

# Playing *bideshi* (western) by a *deshi* (local) ethnographer in the field: Ambiguities in the ‘insider-outsider’ relationship

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A key lesson I have learnt from my year-long doctoral fieldwork in Dhaka is that the ‘insider-outsider’ relationship can be messier and much more complex than one can assume prior going to the field. The ambiguities in the insider-outsider relationship have already been widely discussed in the field of anthropology, sociology and psychology. One common presumption across these three fields is that this relationship needs to be understood beyond binaries, since an ethnographer’s positioning as an ‘insider’ and/or ‘outsider’ depends on the context, and is shaped by the constant interactions between the ethnographer and her research participants in the field. The ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ categories are not fixed and the boundaries between the two can be blurred. This claim however remains largely theoretical and more critical reflections based on ethnographers’ experience is needed to understand better how it works in the real field. Reflecting on my interaction with seventy-two boys and girls aged between fifteen and nineteen years living in Dhaka during 2016 and 2017, I will discuss here how I had to juggle

constantly between the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positionings for building rapport with my research participants.

Getting access to the participants was quite challenging for me due to the cultural sensitivity about the research topic and my *deshi* (local) identity. I researched young people’s understanding of sexuality and I was aware that as a *deshi* thirty-eight years old woman anthropologist, it would not be easy to find participants and get them talking openly about their intimate sexual experiences. I had to do a lot of ground work before conducting my first one-on-one in-depth interview. As part of that, I spent eight weeks hanging out and having chit-chats with a group of two boys and two girls who I met through a colleague in Dhaka and later became the key informants for my research. They all were friends with each other. Our conversations helped me a lot to think through different strategies, some of which were later proven to be very effective. For instance, they recommended that while meeting any potential participant I should show my university identity card and introduce myself as a Dutch PhD researcher and not as a *deshi* (local) researcher. Other important suggestions included using English words frequently, while communicating with participants and recreating my Facebook profile to look more *bideshi* (western). In a nutshell, their advice was to give the participants the impression that I am more of a *bideshi* than a *deshi*. In my pursuit of creating an image of *bideshi* I had to give my Facebook profile a new look. I replaced my profile photo with one that was taken in Kinderdijk and had windmills at the background. I also uploaded personal photos from my stay in The Netherlands as well as in other western countries.

All these strategies were proven to be very effective as soon as I started approaching potential participants for one-on-one interviews and group discussions. The moment I disclosed my identity as a doctoral researcher from a Dutch university, I discovered that they perceived me as an outsider, which was necessary to obtain access and trust among the research participants. It became evident in our

conversations. At the end of each interview I asked the participant why she was willing to share her stories with me. Some typical responses were: “There is no risk in telling you this because you will go back to Netherlands and will not tell my parents or family” or “you will not judge me like people here do”. While representing myself as a Dutch PhD researcher thus helped me to build good rapport in the field. My research assistant who was a young local woman anthropologist had been constantly struggling to access participants. She encountered frequent rejection in the field particularly from the boys. We both believe that the existing sociocultural shame of having a cross-sex (male-female) conversation combined with her *deshi* identity played a strong role behind boys’ unwillingness to talk with her. Conversely, this was not the case for me. With my crafted *bideshi* image I could position myself as an ‘outsider’ and thereby could bypass that shame.

During one-on-one interviews, I realised that my positioning as an ‘outsider’ not only provided me with an easy access to participants but also helped me obtaining an ‘insider’ status without much struggle. Participants saw their views of sexuality as modern as opposed to their parents’ generation (which is apparently my generation) and probably also as opposed to the *deshi* research assistant, and assumed my views would be like theirs. Hence, they could openly talk about sex with me that is usually considered taboo and cannot be normally discussed with an adult in Bangladesh. Many shared their intimate sexual experiences or their private conversations with their boyfriend/girlfriend over Facebook, and invited me to join their closed Facebook group chats between close friends. Participants often addressed me as a ‘close friend’ while introducing me with their peers and encouraged them to participate in my research by saying: “You can tell anything and everything to her because she is very open-minded and is like us!”. During my fieldwork, I have been invited to join their social events, such as

birthday parties, family dinners or social outings. I could thus become an insider by positioning myself as an outsider.

My juggles between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positioning makes me rethinking and questioning the way I was taught about insider-outsider relationship in the classroom when I was an anthropology major student. Drawing on references from classic ethnographies written by western anthropologists, I was taught that an ethnographer is either an insider or an outsider and each of the positioning has its own benefits/pitfalls. While this insider-outsider dichotomy may make sense for western researchers conducting fieldwork in ‘other cultures’, it hardly made any sense when I entered into the field, that is my own culture. Unlike a western researcher I did not have to learn the culture because I was already part of it. Instead I had to create a strategic image of an outsider in order to get access to the participants. Methods that work for western researchers may not work for local researchers. As a *deshi* researcher thus I find the ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ categories as inherently unstable, and the boundaries between the two are very thin and can be transcended. These categories therefore need to be revisited based on local researchers’ real fieldwork reflections.