groups and ideologies began emerging in the camps, embodied in women's lives, code of dress and social activities. By the mid-1990s, very few women remained who did not wear the headscarf. Despite this change, however, my community accepted me as I was, defended me and other activists, and often stood against Muslim Brotherhood attempts to undermine our work in the camps. This acceptance was not due to a shared understanding of how things worked; it was the opposite, in fact. Challenging the community on certain issues while also collaborating to solve community problems offered the space for honest, genuine dialogue. Indeed, having a dialogue and negotiation, while still challenging the community, was seen as a 'practice of respect in their minds', as an old man once put it.

Furthermore, I was often desexualised by men in the community; many men who did not shake hands with women would often comfortably shake mine and invite me into their homes to meet their wives and daughters, without seeing my feminism as a threat. I was trusted to take their daughters to summer camp outside the refugee camps, as well as regular visits to the theatres and cinemas of Amman. In the Jordanian community, it was not important whether I was Jordanian or Palestinian. If someone did ask questions related to my nationality, origin, or family name, such questionings were quickly put down by others and rendered insignificant. This is despite the fact that my work centred around violence against women in Jordanian communities, which was not very popular at the time. Thus, my activism was built on an endless process of negotiation, communication and dialogue with my community, not on shared identities or positions.

Finding what distanced me from my community was only possible at fieldwork sites with which I had no previous affiliation. Conducting research in new places, where I introduced myself purely as a researcher, led to experiences similar to those of researchers who do not belong to their research community, are seen primarily as female, or have their religious beliefs called into question (Abu-Lughod 1986). The questioning of a researcher's political identity or code of dress seems to be more about the community's attempt to situate themselves as equal, or even superior, to the researcher in the research process. This questioning could also be the research community's rejection of the unilateral research method, and thus a way to initiate dialogue with the researcher. Such a questioning does not always indicate the community is attempting to impose on or question the researcher's identity; sometimes this can be an act of connecting and establishing a relationship outside the rigid interview structure.

Lila Abu-Lughod's contribution to writing against cultural difference and identity politics interrogates the knowledge generated by the split between the self and Other in feminist scholarship in terms of three crucial issues: positionality, audience and the power inherent in distinctions between the self and Other (2006, 155). Abu-Lughod's critique involves the question of positionality in relation to partiality. The claim that insiders struggle to gain enough distance, 'since the other is in a certain way the self', suggests that insider researchers

risk 'the easy slide' into subjectivity (Abu-Lughod 2006, 155). Such a suggestion, for Abu-Lughod, thus requires researchers to distance themselves from research participants, forcing them to stand apart from the Other; a failure to do so is seen as a threat to the research's essence. For Abu-Lughod, this claim's key contradiction lies in the fact that outsider researchers receive no such scrutiny of their positionality vis-à-vis the communities they study and the orientalist aspect of such categorisation (Abu-Lughod 2006).

In addition, Abu-Lughod shows how the identification of the Other is predetermined by perceived cultural differences, establishing the separation between groups of people with a 'relativizing effect' (Abu-Lughod 2006, 157). Hence, assuming there are 'insiders', 'half insiders', and/or 'partial insiders' duplicates and reproduces notions of the coherence, wholeness and homogeneity of one culture, which may ultimately lead to essentialism. Abu-Lughod identifies three tools for countering the claim of culture, asking researchers to find a way that constitutes lives 'identified as others as "less other"' through: (1) discourse and practice, which entails an analysis of social life without the presumption of connections, the 'social uses by individuals of verbal resources', and the play of multiple, shifting, competing statements with practical effects; (2) connections, referring to the connections and interconnections between the researcher and community under study; and (3) ethnography of the particular, which entails distinguishing the experience of individuals within a certain group in order to problematise generalisations and offer an alternative to the insider-outsider.

Dialogue, negotiation and solidarity: the way forward

In this article, I examined my own, 12-year-old fieldwork notes detailing the dilemmas and complexities of positioning researchers within the insider/outsider dichotomy; dilemmas that clearly continue to exist, evident in the scholarship of feminists from the Global South (Bhattacharya 2007; Pollack and Eldridge 2015; Kwame 2017; Adu-Ampong and Adams 2020; Parikh 2020; Kamlongera 2021). The connective thread of such scholarship is not its discrediting of the need for methodological research criteria, as there is a difference between discrediting something and arguing for a need to problematise its practices, but instead its use of the complexity of the researcher's self-positioning to suggest alternative methods to hegemonic Western methodology.

One suggested alternative is advocating for research as a process of dialogue and negotiation, which would ultimately lead to new methods (Bhattacharya 2007; Kwame 2017; Parikh 2020). Collins (1989) long ago made this suggestion, highlighting that, for ideas to be tested and validated, everyone in the group must participate. For Collins, negotiation is a form of communication that guarantees shared understanding, competing narratives and meaningful engagement with the research community, and makes a real contribution to changing and challenging structures of power. Gayatri Spivak (1990) adds another aspect to this, as she sees negotiation as integral to research aiming to ensure not only the research community's participation but also a researcher practice of listening that goes beyond documenting merely what was said or done, as opposed to the active participation of the observation method. Spivak also posits that a 'neutral communication situation of free dialogue ... is not a situation that ever comes into being', since 'one must learn to read how desire for neutrality and/or desire for the Other articulates itself' (1992, 72). Dialogue, thus, is about 'connectedness rather than separation' and is 'an essential component of the knowledge-validation process' (Collins 1989, 763). The aim is to not assess the validity of data, but to show how effectively researchers are changing something they are obliged to inhabit. Hence, as Spivak argues, researchers must preserve

certain 'structures – not cut them down completely' (1992, 72). This means scholars must not try to demonstrate their complete break with the structures as outsiders, but rather show how they negotiate and engage with the structures they must inhabit. With this, Spivak problematises both the question of the researcher's defined spaces and neutrality, arguing that the spaces they occupy can only be explained by history: 'the idea of neutral dialogue is an idea which denies history, denies structure, denies the positioning of subjects' (Spivak 1990, 72).

In the same vein, Collins believes that emotions, ethics and reason are interconnected, essential components of assessing knowledge claims (1989, 770). Conversely, dialogue as a method for research both ensures the broadest possible participation and contributes to finding local strategies for connecting issues, generating intersectional analysis, and shining light on the unseen. This particular issue is very important, as feminist work on intersectionality – beyond Black feminist activism and scholarship – has been largely limited to theory or gender's presumed intersections with a number of other classifications, such as class, race and ethnicity.

To test intersectionality in research practice requires a deeper transformation at the methodological level, allowing scholars to test, update and modify based on contextual, historical and political contexts as well as women's differing experiences within these contexts. While intersectionality was vital to my research on *wilaya* over women, it was my activism that enabled me to see women's varied experiences and *wilaya*'s differing applications in a context of intersecting dominating and oppressive forces. It would have been impossible to recognise and theorise all this merely by conducting 60 semi-structured interviews. Indeed, including stories from my own activism filled gaps and helped me represent a wider array of experiences, understandings and institutional arrangements based on women's differing positionalities and the country's fluctuating political moments.

My activism around gender inequality in Palestinian and Jordanian communities demonstrates the usefulness of feminist methodological approaches that go beyond dichotomised relationships, as communities are more receptive to those committed to building a relationship with them than those relying on presumed shared, inscribed or achieved status sets. As previously discussed, even when activists challenge a community's beliefs or norms, or do not adhere to its social practices, genuine dialogue, commitment, understanding and care for the community's issues surpasses all assumed differences. As shown throughout this article, whilst trying to validate my fieldwork through questioning my positionality, my practitioner and activism statuses were called into question by my academic research training and methodology-validation process. I have always actively engaged in community work in Palestinian camps, rural and Bedouin areas, and the west of Amman, but rarely experienced identity questioning, exceptionalisation or rejection. I have also worked with feminists, women's rights activists, and women of different classes, educational backgrounds, geographical locations and religions; and as an activist, my past or present status sets have rarely been openly challenged or questioned, be it in Jordanian villages or towns, Palestinian camps or urban communities. In this sense, it was the shared cause and commitment to building a connection and relationship with my community – rather than the one-sided research process – that allowed me to escape categorisation and the Othering of myself and my community. Doing research on gender inequality and justice is not a process of 'gathering data'; it is about engaging in research as a form of action to fight inequalities, generate more questions, and address contradictions or even unpleasant responses.

In my first academic research experience, I reconciled the dilemma of the rigid insider/outsider dichotomy by engaging with my community differently than I previously had, and

thus lost the opportunity to dialogue with them around my research ideas and goals. If, at the time, I had been able to engage in such a dialogue or use my research to mobilise and generate discussions and debate, it could have been mutually beneficial for my research, the community itself, and general discussions of *wilaya* over women; it could have been a continuation of activism. However, the insecurity, uncertainty and questioning of my positionality not only led to missing an opportunity to communicate with my community, but also resulted in Othering myself twice. First, I othered myself from the academic community, as my activism and belonging to my research community entailed 'trying to fit' into the Western academic world by questioning my space and positionality, trying to validate myself based on the rigid criteria of Western research methodology. Through this, I negated my unique position, long history of activism, and my own experience and knowledge. Second, I also othered myself from my own community, as I thought that in order to view them from the outside, I had to find ways to disengage and prove I had not internalised any normative knowledge or practices by not 'thinking as usual'. However, all of this negated the fact that it was my deep involvement with the issue and community that allowed me to engage with a 'taboo' and understand Jordan's multidimensional, oppressive structures of law and politics. Indeed, it was those very experiences of dialogue, debate and solidarity that filled the gaps in my research interviews and allowed me to show women's wide-ranging positionalities, experiences and understandings rather than merely pivoting around shared experiences and perceptions that often reproduce stereotypes and essentialise women in the Arab region.

By bringing alternative examples discussed by Collins, Spivak and Abu-Lughod, among others, I have shown there is no lack of alternative methodological interventions outside Western methodology, but such have yet to be recognised or reckoned with in Western academia. The institutional arrangements for methodology and fieldwork I experienced, and which continue to be the norm, are managed and facilitated by professionals and committees that, under the guise of preserving ethical and methodological 'good' practice, largely remain in favour of Western hegemonic notions and practices of neutrality and objectivity implemented through bureaucratic procedures that often, whether intentionally or not, question the ability of scholars from the Global South to conduct research. Within these processes, the extent to which a researcher is involved in their communities of research is usually quantified and measured as deep, little or no involvement; hence, reflections on researchers' positionality continue to be dichotomised and categorised.

In response, scholars must reflect on their status, ie how they are situated within the gendered power relations of their research community and their form of negotiation (Harrison 1992; Zavella 1993). Such reflections, then, should be combined with reflections on how their methodology challenges the Western validation process by suggesting alternative methods to test their work. Such methods include, as Collins suggests, attempting to 'present knowledge claims in a style providing their concerns for their ideas' (1989, 768). In this sense, it is not neutrality or objectivity that matters, but instead the connections between the researcher and research community and the ethics of personal accountability, where personal positions, ethics and standpoints are all tested in order to make alternative knowledge claims (Collins 1989). The researcher's task is also to question what Spivak (1990) calls the 'ethico-political' agenda, which aims to create differentiation through defining one's self, a task that leads alternatively to reflections on our positionality: whether or not we belong to the community we study, for the sake of self-clarity, criticism and knowledge, not based on difference and identity politics, but on how we are implicated by our positions vis-à-vis power in all its forms – eg colonialist, racist, imperialist, nationalist, homophobic,

classist, sexist, etc. Thus, it is not a question of whether we are close to/removed from our communities of research, because, as Said reminds us, 'no process of converting experience into expression could be free of contamination. It was already contaminated by its involvement with power, position and interests, whether it was a victim of them or not' (2004, 49).

Acknowledgements

I thank the editors and administrative team at *Third World Quarterly*, for their outstanding engagement and support. To the peer reviewers of the manuscript, your comments and suggestions were extremely useful. I acknowledge that the fieldwork notes discussed in this article are extracted from my PhD thesis entitled *Gender and Guardianship in Jordan: Femininity, Compliance, and Resistance*, submitted to the School of Oriental and African Studies, 2014.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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