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1 Performing Ethnography in Asian American Communities: Beyond the Insider-versus-Outsider Perspective

What are the methodological and analytical implications of third-world scholars from first-world academic institutions studying third-world communities in the first-world? At one time, fieldwork for sociologists and anthropologists meant studying exotic others and their cultures, in many cases colonial subjects in faraway lands. In more recent periods in the United States, sociologists have discovered that the urban neighborhoods of American cities provide an ideal setting to conduct social science research, and anthropologists have moved home as well to study their own society (Messerschmidt 1981). Among researchers doing what has become defined as insider sociology or native anthropology have been scholars of color studying their own racial or ethnic groups, which has raised new dilemmas and debates.

The general debate over the distinction between insiders and outsiders or between natives and non-natives is discussed in terms of constructed boundaries—whether cultural, political, social, or economic—and is most often framed in terms of how one can cross these boundaries (Aguilar 1981). For example, native ethnographers claim that they can be trusted with personal information because of their insider status, while outsiders claim it is precisely because they are removed from the inner circle of gossip that they can be trusted; therefore, trust (or distrust) is a claim that both have used to validate their position. Epistemological concerns have been raised that insiders are "too close to home" and will miss the obvious, whereas outsiders curious about their new environment will make valuable discoveries (Aguilar 1981, 16). One's lived experience can make what would seem like an extraordinary occurrence seem ordinary; in other words, native researchers essentially fail to notice incidents that

are familiar as worthy of evaluation. Yet outsiders, after a period of initiation, can become immersed in the setting to the extent that the unfamiliar becomes familiar and the noticeable becomes unnoticed as well (Whyte 1943, 321).

For the most part, theoretical debates over racial and ethnic scholars studying their own groups followed this lead and tended to emphasize and reinforce this oppositional framework. Merton (1972) contributed to the insider/outsider debate in his essay on the sociology of knowledge by challenging Black scholars' rights to monopolize research on Black communities, based on their claims that they have privileged forms of knowledge unattainable by outsiders. Wilson (1974) questions the privileged insider principle that claims "individuals of a particular race or ethnic group have a greater intellectual understanding of the experiences of that group," since collection and interpretation of data do not necessarily require firsthand knowledge of a group's experience.

Even those who defend the role of scholars of color to study their own group maintained this oppositional framework (Moore 1973; Ladner 1977). For example, Blauner and Wellman state:

> There are certain aspects of racial phenomena, however, that are particularly difficult—if not impossible—for a member of the oppressing group to grasp empirically and formulate conceptually. These barriers are existential and methodological as well as political and ethical. We refer here to the nuances of culture and group ethos; to the meaning of oppression and especially psychic reactions; to what is called the Black, the Mexican-American, the Asian and the Indian *experience*. (Blauner and Wellman 1977, 329)

Although she does not discount the role of the White researcher, Stack (1974, xiv) cautions that outsiders bring biases to the cultures they study, and White researchers often do not analyze their data according to the perspective of minority communities and fail to comprehend the impact of institutional racism. Zinn (1979, 212) argues that there are empirical and methodology advantages to studying a group that one identifies with and is familiar with, but adds: "This is not to suggest that such researchers' understanding or experience will substitute for more systematic knowledge, rather that it may generate hypotheses and discovery of data precluded from traditional frameworks and the experiences of outsiders." Discussions by scholars of Asian ancestry studying Asians in the United States have been cursory (Maykovich 1977; Loo 1980), and rather than exploring the multilayered complexities of this project they have instead supported the binary model.[3]

Most of the self-reflexive fieldwork accounts focus on what techniques White researchers use to conduct research abroad in non-Western nations (Rabinow 1977; Wolf 1992) or concentrate on Whites studying minority communities in the United States (Liebow 1967; Wax 1971; Stack 1974; MacLeod 1987). They, too, have also inadvertently relied on this binary distinction. Previously it was suggested that non-native ethnographers "go native" by immersing themselves into the native scene to become members; however, this methodological strategy has been criticized, since the non-native will always be considered an outsider (Gans 1968; Wax 1971). Although

the concern is with non-natives studying natives, the underlying assumption is that researchers who share a similar racial or ethnic background to those being studied are automatically insiders or natives.

In this essay, I analyze the outsider-versus-insider debate, focusing on the methodological and interpretative dilemmas of doing research in what is defined as one's own ethnic community. Drawing on my experiences carrying out research as a participant-observer in San Diego's Asian American community and my lived experiences as an American citizen of Vietnamese ancestry, I want to dislocate the centrality of the bipolar insider-versus-outsider model by problematizing this opposition. By critiquing the insider or native distinction, I show how this framework reinforces essentialized conceptions of racial and cultural groups. As a researcher of Asian ancestry studying the Asian American community, I could be considered an insider, which is beneficial in attaining rapport with individuals. Yet there were noticeable differences—including ethnic, cultural, political, generational, class, educational, and gender—that were acute reminders of the differences between Asian individuals who were my informants and myself. So I do concur with the idea that the actual process of data collection and the quality of the materials gathered are influenced in crucial ways by a researcher's personal and social characteristics, which can also affect the interpretation of data, but what is needed is the recognition of the multilayered, shifting, and competing similarities and differences between native or insider researchers and their communities—a process that is shaped by simultaneous, ongoing negotiations.

An Introduction to the Debate

There is a long history of Black scholars (Wilson 1974), and to a lesser extent Chicano scholars (Zinn 1979), completing field studies of their own communities, but works by Asian American scholars have only begun to flourish in more recent decades. Miyamoto's (1984 [1939]) research of the Japanese American community in Seattle was one of the few case studies published on Asian Americans. In more recent years, Asian American scholars have pursued and published field research projects on a variety of ethnic communities (Kim 1981; Kwong 1987; Chen 1992; Zhou 1992; Kibria 1993; Fong 1994; Takezawa 1995; Saito 1998). Actually studying one's own ethnic group is not a new phenomena. European American scholars have completed studies of European immigrants in the United States; many were completed by those from the Chicago School (Wax 1971, 38–41). Yet it became controversial for empirical and theoretical reasons when minority scholars entered the field and began studying their own ethnic groups (Reyes and Halcón 1988, 76–77). Reacting to outsiders' misrepresentations, minority communities and scholars questioned the right of White scholars to study minority communities. This occurred simultaneously with the development of the internal colonization models and as people of color challenged the exclusionary policies of universities towards minorities (Blauner and Wellman 1977; Hirabayashi 1995).

The line between personal and academic agendas often becomes blurred, and combining political commitment with research is not a new phenomena invented by scholars of color, although it is one of the most common criticisms directed at ethnic researchers. In an effort to replace myths or stereotypes about their communities, those from minority communities are often working against previous studies that distort or misrepresent their lives (Ladner 1971; Gwaltney 1981). Insider research has been criticized for being inherently biased, since its objective is to foster ethnic pride—a goal that can lead an ethnic insider to select and interpret information accordingly by "functioning as advocates rather than scientists" (Aguilar 1981, 16). Yet other scholars have agendas such as improving conditions for women, the homeless, or workers, or other political causes. Their research can be influenced by funding sources or public policy objectives; however, these scholars do not garner similar criticism even though they can hardly be defined as dispassionate observers. For example, Thorne (1978) was able to justify her role as a participant in the draft resistance movement and the instrumental purposes of doing sociological research, and Gitlin's (1980) participation in the Students for a Democratic Society is seen as beneficial, if not crucial, to his study. Strangers are often perceived as disinterested and can be more objective (Beattie 1964; Merton 1972); however, as I discuss later, at some levels ethnic insiders can be strangers in their community as well.

Like other scholars, I had personal as well as scholarly reasons for choosing my research project. Realizing that ethnic histories of Asian Americans are ignored, devalued, or exoticized, I wanted to capture the voices and actions of activists in one community and to dispel the common misconception that Asians are passive and apolitical.[2] My intention was to understand the dynamics of Asian American political mobilization by focusing on a variety of social, economic, and political organizations in one community. I was interested in what larger structural transformations and internal changes within the Asian American population affect their ability to mobilize as a pan-Asian population. With the increasing diversity of the population and its divergent interests, why have Asian Americans chosen to sustain and expand pan-Asian networks and organizations?[3] I conducted a case study to provide a contextualized analysis of the socioeconomic and political forces that generate change in pan-Asian mobilization and to understand how Americans of Asian ancestry respond to, and are shaped by, these changes (Võ 1995).[4]

Entering Our "Native" Backyards

Fieldwork is considered a collaborative enterprise, not as a neutral one-way encounter, but as a process of dialogue between researcher and those being researched (Burawoy 1991; Emerson 1988, vii). According to Wax, it is "a social phenomenon (involving reciprocity, complex role playing, the invention and obeying of rules, mutual assistance, and play)" (1971, 363). In Goffman's (1959) terms, the dramaturgic elements of doing fieldwork can be viewed like a performance on a stage, especially since ethno-

graphers are like actors concerned with impression management and role playing. My encounters in the field indicated that I was not an automatic insider, since some Asians clearly imagined me as an ally, while others perceived me as a stranger and were suspicious of my intentions. Like all ethnographers, I realized that observation and participation is circumstantial and that each researcher must constantly negotiate her or his interactions while in the field—it is not something that can be mapped and followed according to a step-by-step process in which one starts merely as an outsider and gradually moves to becoming an insider.

For the most part, researching an Asian population felt familiar and comfortable, but the research context was actually a new environment for me. I was regarded as an ethnic and cultural member, but also as a social stranger (see Aguilar 1981). In San Diego, I frequented Asian restaurants, markets, and other businesses and had taken language classes at a Vietnamese language school, yet I was unfamiliar with the organizational infrastructure of the community. I had moved to the area to attend college, so the majority of my interactions were with Asian Americans involved in the academic community; therefore, I had minimal contact with the larger Asian community before I began my project in 1992.[5] Initially, I considered myself an outsider since I was a more recent resident, but because many other Asians were also new migrants or immigrants to San Diego, I realized that being a newcomer was common for a community experiencing a demographic transition.[6] Yet as a researcher who wanted to "hang around" the Asian American organizations, I did not fit into an easily identifiable role, since I did not own a business, was not a professional, did not work for a nonprofit organization, was not interested in being an Asian political representative or politician, and was not looking for a job in the community.

My ethnic credentials helped me gain entrée into the community, although I quickly learned that this was only one criterion. Ethnic communities can be suspicious and distrustful of researchers not from their ethnic group (Blauner and Wellman 1977; Couchman 1973). Yet ethnic researchers do not automatically gain the trust of co-ethnic communities or organizations (Loo 1980). Initially, I contacted the only pan-Asian organization I knew of at the time, a pan-Asian social service agency. The new director, a Japanese American, was wary of researchers prying into the agency's programs, even after I assured her that this was not the objective of my study. In exchange for allowing me access, she wanted me to help them do research or write grants, and because the organization had negative experiences with researchers (some of whom were minorities) in the past, she wanted final approval of my writings before publication. She was receptive to including me in the organization because I was Asian but was suspicious of my status as a researcher.[7]

Fortunately, my second contact was more beneficial, and in this case both my ethnic and academic credentials were seen as an asset. A non-Asian graduate student in my program recommended that I contact a Filipina activist she had met at her nephew's birthday party who was trying to find an Asian American researcher to study the local Filipino American or Asian American communities. After a three-hour meeting with this woman at her home, I felt totally overwhelmed; she had bombarded

me with information on individuals, organizations, events, and controversies. Most importantly, she invited me to several events and allowed me to use her name as a form of introduction. The first event I went to was a tour given by the Chinese Historical Society of the San Diego downtown area once occupied by Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino communities, and I was able to establish more contacts. I began attending pan-Asian events consistently, informing people that I was a sociology graduate student gathering data for a dissertation on Asian American organizations. The majority were receptive to the idea that I was studying them, and many accepted me because my presence showed that I valued their ideas and actions.

The Interplay of Participation and Reciprocity

At this stage I was only interested in being an observer. However, as someone identified racially as Asian, I could not be a detached bystander; they expected me to become more than merely an outside observer. After attending a few Asian Business Association (ABA) meetings, I was asked if I could contribute to their newsletter an article about the preservation and restoration project of what was once the Asian section of downtown San Diego, since I had also attended some meetings on this project. After the article was published, I was asked to become the editor of the newsletter and because of this position I automatically became a board member of the business association and served on several committees. They compensated me for my voluntary efforts by allowing me to be a part of the organization and by covering dinner events, membership dues, and other related expenses. I believe organization members saw their role as beneficial, since they were mentoring someone who could assist the community as well as helping me in my research project. A quid pro quo relationship can be valuable for a research project (Pollner and Emerson 1988, 238), and this was the situation in my case. In this way, we formed a mutually beneficial relationship, and while it allowed me to reciprocate in some way, I felt I gained much more than I gave.

As both an observer and a participant, I was allowed situational flexibility in identifying myself in the field. Depending on the circumstances, I could identify myself as a researcher affiliated with the university, as a member of ABA, as the editor of the ABA newsletter, or merely as an Asian American interested in organizational issues. Like other fieldworkers, my involvement gave me a sense of the backstage—of what goes on behind the curtains of the organization—allowing me access to a wealth of information. I was included on mailing and fax lists, which helped me keep in touch with a community that was essentially nonterritorial and in which individuals were dispersed throughout the county. Being a participant, I had justification for being at particular gatherings, especially small ones when the role of an observer would have been intrusive. With new participants joining community activities and new organizations emerging, it was easy for Asian Americans to incorporate another stranger into the community structure. The business organization gave me networks