

The Inside-Outside Paradox in Social and Anthropological Field Research: The Role of Positionality in Shaping Qualitative Data

Received date:30/12/2024 Accepted date:24/06/2025 Published date:28/10/2025

Salim sahli ¹

¹ *Laboratory of Social Work Development and Community Service, University of El Oued, Algeria, Email: sahli-salim@univ-eloued.dz*

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8998-8426>

Abstract:

Positionality is a pivotal concept in qualitative research, embodying the researcher's recognition of their social, cultural, and cognitive positions relative to the participants. This notion sheds light on the "inside and outside" paradox, where the tension lies between the researcher's "insider" role, enriched with profound insights and understanding of the phenomenon, and the "outsider" role, which offers a more detached, objective viewpoint essential for scientific analysis free from personal biases. This paper will delve into this paradox, discussing its significant impact on the methodologies employed in the collection, interpretation, and analysis of qualitative data.

Keywords: Paradox; Inside; Outside; Qualitative Research; Qualitative Data.

Corresponding Author: salim sahli , **Email:** sahli-salim@univ-eloued.dz

1. INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research offers a distinct approach compared to quantitative methods, not only in its tools but also in its underlying philosophy. In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is not a detached observer but an integral part of the research process. Entering the field with their own cultural, social, and political backgrounds, the researcher inevitably influences and is influenced by the context under study. This embeddedness enables a deeper understanding of meanings and lived experiences, yet it also raises a crucial methodological challenge: how can one produce valid knowledge while being personally entangled in the very social fabric being analyzed?

This is where the concept of positionality becomes central. Positionality refers to the way a researcher's identity shapes their perspective on the studied phenomenon. When the researcher is an insider—someone from within the community—they often hold a deeper grasp of symbols, norms, and implicit meanings that may elude an outsider. However, this closeness can introduce unconscious biases or blind spots, as the researcher might take certain cultural assumptions for granted. In contrast, an outsider may maintain analytical distance and offer fresh critiques, but might misread or oversimplify complex local meanings due to a lack of cultural fluency.

This tension between insider and outsider positions is known as the internal-external paradox. It reveals a fundamental dilemma in qualitative research: proximity can enrich understanding but threaten objectivity; distance can protect neutrality but risk superficiality. The researcher's role, therefore, extends far beyond data collection—it involves interpreting social dynamics and narratives through the lens of their own situated identity.

This paradox is particularly significant in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, where subjective experience is a core part of the research itself. Accordingly, this study explores how researcher positionality influences both data collection and interpretation, and proposes strategies to manage its challenges.



These include self-reflexivity, transparent documentation of the research process, and the use of multiple, complementary data collection methods.

By addressing the internal-external paradox, this paper argues that positionality is not simply a bias to be avoided, but a methodological reality to be managed. When handled with critical awareness, it becomes a valuable analytical tool—one that can deepen insight into the studied phenomena while maintaining ethical and interpretive rigor.

2. The concept of locality in qualitative research

The concept of locality in qualitative research is foundational, encapsulating the researcher's awareness of their social, cultural, and cognitive positions within the research context. This notion posits that researchers are not detached observers but integral components of the research environment, significantly shaping the research design, data collection, and analysis processes (Brown, 2018, p. 102). The concept underscores the researcher's role as an active participant whose presence influences the research outcomes in non-trivial ways.

The locality emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the researcher and the subjects of research. The interactions between the researcher and participants directly impact the outcomes, as these relationships are fluid and evolve throughout the research stages. In this context, the researcher becomes embedded within the studied phenomenon, affecting the interpretation of data collected (Smith, 2020, p. 75). For instance, an internal researcher might analyze study results differently from an external researcher due to the influence of their cultural and social backgrounds on their perceptions of the phenomena being studied.

2.1 Self-awareness in research

Qualitative research mandates a high degree of self-awareness from researchers regarding their personal biases, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds, as these elements profoundly affect their understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Self-awareness is a critical, ongoing process that requires researchers to acknowledge how their

sociocultural positioning influences both data collection and analysis. By engaging in continual self-reflection, researchers can mitigate the risk of distorted perceptions or interpretations that could compromise the research's integrity and validity. This heightened awareness also facilitates more genuine interactions with participants, enhancing the credibility of the research findings (Jones, 2017, p. 150).

For example, in studies **addressing sensitive issues like domestic violence within a specific community**, a researcher's preconceived notions, shaped by their cultural background, could skew their engagement with participants and interpretation of data, potentially leading to biased or incomplete conclusions.

2.2 Social dynamics and the impact of the researcher's position

The relationship between the researcher and participants, influenced by variables such as social class, gender, religion, or ethnicity, plays a crucial role in the quality of data collected. Participants' perceptions of the researcher's social and cultural standing can alter their willingness to disclose information, affecting the data's richness and authenticity. For instance, participants may be more open or reticent depending on whether they view the researcher as an outsider or as someone from a similar social background.

In a study exploring economic challenges in a rural setting, the rapport between the participants and a researcher from a comparable social class may yield more transparent and nuanced data than interactions with a researcher from an urban or more affluent background. These variations in participant engagement highlight the significant impact of social dynamics on data quality (Lee, 2019, p. 220).

2.3 Researcher reflexivity

Positionality is intricately linked with the concept of reflexivity in qualitative research. Researchers are encouraged to consistently engage in self-reflection to understand how their positions influence the research process and the reshaping of relationships during data collection and analysis. A reflective approach enables researchers to recognize how their own attitudes and biases may impact interactions with participants and the data collected. This self-awareness promotes



greater transparency and objectivity in research, thereby enhancing the credibility of the outcomes. Meditation is often utilized as an effective tool to minimize personal biases and foster productive interactions with participants (Brown & Smith, 2018, p. 98).

For instance, in research **focusing on gender identity within a community**, the researcher must consider how their own gender or gender identity may influence interactions with participants. A lack of awareness about this influence could skew the nature of questions posed or the interpretation of responses received from participants.

2.4The Power of negotiation between the researcher and the participant

This dynamic also highlights the negotiation of power between the researcher and the participant. Often, the researcher's cognitive and social authority can subtly or overtly influence the responses of the interviewees. This implies that the researcher possesses a form of cognitive and social power that can lead participants to tailor their responses to align with the researcher's expectations or perceptions, impacting the authenticity of the data collected (Jones, 2017, p. 154; Lee, 2019, p. 225).

For example, in studies **involving persons with disabilities, researchers from academic settings might display cognitive abilities** that prompt participants to provide responses that they believe align with the researcher's expectations. This influence can distort the data or obscure genuine insights that could lead to a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon

3.The inside-out paradox in social and anthropological research

In social and anthropological research, the relationship between the researcher's social status and the research topic often gives rise to internal and external paradoxes. These paradoxes underscore the challenges researchers face depending on whether they are embedded within the community or culture being studied or observing from an external vantage point. The more closely a researcher is integrated into the community under study (i.e., the internal researcher), the more access they have to data and cultural insights.

However, this proximity can also introduce biases and diminish objectivity. Conversely, external researchers may encounter cultural barriers and challenges in gaining a deep contextual understanding of the society they study, yet they often maintain a greater degree of objectivity.

3.1 Internal researcher

An insider is an individual who belongs to the same community or culture as the subjects of their research. This position offers several advantages but also presents challenges related to bias and a potential loss of objectivity. The cultural and social closeness might impede the researcher's ability to provide an entirely objective analysis, as their familiarity with the community could color their interpretations and conclusions.

3.2 Benefits associated with the internal researcher

3.2.1 Easy access to data:

Positioned ideally within the community, the internal researcher facilitates rapid and straightforward data collection, leveraging an inherent level of mutual trust with participants. This trust, rooted in shared cultural or social backgrounds, fosters open and candid interactions, thereby enhancing the quality of the data gathered (Brown, 2018, p. 101). For instance, a researcher studying social practices at traditional Algerian weddings and originating from the same tribal area can communicate in the local Amazigh language. This familiarity not only strengthens trust but also encourages participants to disclose personal details about traditional rituals and social nuances of the ceremonies.

Moreover, this researcher's familiarity allows for unobtrusive field observations during event preparations or the actual ceremonies. Being a recognized and non-disruptive presence, the researcher can inquire about subtle elements like the symbolism of specific foods or traditional songs without feeling out of place or causing discomfort among participants.

3.2.2 Deep understanding of cultural symbols and social phenomena:



The internal researcher possesses an intrinsic ability to decipher cultural and social contexts that might elude an external observer. This profound comprehension is crucial in accurately interpreting cultural symbols and signals, thereby enriching the analysis and understanding of underlying social patterns (Jones, 2017, p. 80).

Consider the phenomenon of migration within a rural Algerian village with a high rate of emigration. An internal researcher from this village would possess an intimate understanding of the multifaceted cultural, economic, and social dynamics that drive migration. This deep insight allows the researcher to recognize and interpret cultural expressions, such as folk songs and proverbs, that subtly comment on migration, encapsulating sentiments of homesickness or aspirations for improved living conditions, which might not be as perceptible to an external researcher.

Furthermore, the internal researcher can elucidate social phenomena linked to migration, like the seasonal gatherings of families to welcome back migrant members, or the observance of customs by migrants during visits, such as donning traditional attire or participating in communal feasts. These observations highlight the profound connection between migration and personal identity, underscoring migrants' attachment to their cultural roots.

Additionally, the researcher might identify less obvious trends, such as the correlation between increased migration and shifts in community ambitions or traditional values. This deepened understanding facilitates a holistic exploration of the migration phenomenon, offering insights that transcend mere surface-level data.

3.3 Challenges associated with the internal researcher

Despite the aforementioned advantages, an excessive closeness to the studied society or culture can introduce significant challenges to research integrity, the most notable being:

3.3.1 Bias

An internal researcher's close ties to the community can hinder

objectivity, creating a predisposition based on presumed knowledge of the culture or subject matter. This proximity poses a risk of bias, which can skew interpretations and lead to premature conclusions without proper verification (Lee, 2019, p. 45). For instance, an internal researcher might assume that violence against women (VAW) is solely influenced by economic conditions or educational levels, potentially overlooking other critical factors like social norms or religious beliefs. Such biases could direct the focus towards certain areas without adequately validating these assumptions.

Additionally, the internal researcher might shy away from probing into traumatic or sensitive details, such as aspects of psychological or emotional abuse, preferring instead to concentrate on more tangible forms of physical violence due to their clearer and more measurable nature. This avoidance can lead to underestimating the role of cultural contexts in justifying violence or misrepresenting the prevalence of the phenomenon, thereby compromising the research's credibility and accuracy.

3.3.2 Loss of objectivity

Immersion in the same cultural and social environment as the subject of study can result in a loss of objectivity. The researcher's personal views, shaped by the prevalent attitudes and ideas within the community, might unconsciously bias the analysis of data (Smith, 2020, p. 75). This can detract from the research's validity, as the findings may not accurately or wholly reflect reality.

For example, when studying the social customs of a rural society, an internal researcher might interpret certain behaviors as "normal" or "acceptable" without considering the underlying complex social dynamics. If these inherent biases are not recognized and addressed, the researcher may fail to achieve a thorough understanding of the behaviors being studied.

4. External researcher in social research

An external researcher is an individual who does not belong to the community or culture being studied. This detachment provides a contrasting perspective to that of an internal researcher, offering a different set of benefits and challenges that influence the conduct and

outcomes of qualitative research.

4.1. Benefits associated with the external researcher

4.1.1 Objectivity

The external researcher's detachment from the cultural and community biases typically offers a more objective approach to data collection and analysis. This separation ensures that the findings are less likely to be swayed by the personal biases and preconceptions that an internal researcher might face (Brown, 2018, p. 102).

For instance, an external researcher studying funerary rituals in Algerian society, without any prior ties to Algerian culture, is likely to view these practices through an unbiased lens. This perspective can reveal different dimensions of the rituals, such as the predominance of social over religious motivations in communal feasts or grave visitations. Unlike an internal researcher, who might view these activities as intrinsic cultural norms, the external researcher can critically analyze them without cultural preconceptions.

Additionally, the external researcher may approach sensitive topics with more forthrightness, like inquiring about the financial implications of funerary practices or their effects on low-income families, questions that an internal researcher might avoid due to cultural sensitivity or presumed understanding. This ability to maintain a distance from the cultural context allows the external researcher to offer fresh analyses that are not shaped by the prevailing local cultural norms, thereby enhancing the thoroughness and precision of the research outcomes.

4.1.2 New insight

External researchers bring fresh perspectives to social phenomena, potentially leading to innovative interpretations that might elude those within the community. This fresh outlook can challenge conventional understandings of social issues and the roles of cultural symbols, contributing to the development of new theoretical frameworks in qualitative research (Jones, 2017, p. 85). By analyzing data from an outsider's viewpoint, external researchers can generate theoretical

advancements that reshape existing paradigms and enrich the academic discourse in their fields.

4.2 Challenges associated with the external researcher

4.2.1 Understanding the cultural context

One of the principal hurdles for an external researcher is the limited grasp of the local cultural nuances, which is crucial for accurate interpretation of social behaviors and interactions. An external researcher's unfamiliarity with the cultural symbols and cues can lead to misinterpretations or oversimplified views of complex social behaviors (Smith, 2020, p. 77). For example, without a deep understanding of the local context, an external researcher might misconstrue the significance of social behavior or overlook the subtleties of practices that are culturally specific.

4.2.2 Difficulty building trust

Establishing trust with participants is another significant challenge for external researchers. Participants may be wary of divulging information to someone they perceive as an outsider, lacking intimate knowledge of their culture and daily realities. This discomfort can hinder effective data collection and compromise the quality of the information gathered, as participants might not fully engage or may withhold details they deem misunderstood or out of context (Lee, 2019, p. 50). The external researcher's ability to connect with participants is thus critical, requiring sensitive navigation of cultural boundaries and earnest efforts to understand and respect the community's values and experiences.

For example, in a study on **religious traditions in a conservative society**, the external researcher may have difficulty interpreting religious symbols that are used unspokenly among members of the community. The external researcher will also lack a deep understanding of the religious or symbolic rituals associated with them, which causes him to misunderstand their true meaning and their impact on the behaviors of individuals. This suggests that the inner seeker, living within that culture, may be better able to interpret these symbols in their proper context.



4.3 Neutral point of view

One significant advantage that an external researcher holds is the ability to maintain a neutral point of view. Being detached from the studied culture or society allows the external researcher to analyze phenomena objectively without the influence of local cultural biases. While an internal researcher brings deep insights into subtle cultural symbols, their interpretations might be clouded by preconceived expectations or cultural affiliations, potentially leading to biased analyses (Smith, 2020, p. 80).

For instance, consider a study analyzing the impact of religious rituals on social cohesion within a traditional society. An internal researcher, having grown up within that society, might see these rituals as an integral part of daily life, which could skew their interpretation of the rituals' societal impacts. In contrast, an external researcher, unaffected personally by these rituals, can assess their social implications more neutrally and precisely, thus providing a clearer picture of their effects on community cohesion.

4.3.1 Ability to ask new questions

Another distinct advantage of the external researcher is the capacity to pose novel questions that might not occur to an internal researcher due to their deep familiarity with the local customs and practices. Internal researchers might dismiss certain aspects as obvious or unworthy of inquiry due to their ingrained understanding of the culture (Brown, 2018, p. 102).

Take, for example, the study of gender roles in tribal societies. An internal researcher, embedded within this cultural milieu, might accept the established division of labor and social rights between genders as the normative order, hence seeing no reason to challenge or scrutinize it further. Conversely, an external researcher might question the cultural or social rationale behind this division, probing into how it shapes the economic or political power dynamics within the society. This approach can uncover new dimensions of the phenomenon that might remain overlooked by someone accustomed to and accepting of the status quo.

These insights demonstrate how external researchers can significantly enhance the depth of understanding of the studied phenomena. Their ability to approach the subject from an uninvolved standpoint not only facilitates a more balanced view but also opens up avenues for questioning that can lead to profound discoveries, enriching the scholarly discourse surrounding the topics they investigate.

4.4 Challenges

4.4.1 Difficult access to data

A significant challenge for external researchers is the difficulty in accessing data, largely due to the lack of established social or emotional connections with the community under study. This barrier is often more pronounced in conservative societies, where outsiders might be viewed with suspicion or as potential threats, complicating the trust-building process that is crucial for gathering accurate and comprehensive data (Lee, 2019, p. 52).

For instance, in studies involving closed religious groups, external researchers may encounter resistance or outright refusal from members reluctant to share information or permit observation of their internal practices. Such reluctance typically stems from fears that the researcher might misinterpret their beliefs or motives. To navigate these challenges, external researchers might need to employ specialized approaches such as engaging local liaisons or dedicating significant time to develop trusting relationships, thereby affirming their sincere and objective intentions in the study.

4.4.2 Misinterpretation of the context

Misinterpreting the cultural context represents another substantial challenge for external researchers, potentially leading to flawed analyses or conclusions. Social and anthropological research demands a nuanced understanding of the local culture to accurately interpret social phenomena. However, external researchers, coming from different cultural backgrounds and lacking intimate connections with the study population, are at a higher risk of misreading behaviors or rituals (Jones, 2017, p. 88).

A pertinent example can be seen in the study of marriage rituals in a rural community, where an external researcher might incorrectly interpret certain ceremonial symbols or traditions if they are not well-acquainted with the community's cultural underpinnings. Such misinterpretations can result from viewing unusual or unfamiliar practices as mere formalities, disregarding their deep cultural significance and connections to broader aspects of social life like family dynamics or religious practices.

To mitigate these risks, external researchers should engage persistently with community members, seek insights from local experts, and perhaps utilize local research assistants who can offer precise cultural interpretations of complex or ambiguous social behaviors and symbols. This proactive engagement underscores the necessity of cultural sensitivity and ongoing interaction with the community to surmount these challenges and ensure the integrity of the research process.

5. The impact of location on qualitative data

In our earlier discussion, we highlighted that locality is a fundamental concept that cannot be overlooked within the scope of qualitative research. The researcher's geographical, intellectual, social, and cultural positioning plays an integral role in the research process. This positioning not only reflects the researcher's backgrounds and affiliations but also brings to light their conscious and unconscious biases, which are pivotal in shaping both data collection and analysis. For instance, in studies concerning gender, pivotal factors such as ethnic affiliation, social class, and religious beliefs directly influence the researcher's interactions with participants, thereby impacting data collection and interpretation.

Understanding the influence of locality in qualitative research necessitates a critical approach that recognizes the dynamic interplay between the researcher and the field. The researcher is not merely a passive observer but an active participant whose presence can either enhance the understanding of the studied context or skew the results due to inherent biases or misconceptions.

The core question that emerges is: How can researchers address the influence of their own positions in a manner that is both conscious and transparent, thereby safeguarding the integrity of the research and enhancing its credibility?

5.1 Data collection

Data collection stands as the most challenging phase of qualitative research, where the researcher's ability to gather data from the field becomes crucial. This phase is vital for deconstructing the phenomenon under study and transitioning from mere data collection to systematic organization and analysis. The success of this stage hinges on the researcher's awareness and ability to remain ideologically neutral to avoid compromising the quality of the field data. The relationship with participants, who are central to the study, also significantly affects this process. In the subsequent sections, we will explore how the impact of locality influences the trajectory of qualitative research.

5.2 The impact of location on the quality of information

In qualitative research, the caliber of the information gathered and analyzed is paramount for generating accurate and trustworthy insights. However, the quality of this information is heavily influenced by the researcher's location, encompassing personal, social, cultural, and professional factors. These influences manifest in various aspects of the research process, from data collection and participant interaction to data analysis and the presentation of findings.

5.2.1 Impact of locality on information gathering

▪ Access to the field

The location of the researcher can significantly influence their ability to access participants. For instance, researchers sharing a similar cultural background with the community under study may find participants more open and comfortable in sharing information (Smith, 2020, p. 45). Conversely, when there is a noticeable cultural discrepancy, it might erect confidence barriers, impacting participants' willingness to engage (Brown, 2019, p. 122).



▪ Choice of topics and interviews

The influence of the researcher's unconscious biases on the quality of the questions posed and the focus areas of the interviews is considerable. Researchers may shy away from sensitive topics to preserve rapport or inadvertently emphasize issues that align with their preconceptions, thus affecting the depth and breadth of data collected (Jones, 2018, p. 76).

▪ **The impact of location on the researcher's relationship with the participants**

• **Power and representation:**

The dynamics of power between the researcher and the participants play a crucial role. If researchers hold more social or economic power, participants may feel compelled to provide socially desirable responses rather than conveying their genuine opinions and experiences, which can skew the authenticity of the data collected (Miller, 2017, p. 98).

• **Cultural biases**

A researcher's cultural background can profoundly affect their interpretation of participants' reactions and behaviors. Misunderstandings of cultural symbols or local values can lead to incorrect data interpretations, thereby compromising the research's validity (Taylor, 2021, p. 134).

▪ **Impact of location on information analysis**

• **Researcher frame of reference:**

Researchers often analyze data through the prism of their own social and cultural backgrounds, which can introduce bias into the findings. This might manifest as a propensity to seek evidence that corroborates their pre-existing beliefs or reflects their cultural norms (White, 2022, p. 67).

• **Diversity of interpretation:**

The researcher's location can restrict the diversity of interpretations offered by the data. Researchers influenced by a particular cultural perspective might overlook alternative interpretations that could

reveal deeper or differing meanings (Green, 2016, p. 59). For instance, in studying collective agricultural rituals in Algerian society, a Western researcher might interpret these practices as merely symbolic, aimed at strengthening social bonds, thereby neglecting their spiritual and metaphysical dimensions.

However, a local researcher might recognize these rituals as intertwined with a profound belief in metaphysical forces that influence crop abundance or as a form of communication with ancestors or deities. Such divergent interpretations underscore the importance of transcending one's cultural confines to fully appreciate the multifaceted meanings embedded within the data.

5.2.2 Impact of locality on the credibility of results

▪ Transparency and self-criticism:

Awareness of the influence of one's positional biases on the research process is critical for maintaining the credibility of the results. It is essential for researchers to practice self-criticism and to disclose how they address their biases to ensure the integrity and quality of the information gathered (Black, 2020, p. 24). Without this awareness and transparency, the research outcomes may face scrutiny regarding their validity.

▪ Enriching the results:

Conversely, positionality can serve as an asset when appropriately managed. Recognizing and transparently interacting with the impact of one's position can enrich the analytical depth of the study, particularly when the researcher is conscious of how their perspective influences the research outcomes (Johnson, 2019, p. 88).

▪ Challenges in building relationships with participants

Building trusting relationships with participants is one of the most significant challenges external researchers face in qualitative research. Trust is paramount for ensuring that data collected are honest and reflective of participants' true experiences. Establishing this trust necessitates considerable time and effort, particularly when researchers are not native to the community or familiar with the cultural context of the participants. This lack of familiarity can

adversely affect the quality, authenticity, and validity of the data gathered.

▪ **Cultural and Social Barriers:**

External researchers often encounter cultural, linguistic, or social barriers that can make participants feel uncomfortable or hesitant to express themselves freely. For instance, in studies involving refugees, initial reluctance to share personal stories with external researchers has been observed, often stemming from concerns about privacy and potential misunderstandings (Lee, 2019, p. 88).

▪ **The Need to Build a Long-term Relationship:**

In many research contexts, it is necessary for researchers to invest time in developing relationships based on mutual trust with participants. This process may involve participating in daily community activities, engaging with local customs, or even partaking in cultural events. For example, Lee (2019) describes a scenario where a researcher spent several months building trust with a group of refugees by actively participating in community and cultural events, which ultimately enhanced the reliability and credibility of the data collected (Lee, 2019, p. 90).

▪ **Ethical Challenges:**

Cultivating close relationships with participants also introduces ethical considerations. Participants may develop expectations of receiving special treatment or assistance from the researcher, which poses a dilemma. Researchers must carefully balance building empathetic, trust-based human relationships with maintaining the professional detachment necessary to preserve the research's integrity. This balance is crucial to avoid conflicts of interest and to ensure the ethical conduct of the study.

▪ **Time and resources**

The process of building relationships necessitates both time and resources, which may not always be readily available to researchers. Insufficient time allocation can result in the gathering of superficial data that fails to capture the depth of participants' experiences. Lee

(2019) notes that inadequate relationship-building has led, in some instances, to participants either refusing to engage or providing incomplete and erroneous data (Lee, 2019, p. 92).

▪ **Data analysis and the impact of locality on research quality**

Data analysis within qualitative research is inherently complex and significantly influenced by the researcher's locale. While external researchers may benefit from a presumed neutrality, allowing them to interpret data without local prejudices, this detachment can also be detrimental. The lack of local insight might prevent external researchers from grasping nuanced elements crucial for a profound understanding of the cultural context.

6. Objective advantage of the external researcher

An external researcher typically possesses the capability to analyze data devoid of local cultural or social influences that might skew research outcomes. This position enables the researcher to pose neutral questions and analyze phenomena without the cultural biases that might affect an internal researcher. For instance, in studies concerning protest movements, the detachment maintained by an external researcher might facilitate a clearer understanding of shifts in public opinion that are free from local prejudices (Jones, 2017, p. 102).

Consider an external researcher examining protest movements in a culturally unfamiliar country. This researcher might provide an unbiased interpretation of the economic and political catalysts of the protests, unswayed by the local sentiments that might bias an internal researcher.

6.1 Challenges associated with cultural understanding

Despite their objective stance, external researchers might lack insight into local symbols and expressions laden with deep cultural significance. For instance, when analyzing protest movements in a specific locale, an external researcher might not fully comprehend the symbolism embedded in protest slogans, which often reflect historical memories or cultural identities (Jones, 2017, p. 106). This oversight can lead to a misinterpretation of the movement's dynamics or a

failure to recognize significant elements that contribute to its efficacy.

In protests occurring in the Middle East, for example, demonstrators often employ religious or historical slogans with profound implications. While these might appear superficial to an external observer, they frequently carry significant historical or religious undertones that reinforce the political message, such as slogans like “the people want to overthrow the regime” or “freedom or death.” These phrases are imbued with historical and cultural meanings that may elude an external researcher.

6.2 The importance of the positionality of the researcher in data analysis

The positionality of the researcher is a critical determinant in the interpretation and analysis of qualitative data. Whether the researcher is internal (originating from the same community being studied) or external (from a different cultural background), this distinction significantly influences the quality and depth of the research. Internal researchers often possess a profound understanding of symbols and cultural contexts, enabling them to interpret data with greater depth and accuracy. In contrast, external researchers may lack this intricate knowledge, presenting considerable challenges in deciphering cultural meanings embedded in behaviors or actions that may appear unfamiliar or perplexing.

For instance, in a study examining religious rituals in a specific region, an internal researcher might accurately discern the significance of inscriptions or clothing used during the ritual. Conversely, an external researcher might misinterpret these elements, resulting in a superficial analysis that fails to capture the ritual's authentic meaning and significance.

6.3 Strategies for overcoming challenges

To address these challenges and ensure accurate and reliable data analysis, external researchers can employ several strategies, including:

- **Continuous learning about local culture:** Enhancing cultural awareness and understanding through activities such as extensive

reading, participating in local social events, and engaging in informal conversations with participants.

- **Collaborating with local researchers:** Partnering with local researchers during the analysis process can help bridge cultural gaps. These local experts are often more familiar with the nuances of symbols and logos that external researchers might overlook.

- **Maintaining constant communication with participants:** Developing strong and trusting relationships with participants can enable the researcher to achieve deeper and more accurate interpretations of the data.

7.Interpretation

Internal researchers, equipped with an intimate knowledge of their culture, are well-positioned to provide comprehensive and authoritative interpretations of data based on their understanding of local symbols and cultural nuances. On the other hand, external researchers, while achieving a neutral perspective, may inadvertently overlook cultural details that add depth and complexity to the analysis.

External researchers and the difficulty of understanding hidden meanings

In qualitative research, grasping hidden and symbolic meanings is a vital component of deep cultural analysis. Although external researchers often bring a degree of objectivity to their work, they may encounter difficulties in recognizing subtle cultural symbols or references. This limitation can lead to the misinterpretation or omission of critical meanings, ultimately affecting the quality and reliability of the research.

7.1 Difficulty understanding cultural symbolism

Different cultures are characterized by unique symbols and customs that hold specific meanings within their local contexts. These symbols may include colors, shapes, verbal expressions, or behavioral cues that convey particular connotations, which may not be readily apparent to an external researcher. When a researcher engages with a community unfamiliar to them, they might fail to recognize these hidden messages, which form an integral part of the community's



communication and cultural fabric.

For example, in analyzing the symbolism of colors in a traditional society, an external researcher might interpret white as a representation of peace or purity, influenced by their own Western cultural framework. However, in some local cultures, white may symbolize sadness or mourning. This divergence in understanding can result in a misinterpretation of the symbol's actual significance within its cultural context. In certain Asian cultures, for instance, white is associated with death and loss, while in Western culture, it is commonly linked to peace or innocence. Such cultural variations highlight the challenges external researchers face in accurately interpreting cultural symbolism.

7.2 Challenges associated with the interpretation of cultural signs

In addition to symbols, hidden meanings often include non-verbal cues such as gestures or physical expressions. External researchers may lack the cultural knowledge necessary to interpret these signals accurately, which can sometimes lead to misinterpretations of reactions or behaviors that appear unusual or ambiguous.

For instance, in certain cultures, smiling while discussing sensitive topics like poverty or pain may serve as a cultural defense mechanism. An external researcher might mistakenly interpret such a smile as evidence of cynicism or indifference, whereas within the cultural context, it may actually signify modesty or discomfort. Without a precise understanding of these cultural signals, analyses risk being inaccurate or incomplete.

7.3 Strategies for overcoming the difficulty of understanding hidden meanings

To address these challenges and achieve a deeper understanding of the hidden meanings embedded in a local cultural context, external researchers must cultivate skills and adopt techniques that enable them to interpret these nuances effectively. Key strategies include:

▪ Extended observation:

Continuous and immersive observation can offer external researchers an opportunity to better grasp cultural symbols and signals. By actively participating in the daily lives of the community under study, researchers may uncover hidden meanings that are not immediately apparent.

For example, consider a researcher studying funerary rituals in an Algerian village. Through prolonged observation, they can:

- _ Attend multiple funerals to identify seasonal or occasional variations in rituals.

- _ Observe the roles performed by different individuals, such as elders, women, and youth, during the rituals.

- _ Analyze how the rituals influence participants' social relationships or emotional states over time.

- _ Detect subtle distinctions, such as differences in practices between families or social classes.

▪ **Collaborating with local research assistants:**

Partnering with local researchers or assistants who are embedded in the community is a crucial step toward accurately interpreting hidden cultural symbols and meanings. These individuals can provide invaluable guidance to help researchers navigate nuances they might otherwise overlook.

For instance, imagine a foreign scholar studying funerary rituals in the Aures region. Due to linguistic and cultural differences, the scholar might struggle to interpret certain symbols or customs unique to the area. Collaborating with a local research assistant from the region can bridge these gaps.

▪ **Contributions of local assistants:**

• **Explanation of symbols:**

If the researcher notices the presentation of specific dishes, such as “**chakshukha**,” during a funeral, the local assistant can explain its association with cultural values such as generosity and solidarity during mourning.

• **Clarification of phrases or expressions:**

During the funeral, participants might use expressions of grief or compassion that carry profound symbolic meanings unfamiliar to the researcher. A local assistant can elucidate the context and cultural connotations behind these statements, enriching the researcher's understanding of the cultural practices.

In traditional Algerian societies, individuals may sometimes hesitate to engage with an external researcher due to a lack of trust or an unclear understanding of the study's objectives. In such contexts, the presence of a well-known local assistant within the community can play a pivotal role in building trust and facilitating the collection of valuable information.

▪ **Identifying participants**

A local assistant often has an intimate understanding of the community and can identify individuals who possess significant knowledge or experiences related to funeral rituals, ensuring that the data collected is both rich and accurate.

• **Adapting to local norms**

Certain regions maintain strict social rules governing participation in community events. A local assistant can guide the researcher on how to respect these norms, minimizing the risk of unintentionally offending the community.

• **Critical analysis of cultural legacies**

An external researcher must be attuned to the prevailing cultural and symbolic patterns within the society under study. It is crucial to remain vigilant regarding all elements that may contribute to the cultural narrative, even if these symbols are non-verbal or less apparent.

For instance, when examining the disparity in educational attainment between urban and rural areas in Algeria, the researcher must consider the cultural legacies influencing this phenomenon:

- **Nonverbal symbols:** In rural communities, a subtle prioritization

of agribusiness or familial responsibilities over formal education may serve as an unspoken reflection of societal roles and values. Such values may imply an implicit belief that education is not always essential for achieving economic stability or success.

- **Gender-related values:** Cultural legacies in some regions may emphasize defining a girl's role within the family context, often at the expense of educational pursuits. For example, early marriage may be perceived as a more significant milestone than completing higher education, contributing to lower enrollment rates of girls in secondary schools or universities.

- **Language of education:** The dual-language system in Algerian education, encompassing Arabic and French, symbolizes the tension between national identity and colonial history. This dynamic can influence students' experiences, such as feeling disconnected from the language of instruction or maintaining a stronger cultural attachment to their native language.

- **School environment:** Schools themselves often convey cultural messages through factors like gender segregation, the use of uniforms, or architectural design. For instance, if a rural school lacks basic infrastructure, it may implicitly communicate the state's perceived priority, or lack thereof, regarding education in that area.

Conducting a critical analysis of cultural legacies enables the external researcher to transcend superficial interpretations of educational phenomena. This deeper understanding of cultural and social contexts allows for the formulation of more informed and meaningful recommendations.

8. Knowledge production and the impact of locality on qualitative research

In qualitative research, knowledge production is closely tied to the researcher's cultural positioning. Both internal researchers (who belong to the studied community) and external researchers (from a different cultural background) produce knowledge shaped by their cultural perspectives. The knowledge generated by an internal researcher often reflects their personal cultural experiences, while that produced by an external researcher may highlight the cultural distance



between themselves and the community under study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 130).

8.1 Knowledge production by the internal researcher

An internal researcher, being a member of the studied community, possesses a unique advantage in generating deep and contextually rich knowledge. Their cultural and societal experiences provide a solid foundation for accurately interpreting local phenomena. This in-depth understanding ensures that their interpretations align closely with the realities of the community. For instance, a researcher from the same community studying religious or social practices is equipped with cultural insights that allow for interpretations that are more congruent with the local context (Jones, 2017, p. 112).

In a study of social rituals in Algeria, an internal researcher might recognize the nuanced meanings embedded in folk songs or traditional dances, drawing on their knowledge of the historical significance of these rituals and their role within the local community.

8.2 Knowledge production by the external researcher

Conversely, an external researcher may produce knowledge that reflects the cultural distance between themselves and the studied community. This gap can lead to interpretations that might initially appear incomplete or less accurate. External researchers often face challenges in fully grasping the symbolic and cultural dimensions that community members intuitively understand from an insider's perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 134).

For example, in a study of religious rituals in a particular community, an external researcher might misinterpret the meaning behind certain practices, such as keeping sacred symbols within homes. While these practices may seem like superficial customs to an outsider, they often carry profound religious and cultural significance for the local population.

8.3 Enriching qualitative research through situational awareness

Despite the cultural gap, both internal and external researchers can make meaningful contributions to qualitative research by approaching

this paradox with care and situational awareness. By acknowledging and addressing the effects of locality, researchers from both perspectives can collectively offer a multidimensional and enriched understanding of the phenomena under study (Jones, 2017, p. 115).

9.Strategies for dealing with cultural paradox

9.1 Self-reflexivity

One fundamental approach that researchers should employ is self-reflexivity. This involves being critically aware of their own cultural and social positioning and evaluating how this influences the research process. Through self-reflection, researchers can identify and mitigate potential biases that might affect data collection and interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 138).

For instance, an external researcher studying protests in a particular community could reflect on how their cultural background shapes their understanding of events. Are they predisposed to interpreting protests primarily within a political framework? Do they tend to view them through social constructs that may not align with the studied community's context? Such reflexivity enables researchers to approach data analysis with greater openness and awareness.

9.2 Using triangulation

Triangulation is a strategy designed to enhance the reliability and validity of research findings. It involves integrating multiple perspectives to minimize bias and achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon. In qualitative research, triangulation can include drawing on diverse data sources, employing multiple research methods, or collaborating with researchers from different cultural backgrounds (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 142).

For example, an external researcher investigating the interaction between migrants and host communities could conduct interviews with both migrants and members of the host community. By incorporating these differing viewpoints, the researcher can construct a more balanced and multidimensional analysis of the phenomenon, reflecting a variety of perspectives.



Figure 1: Concept of trigonometry in qualitative research

Source: Created by the researcher by Canva app and enhanced by perplexity

9.3 Cultural communication

To enhance their understanding of participants' cultural contexts, external researchers must cultivate cultural communication skills that enable them to grasp the social, political, and economic dynamics of the studied society. Developing such connections fosters trust with participants, which, in turn, strengthens the credibility and quality of the data collected (Jones, 2017, p. 121).

For example, when studying women's issues in a traditional society, an external researcher could establish relationships with women from that community and engage in informal conversations about their experiences. This cultural immersion provides valuable insights into the community's practices and perceptions, enabling a more nuanced and accurate analysis of the data.

Figure 2: Cultural communication in qualitative research



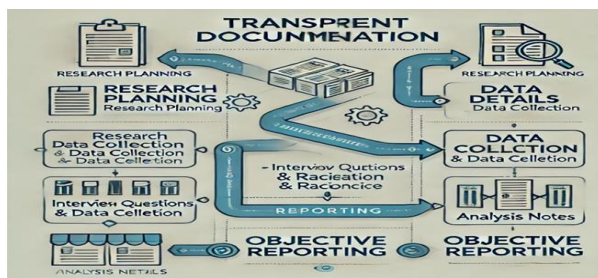
Source: Prepared by the researcher by canva application and improved by perplexity

9.4 Transparent documentation

Ensuring the data collection and analysis process remains free from biases requires a commitment to transparent documentation. This involves meticulously recording all research stages, including the methods employed, the questions posed, and the analyses or interpretations made during data collection (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 146).

For instance, when conducting interviews with community members, researchers should document every detail accurately. This includes the questions asked, the rationale behind choosing those questions, and any subsequent analyses based on participants' responses. Transparent documentation not only enhances the reliability of the findings but also enables others to verify and replicate the research process.

Figure 3: Transparent documentation process in the research



Source: Prepared by the researcher by canva application and improved by perplexity

Conclusion

The internal and external paradox represents a central challenge in qualitative research, as it highlights the influence of a researcher's positionality on their understanding of the studied phenomena and the interpretation of collected data. The relationship between the researcher and the context under study is not static but dynamic, continuously evolving throughout the research process. In qualitative research, the researcher becomes part of the inquiry itself, with their cultural and social background shaping the data collection and analysis.

This paradox underscores the intricate interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, urging researchers to reflect on the influence of locality at every stage of their work. Recognizing a researcher's position, whether internal or external, is a critical first step in understanding its impact on research outcomes.

Internal researchers, as members of the studied community, benefit from a profound understanding of local symbols and meanings. However, their proximity may also introduce social or cultural biases, potentially obscuring less apparent aspects of the phenomena. Conversely, external researchers bring perspectives that may differ from local realities, which can result in interpretations that, while offering fresh insights, might not fully align with the lived experiences of the community.

Awareness of the researcher's position is a fundamental element in

managing the internal-external paradox in qualitative research. A researcher who acknowledges the influence of their cultural and social position on the research process is better equipped to evaluate their analyses and interpretations critically. Moreover, the ability to engage in self-reflection, critiquing one's positionality and its impact on understanding phenomena, is essential. Through self-reflection, researchers can make more informed decisions regarding the tools and methods they use, thereby enhancing the accuracy and reliability of their findings.

To effectively navigate this paradox, researchers must adopt practical strategies, such as employing triangulation, which enables the integration of multiple data sources and explanations. External researchers should also focus on improving their cultural communication skills and fostering trust with participants. Additionally, ensuring transparent documentation of research processes can help minimize personal biases and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Despite the implementation of these strategies, the internal-external paradox remains a persistent challenge in qualitative research, particularly in culturally diverse societies. Researchers are, therefore, continually encouraged to develop innovative and adaptive methods suited to varying cultural contexts. This requires ongoing reflection on how research topics and theses are approached, ensuring the research process accommodates cultural and social pluralism and captures the nuanced dynamics between internal and external perspectives.

Recognizing the paradox between internal and external perspectives in qualitative research is not merely a step toward producing more accurate and objective knowledge; it is also a fundamental principle for fostering a respectful and transparent relationship with the studied community. By embracing situational awareness and effectively managing cultural paradoxes, researchers can generate knowledge that is more authentic and reflective of the cultural and social diversity inherent in the communities they study.

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