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## **Insider Research in the Study of Youth Cultures**

### **Abstract**

Ethnographic research on youth cultures, particularly at doctoral level, is often conducted by investigators with some degree of initial cultural proximity to the individuals or cultures under the microscope. Yet elaboration of the practical and epistemological implications of 'insider research' among such scholars, has been somewhat limited. This article contributes to the development of such discussion through drawing together a range of previous writings and by drawing upon elements of the author's own experience of researching a contemporary youth subculture as a long-term participant of the grouping. In the face of theories emphasising the complexities of identity and the multiplicity of insider views, the paper argues for the continued use of the notion of insider research in a non-absolute sense. Subsequently, it is argued that that researching youth cultures from such a position may offer significant potential advantages - in respect both of the research process and the types of understanding which might be generated. It is also suggested, however, that the realisation of such possible benefits and the avoidance of significant difficulties, requires a cautious and reflexive approach.

### **Keywords**

youth culture/ ethnography / identity / insider

# **‘Insider Research’ in the Study of Youth Cultures**

## **Introduction**

Established as an approach by Chicago School researchers such as Nels Anderson (1923) in the early twentieth century, conducting ethnography from an initial position of subjective proximity with relation to one’s respondents has, in recent times, become relatively commonplace within some areas of social research. Referred to either as ‘ethnography of the self’ (Wolcott, 1999), ‘native ethnography’ (ibid.), ‘pure observant participation’ (Brewer, 2000) or, as this paper prefers, ‘insider research’ (Roseneil 1993), this form of enquiry has become particularly prevalent in the study of youth cultures, not least at doctoral level (Bennett 2002; 2003). Selected recent examples include Malbon’s ethnographic study of clubbing in the UK (1999), Weinstein’s examination of heavy metal culture (2000), Khan-Harris’ work on the global extreme metal scene (2004), Karenza Moore’s study of drug use among clubbers (2003) and my own research on goth culture (Hodkinson 2002). Yet Bennett rightly has pointed out that, in spite of the prevalence of such ‘insider studies’, detailed reflexive analysis of the implications of researching youth cultures from a point of initial subjective proximity is comparatively sparse (Bennett 2002: 461).<sup>1</sup> This paper attempts to contribute to the development of such methodological discussions, bringing together a range of literature from

within and outside the area of youth cultural studies and drawing upon some elements of my own ethnographic research of the goth scene, a music and style based subculture with which I had enjoyed intense personal connections prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

While recognising, in relation to contemporary theories of identity, that the complexity of the selves of both researcher and researched makes the notion of being an absolute insider (or outsider) problematic, the paper rejects calls in some quarters for the total abandonment of such terminology, instead seeking to justify and clarify use of the notion 'insider research' as a means to designate ethnographic situations characterised by significant levels of initial proximity between researcher and researched. Subsequently, the discussion goes on to examine some of the most important implications of researching youth cultures from such a position, firstly in terms of the practicalities of the research process and secondly in respect of the effects insider experience might have upon the quality of ethnographic interpretation and understanding. In both respects, it is suggested that the role of insider researcher may offer significant potential benefits but that far from being automatic, the realisation of such advantages and the avoidance of a series of equally significant difficulties is dependent upon caution, awareness and ongoing reflexivity.

### **Insider as Simplification?**

Before discussing the potential implications of what this paper terms 'insider research', there is need carefully to justify the very use of such a notion, in the face of well versed arguments about the multifaceted and unstable nature of identities, lifestyles and perspectives (Mercer 1990; Hall 1994). Some

decades ago, Robert Merton pointed out that the idea of researchers as absolute insiders or outsiders was based upon 'deceptively simple' notions of identity and status (1972: 22). Having rather failed to heed this warning, Ann Oakley illustrates the possible pitfalls of taking insider status for granted, in her suggestion that a feminist interviewing women was 'by definition, both "inside" the culture and participating in that which she is observing.' (1981:57). As black feminists have since pointed out, this assumption rode roughshod over crucial differences between women, not least those based upon ethnicity (Carby 1982).

While raised by Merton and others some time ago, emphasis on the fluidity and multiplicity of individual identities and the decline of substantive social groupings has since then become an increasingly dominant feature of social theory (e.g. Jameson 1991; Bauman 2000). Contemporary youth identities sometimes are regarded as a prominent case in point. That all manner of divisions and ambiguities may be found beneath the massive umbrella category of 'youth culture' is long established, of course (see Valentine, Skelton and Chambers 1998). More recently, however, increasing doubts have also been expressed over the existence of individual groups of young people sufficiently substantive to allow the clear designation of insiders or outsiders. Notably, subcultural theories, which placed emphasis upon the gravitation of young people towards distinctive, normatively consistent cultural groupings characterised by clear boundaries of 'us' and 'them' (e.g. Cohen 1955; Hall and Jefferson 1977), are frequently criticised. Contemporary young people's identities, claim many critics, are dominated by unstable individualised cultural trajectories which cross-cut a variety of different groups

rather than attaching themselves substantively to any in particular (Muggleton 1997; Bennett 1999). At the very least, according to this 'post-subcultural' perspective, youth cultural groupings must be regarded as diverse, ephemeral and loosely bounded, something which would make the proximity or distance of social researchers variable and hard to predict.

Such difficulties are accentuated by recognition that the prominence of particular elements of identity fluctuates back and forth according to context and audience. The possible impacts of this on ethnographic relationships have been illustrated by Gillespie, who, having gained access to a group of Asian young people in Southall by adopting the role of local teacher, claims continually to have shifted according to context between the roles of teacher, researcher, friend, *gori* ('white woman') and 'Southalli' (1995: 67-73). In a complex situation such as this, the notion of being *either* an insider *or* an outsider in an absolute sense is inadequate. In some contexts Gillespie's local residence gave her a degree of insider status, while in others her ethnicity, her status as a teacher and, presumably, her age, created barriers between herself and respondents. Similarly, in relation to their own unpredictable experiences as Korean American and Chinese British researchers interviewing Chinese British young people, Song and Parker discuss a highly complex set of research relationships, emphasising that in spite of what at the outset appeared to be a significant degree of insider status in relation to respondents, their levels of proximity were in practice 'not a priori readily apparent or defined' (1995: 243). As they put it:

Dichotomised rubrics such as 'black/white' or 'insider/outsider' are inadequate to capture the complex and multi-faceted experiences of some researchers such as ourselves, who find themselves neither total 'insiders' nor 'outsiders' in relation to the individuals they interview (ibid.: 243).

This kind of cautious emphasis upon the ongoing nuances and intricacies of subjectivity in discussions of researcher proximity provides an important reminder that the notion of being an insider in an absolute sense can indeed be a misleading one (Davies 1999:182). However, whether in respect of the study of youth cultures or other parts of society, there is little value in overestimating the impact of such complexities to the extent that we lose the ability to differentiate between those situations where there are extensive and consistent overall levels of familiarity between a researcher and a group of respondents and those characterised by greater overall levels of distance. Like most social science terminology, the notion of 'insider research' reduces complexities to generalities, but through doing so, it establishes that researchers may sometimes find themselves positioned especially close to those they study and enables the tentative development of valuable common lessons about the likely implications of researching from such a position. Notably, the term 'insider research' is more useful in this respect, than Gold's (1958) notion of 'observant participation' whose current use ranges, from a specific reference to *initial* researcher proximity (Brewer 2000) to, more often, a general allusion to high levels of researcher participation *after* the fieldwork has begun (Davies 1999).

At the same time as recognising the issues of complexity raised by Gillespie, Song and Parker and others, then, this paper utilises the notion of insider research as a non-absolute concept intended to designate those situations characterised by a significant degree of *initial* proximity between the sociocultural locations of researcher and researched. Judgement of the appropriateness of the term for different research situations will, of course,

require the careful weighing up of a series of factors which, according to their comparative levels of importance to those involved, may create differing levels of proximity and difference in the context of the particular research being undertaken. Thus, while they shared a degree of proximity with their young respondents in respect of visible elements of 'Asianness' in their appearance, Song and Parker found that, in the context of research which was focused upon race and nation, obvious American and British elements of their respective identities created barriers significant enough to warrant rejection of the notion that they were insider researchers. Song and Parker's careful reflective approach provides a valuable model for other researchers in situations of apparent proximity. While in both their cases, differences were deemed at least as notable as similarities, there will surely be other research situations where the consistency, importance and impact of those elements of identity and perspective which are shared with respondents is deemed to outweigh points of distance.

As a result of such careful assessments, the notion of insider research may be deemed appropriate in a variety of research situations and in relation to a range of different kinds of cultural grouping. Levels of proximity (or distance) seem likely to be particularly clear, however, in those situations where, in spite of elements of complexity and multiplicity in their individual identities, a set of respondents are strongly and consciously united by the high overall importance to all of them of a particular distinctive characteristic or set of characteristics. Such collective consciousness – and hence clear insider/outsider boundaries, may sometimes be particularly strong in the case of groups of respondents who are structurally marginalized in respect of class,

ethnicity, sexuality, gender or some combination thereof. Yet cultural groupings whose defining characteristics are partially or wholly 'elective' may also sometimes be characterised by high levels of distinctiveness and group commitment.

Consistent with this, there may be reason to suggest that in the context of youth culture, committed and bounded groupings (whether predominantly structural or elective in character) remain rather more prevalent than has been implied by the 'post-subcultural' theories described earlier. The emphasis upon fluidity and individualisation within the latter has been offset by an ongoing accumulation of evidence which suggests that some young people continue to focus significant proportions of their identities upon discernable groupings which, whether 'subcultural' or not, are united by strongly held attachments towards relatively distinct sets of tastes, values or activities (e.g. Thornton 1995; Hetherington 2000; Hodgkinson 2002; Moore 2004; Khan-Harris 2004). Furthermore, it would seem that the participants of such groups continue actively to differentiate themselves from those deemed not to share the characteristics or perspectives so important to them (Thornton 1995; Locher 1998; Pilkington 2004). As a consequence, while they may experience variability in their precise levels of familiarity with different respondents, those who research such groupings are liable to find that their overall level of proximity to most participants is heavily contingent upon compatibility with the fairly consistent and distinctive set of primary characteristics through which they are unified. On the basis of such clear criteria, being positioned predominantly as either an insider or an outsider becomes a highly probable outcome.

This brings us onto the example of the goth scene and of my own location as researcher of this grouping. Centred around specialist pubs, gigs and nightclubs and identifiable via the dark, sinister appearance of its young participants and the sombre tones of their preferred music, this grouping exhibited particularly strongly the kind of collective characteristics alluded to above. Notably, as I have demonstrated in detail elsewhere, involvement tended to be central to the practical and symbolic lifestyles of individual participants and to involve a strong sense of collective identity which, in many cases, was linked with an equally intense suspicion of outsiders (Hodkinson 2002). There were few social rewards for those who displayed partial or temporary involvement and significant encouragement for the display of commitment to a relatively consistent and distinctive range of norms and values (ibid.). Such levels of group identity, commitment and distinctiveness serve significantly to reduce the likelihood of ambiguity in respect of whether or not an ethnographer of the goth scene should or should not regard themselves as an insider researcher.

As for myself, I had become interested in the goth scene as a sixteen year old in search of belonging, distinctiveness and status, and over the years that followed, it had maintained a central role in my sense of self, cultural tastes, consumer habits and social patterns. Although there was a degree of diversity to the precise tastes, attitudes and forms of behaviour associated with the goth scene, I shared with other participants a commitment to and enjoyment of music, style and activities which most regarded as central to the group's value system. Both in my own perceptions and in those of other goths, I clearly occupied the position of insider. In respect of an element of

identity central to the lifestyles of most respondents and at the heart of the concerns of my research project. There clearly were variations in the levels of similarity between myself and other goths – most notably perhaps in relation to gender, age and, in some cases, class. However, occupying a position within my mid-twenties placed me towards the middle of the age range of goths at that time and my white, middle class background, educational achievements and professional career aspirations were, at the very least, compatible with the background and outlook of many other subcultural participants. As well as sharing with respondents the all-important primary status of goth participant, then, I was also in a position of relative proximity in respect of various secondary features.

At the same time, like other insider researchers, from the moment I had finalised my doctoral research topic, this relatively clear position as subcultural insider operated alongside the equally important role of ethnographer. I was now observing, interviewing and analysing the goth scene and its participants in relation to continual reading, writing and academic discussion (see Bennett 2003: 190). Importantly, while the nature and character of my personal involvement inevitably were affected by such academic activities, I continued to participate as an enthusiast as well as a researcher, something made easier, perhaps, by the aforementioned compatibility between the values of the goth scene and those of education and academia. My viewpoint was widened and focused in particular ways according to my academic background and aspirations, but without compromising my level of involvement. In other words, I made the transition from insider to *insider researcher*. The complex implications of occupying

such a position in respect of issues of interpretation and understanding will be explored later on. However, occupying the role of insider researcher is liable to have equally important implications for the successful practical negotiation of the research process. With particular reference to issues of access and the conduction of interviews, it is to these practical issues that we turn first.

## **Implications for the Research Process**

### ***Participation and Access***

Holding a degree of insider status clearly can have implications for the achievement of successful and productive interactions with participants. In the course of ongoing decisions about the granting of trust and cooperation, research subjects are liable to observe and classify those who seek to research their lives (Agar 1996: 105). The results of this process may affect general willingness to participate and the quantity and quality of data that eventually are disclosed (Song and Parker 1995: 253). While such processes of classification may be influenced by a variety of shifting factors, it already has been suggested that an insider/outsider distinction of some kind should probably be expected if the research is focused upon a distinct and committed grouping to which all respondents belong.

It is well established that being classified as an outsider by respondents may generate practical difficulties for ethnographers in respect of access, not least in the case of tightly knit or marginalised groups (Humphreys 1970: 24). Although written some time ago, the following words from Becker surely retain significance to some research situations today:

It is not easy to study deviants. Because they are regarded as outsiders by the rest of society, and because they themselves tend to regard the rest of society

as outsiders, the student who would discover the facts about deviance has a substantial barrier before he will be allowed to see the things he needs to see (Becker 1963: 168).

Sasha Roseneil's assessment that 'there are many social situations which would be inaccessible to an outsider researcher' (1993: 189) seems a little over-categorical here. Some of the most well known sociological studies have demonstrated the potential for initially distanced ethnographers to achieve significant levels of trust in the most marginal of groupings - not least Whyte's famous study of street corner gangs (1943), Humphreys' work on public homosexual encounters (1970) and Fielding's ethnography of the National Front (1981). Yet such examples also demonstrate that non-insiders may have to work hard over a long period of time in order to gain the levels of trust they require (Brewer 2000: 61). Indeed, they may - as in the case of Humphreys and Fielding - even have to deceive respondents through use of a covert approach.

In the case of youth cultures, those seeking to immerse themselves must be conscious of the risk that they may raise rather than reduce barriers to access due to a tendency in some such groups for particular suspicion of inauthentic participants (Thornton 1995). In my own case study of the goth scene, the hostility of some individuals towards those deemed to be 'trying too hard', or adopting elements of the subculture in an insincere manner, was sometimes as great as that afforded to those regarded as total outsiders (Hodkinson 2002: 40). Muggleton indicates that this is a relatively common feature of youth cultures, something which may suggest significant potential difficulties for ethnographers seeking to immerse themselves:

Those who merely 'adopt' an unconventional appearance without possessing the necessary 'inner' qualities are regarded... as 'plastic', 'not real'... a subcultural 'Other' against which the interviewees authenticate themselves (Muggleton 2000:

90).

On this basis, attempting what may be construed as an artificial façade could be more damaging to levels of trust and cooperation than approaching participants up-front as an outsider, something particularly applicable where inflexible indicators of age, class or ethnicity may be liable to undermine attempts at participation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1993: 97; Moore, 2003).

In contrast, insider researchers are liable, to some degree, already to share with respondents an internalised language and a range of experiences (Roseneil 1993: 189). Gary Armstrong (1993), in relation to his study of football hooligans in Sheffield, emphasises that his local working class background, his long-term status as a committed Sheffield United fan and previous interactions with hooligans were of crucial importance to socialising effectively in the field. Albeit in a thoroughly different environment, having become familiar over a period of several years with the distinctive norms, values and systems of status within goth pubs or clubs, I already possessed the 'cultural competence' required to spend time within such spaces and to communicate effectively with others (ibid.). Alongside signifiers of age, ethnicity and class background which were compatible with those of most goths, my carefully cultivated subcultural appearance was critical in communicating my insider status to those present, as was my ability to participate authentically in activities such as dancing and making requests to the DJ. At the same time, an ability to interact with others in a relaxed, confident manner, rather than being preoccupied with attempting to perform in an unfamiliar way, made it relatively uncomplicated to meet and spend time with people. As well as enhancing my ability to participate and observe, such

factors helped to enable a generous flow of informally volunteered information as well as a willingness on the part of participants to introduce me around, vouch for me and, in many cases, to take part in interviews themselves.

Of course, rather than being automatic or guaranteed, such potential advantages are only realised when insider status is combined with a variety of generic social and research skills (Bennett 2003). Furthermore, the significance and obviousness of insider status and the extent to which it provides benefits, may vary from situation to situation. In the case of Karenza Moore's research on clubbing, for example, familiarity and acceptance in one local 'scene' was not automatically translated to similar kinds of clubs in different towns or cities (2003: 140). While in my own case, locality was less of a barrier, the symbolic importance of physical appearance among goths meant that, while my insider status was usually clear in face-to-face situations, greater levels of effort were required in the case of online spaces. Goth discussion forums on the internet tended to require the gradual earning of acceptance even from the most respected of goths off the screen. In my case, this entailed the gradual internalising of specific norms for online communication and, initially, the development of ways to convey subcultural membership in the absence of the key signifier of appearance. After careful observation and a process of trial and error, my insider status gradually was transferred into the online context through conversational techniques, web site photographs and eventual face-to-face acquaintance with some subscribers. Nevertheless, the example serves as an important reminder that achieving recognition as an insider may require different levels and types of effort and technique in different contexts.

## ***Interviews***

Longstanding calls for the 'matching' of interviewers with respondents suggest that in addition to its potential benefits in terms of access, insider status may enhance the quality and effectiveness of qualitative interviews. Feminists have established that differences in status and power between researchers and respondents can seriously inhibit rapport (Oakley 1981: 41). While initially, their concern was with the potential benefits of gender matching, it has since been demonstrated that differences of ethnicity among women can create substantial barriers (Edwards 1990: 479). While the specific identity criteria in question may differ, the observation that cultural proximity and distance may affect interview situations applies every bit as much to the study of youth cultures.

Of course, first and foremost, successful interviews with young people require a variety of generic techniques. In the case of my interviews with goths, careful choice of venue, friendly conversational tones, sympathetic responses, probing and offering sets of alternatives were of particular value (Fielding and Thomas 2001: 126-129). However, holding some degree of insider status can offer important additional benefits and possibilities, most notably with respect to generating of a relaxed atmosphere conducive to open conversation and willingness to disclose. In one of the interviews for my study, a goth promoter on interpreting my appearance expressed a sense of relief about my not being 'some scary academic' - something which I believe many others also to have felt (also see Moore 2003).<sup>2</sup> An ability to share subcultural gossip, anecdotes and observations with respondents, further enhanced initial

rapport as well as offering an invaluable and effective additional stimulus for conversation during the interviews themselves. While care must be taken to avoid leading respondents towards particular answers through such contributions, the ability sometimes to move interviews towards a situation of two-way exchange rather than the usual question and answer format can offer substantial advantages in terms of trust and conversational flow (Armstrong 1993: 26).

Of course, there are also potential difficulties which, if not recognised and counterbalanced, may affect the conduction of interviews by insider researchers. Over-complacency may result in failure to recognise that - even when consistently regarded as an insider - one's precise level of proximity is liable to fluctuate somewhat from one respondent to the next. For example, Sasha Roseneil emphasises that while most of her interviews with fellow Greenham Common protestors were characterised by a deep sense of mutual commonality, she found herself unprepared for a minority of cases in which differences of sexuality and perspective seriously inhibited both rapport and trust (1993: 199). Needless to say, insider researchers of youth cultures must - like all ethnographers - continually assess the way they are positioned by respondents and adjust their behaviour appropriately. Insider complacency may also lead to problems if the amount of perceived familiarity between respondent and interviewer results in too much being taken as given, whether in terms of questions not asked or information not volunteered. The distanced interrogator may, in the course of asking basic level questions, gain access to important insights and information (Lummis 1987: 58), making it advisable for insider researchers to find ways of identifying and asking such questions

themselves. In my interviews with goths it was relatively unproblematic to invite respondents, from time to time, to provide detailed answers to basic questions 'for the benefit of the tape' and the strategy produced invaluable and sometimes surprising data.

Insider researchers should also be aware that, although their status may often improve rapport in a general sense, it may in some situations cause respondents to feel threatened, or pressured into giving particular kinds of responses. In particular, the notion that youth cultures, like other communities, are often characterised by their own collective ideologies (Thornton 1995) raises the possibility that, in the presence of someone they perceive as an insider, respondents may feel disproportionately encouraged to provide answers consistent with dominant thinking within the group.<sup>3</sup> Awareness of this possibility should inform both the approach taken to the conduction of interviews and the subsequent analysis of respondent accounts.

Nevertheless, the problem may be somewhat balanced by the simultaneous likelihood that, in the presence of someone they perceive as already 'clued-up', respondents may be discouraged from the worst excesses of conscious inaccuracy. It may be particularly easy for respondents to make exaggerations, omissions, guesses and throwaway statements in the presence of a relatively ignorant 'professional stranger' and, for this reason, I found myself grateful to be perceived by my goth respondents as someone liable to identify obvious inaccuracies.

## **Insider as Insider? Implications for Understanding**

### ***The Insider View?***

In spite of the significance of issues of researcher proximity with respect to practical matters such as access and interviewing, there are equally important and, perhaps, more difficult questions at stake concerning the implications of insider research for the kinds of understanding and knowledge eventually produced. After all, the need to gain access to 'insider knowledge' has long been at the heart of arguments for an ethnographic approach to the study of society. The interpretivist emphasis on capturing social life, as experienced and understood by its participants requires those who would research that social life to gain access to insider feelings, motivations and meanings (see Blumer 1969; Shutz 1970).

Such an argument has been of key importance to recent debates in the study of youth cultures. Rejection of the neo-Marxist brand of subcultural theory associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies is often premised on the argument that the CCCS tended to impose external interpretations upon young people's patterns of behaviour and alignment. Through taking an approach dominated by theoretically-driven textual analysis, Cohen (1972), Hebdige (1977, 1979) and others interpreted the appearance and behaviour of skins, bikers, mods, punks and others as a magical means of resolving of class contradictions and an expression of symbolic forms of resistance to hegemony. Such interpretations are argued specifically to have lacked resonance with or concern for the 'insider views' of most participants of such groupings (Muggleton 2000; Bennett 2002). Subsequently, through what Bennett has termed 'the ethnographic turn', emphasis has been placed upon the need to access and understand the motivations, meanings and viewpoints of youth cultural participants

themselves (Bennett 2002).

Traditionally, this sort of interpretivist emphasis upon the need for insider understanding has tended to prompt the adoption by initially distanced researchers of methods which allowed them to access and record the volunteered accounts of insiders or to gain direct temporary experience of being an insider through participation. However, some have suggested that, no matter what methods they use, non-insiders may be unable fully to access and understand the values, meanings and worldviews of those they study. No amount of qualitative interviews or temporary involvement, they argue, can compete with the privileged view possessed by genuine insiders. Labelling this perspective 'The Insider Doctrine', Merton characterises the basic thrust of argument as follows:

'The doctrine holds that one has monopolistic or privileged access to knowledge, or is wholly excluded from it, by virtue of one's group membership or social position... the Outsider, no matter how careful and talented, is excluded in principle from gaining access to the social and cultural truth.'  
(Merton 1972: 15)

While Merton's discussion focuses largely upon adoption of the insider doctrine in the development of 'black studies' in the US, the position can be associated with various strands of anthropology and sociology. It informs the reflections of Hayano, for example, on his ethnographic study of poker players, in which he asserts that 'being a player' himself for many years was essential to the ability to present an authentic 'insider's view' (1982: 155). A version of the insider doctrine can also be found within feminist methodological discussions. For the same reason that, historically, white male science failed even to place the plight of women on the agenda, men are sometimes argued to be unsuited successfully to understand female

experience in the present.<sup>4</sup> Kremer is particularly uncompromising, arguing for the exclusion of men from feminist research in order to avoid the ‘mistakes’ and ‘false knowledges’ which would result from their lack of insider experience (1990: 465).

Falling into the essentialist trap discussed earlier in this article, this uncompromising position presents social groupings as fixed, one-dimensional and mutually exclusive (Merton 1972). More fundamentally, it shares with interpretivism more generally, a questionable premise that there exists a single insider TRUTH to the lived experience of being female, being a poker player or indeed, being a goth, which somehow can be recorded by the ethnographer (Schwandt 2000:192). Wolcott explicitly warns against any such assumption, arguing that ‘there is no monolithic insider view... There are multiple insider views, multiple outsider views. Every view is a way of seeing, not *the way*’ (1999: 137). Such emphasis upon the multiplicity of situated understandings of the world, has prompted many to argue that the interpretations made by ethnographers, as with all other ‘ways of seeing’ should always be regarded as constructions rather than revelations (Haraway 1992; Wolcott 1994; Smith and Deemer 2000).

My retention of the notion of insider research as a means to conceptualise research situations characterised by significant initial social proximity should not, therefore, be taken as a suggestion that researchers who find themselves in such a situation have privileged access to a singular insider truth. Yet the avoidance of what some have termed ‘naïve realism’ need not prompt abandonment of any attempt to evaluate the potential implications that insider research may have for the levels and types of

understanding produced. As Hammersley (1992), Davies (1999) and others have shown us, we can accept the absence of absolute certainties and of exclusively correct 'ways of seeing' without abandoning the notion that, on the basis of contestable, yet broadly agreed-upon criteria, some forms of ethnographic interpretation should be regarded as more plausible, useful and generally applicable than others. Indeed, in spite of his own emphasis on multiple ways of seeing, Wolcott also implies the existence of some such criteria, acknowledging the importance of producing 'plausible interpretations', of 'not getting it all wrong' and even of assessing the correspondence of an ethnographic account with 'the setting and individuals on which it is based' (1994: 347-366). On this basis we may surely accept his contention that there are multiple insider views, yet still plausibly demonstrate, in the case of some groupings, that there are extensive points of apparent coherence between such insider views, and equally consistent points of difference between them and the majority of views from 'outside'. At which point, the extent to which social researchers share with their respondents such points of insider consistency remains a matter of great interest in respect of their ability to produce plausible forms of understanding.

### ***Insider Experience as a Resource***

We are now able to move onto a discussion of the extent to which initial proximity should be regarded as valuable or even necessary in the aforementioned quest to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of those involved in youth cultures. Essentially, my argument here is that, while insider researchers should not be regarded as having exclusive access

to such understanding, they may nevertheless find that, as a result of their dual position, they have valuable additional resources at their disposal.

Even accepting, as argued earlier, that some groups of young people will retain significant levels of external distinctiveness and internal consistency, it remains likely that competent non-insiders will generate persuasive and valuable interpretations. For example, in apparent contrast to the aforementioned gender essentialism of Kremer, Shane Blackman (1998) has argued convincingly that, with the help of a variety of practical measures and precautions, a white, male academic may overcome at least some of the barriers to producing a plausible documentation the lifestyles of a group of young women. In Blackman's case, asking his 'New Wave Girl' respondents to read and comment upon field notes and enlisting the advice of female colleagues in the interpretation of data were among a number of strategies used in order to reduce epistemological difficulties which may have arisen from his apparent outsider status. Yet, at the same time as illustrating the ways in which research can successfully be carried out and interpreted by non-insiders, the measures Blackman was required to take also serve to highlight that social distance can create obstacles, uncertainties and hazards which may be bypassed by insider researchers.

In the first instance insider researchers may be particularly well placed to use a combination of their academic background and their experience of the culture in question, to make reasonable judgements as to which elements of the grouping might be worthy of their explorative energies in the first place (Roseneil 1993: 189). As well as saving time, this may help to avoid the early imposition of unsuitable conceptual frameworks, or what Wolcott refers to as

'detour[s] of my own or other's making' (1994: 348). During the early planning stages of my research on the goth scene, for example, I was heavily influenced by an increasingly popular body of existing ethnographic work which examined popular music related practices and identities through focusing upon the local specificities of individual cities (Finnegan 1989; Cohen 1990; Shank 1993). However, a temptation to replicate the locally specific emphasis of these and other studies in my own work on the goth scene was tempered by my previous experience as an enthusiast. Having regularly travelled from place to place to attend goth gigs in this role and having experienced strong feelings of commonality with goths outside the places I lived, I was able to recognise from the beginning of my research that confining my analysis to the in depth dynamics of a single locality may have resulted in a neglect of the *translocal* elements of this culture. I therefore focused my research on the goth scene in a number of different cities and placed initial emphasis both on the specificities of each locality and on the ways in which they were connected with one another. Induced fairly directly by my insider experience, this explicit focus upon translocal as well as local elements generated invaluable data which illustrated levels of translocal connectedness which even I had not expected (see Hodkinson, 2004). Whether the potential importance of this research direction would or would not have been picked up on immediately by a non-insider influenced by the same literature, is not clear of course. My contention merely is that, as an insider researcher, my chances of recognising its significance at an early stage were particularly high.

To have maximum initial awareness of what aspects of a youth culture may most usefully be examined, is of significant value, but ultimately it may be

less significant than the ability to reach plausible interpretations of research data during and subsequent to the conduction of fieldwork. In this respect, although they do not have access to THE insider TRUTH, insider researchers may again find themselves in a useful position. This is because, having experienced activities, motivations, feelings and affiliations which are liable, at least, to be comparable to those of many respondents, they have a significant extra pool of material with which to compare and contrast what they see and hear during the research process. No matter how skilled or adaptive they are, non-insider researchers, seeking to learn about and temporarily immerse themselves in an unfamiliar cultural grouping, are liable to find themselves heavily reliant upon what they are told by participants and, in particular, 'key informants' (Davies 1999: 71). As a consequence, there is a danger that they may be drawn towards problematic interpretations by respondents who, through dishonesty, exaggeration or misplaced speculation, offer misleading or unrepresentative accounts of their own or other people's experience. In contrast, the ability of insider researchers to examine the accounts they receive from respondents in the context of their own history of experiences and interactions, may enhance their ability to judge the sincerity, motivations, applicability and significance of what they are told (Roseneil 1993: 189). While it is widely accepted that initially distanced researchers who 'go native' may become unable critically to assess their data, it seems equally likely that those who begin in an insider position and at least partially 'go academic' may find themselves in a strong position both to empathise and to scrutinise. In order to illustrate the potential significance of this point in youth cultural research, I present an extended example from my case study.

A number of goths I spoke to during my ethnography initially were uncomfortable with the idea that their style and behaviour could be attributed to collective normative pressure or to the need for group belonging. Many insisted that the goth scene was characterised by considerable diversity, by a comparative lack of normative pressure and by an atmosphere which, more than anything else, encouraged individual freedom of expression. One can imagine, perhaps, that - particularly in the context of a theoretical climate dominated by notions of fluidity and individualism - the receipt of consistent comments of this sort may be taken to suggest that the experience of these respondents was one of involvement in an essentially loose-knit grouping characterised as much by the experience of heterogeneity, diversity and individualism as by collective values or normative boundaries. Indeed, partly on the basis of having received not entirely dissimilar comments about individual self-expression in his own non-insider interview study of young people, Muggleton argues that the identities of so-called subculturalists in fact tend to be dominated by a rejection of collective identity and a celebration of individual distinctiveness (2000: 55-80).

In contrast, my existing role as a goth participant provided elements of experience which led to greater caution regarding participants' claims about individuality. Alongside many of my peers, I had rather unthinkingly made such claims about myself in the past, in spite of strong feelings of affiliation with other goths and extensive reliance upon established subcultural conventions in the practical development of my style and behaviour. I also had taken part in conversations where, during moments of self-criticism, some participants had joked that the truest devotees to the goth scene could best

be identified by their frantic denials of affiliation and assertions of individuality! Through use of academic reading, I began to question whether this discursive emphasis on individualism might be interpreted as a form of subcultural ideology or rhetoric (Hodkinson, 2002: 76-80). Without providing reason to dismiss respondent claims to individuality, then, elements of my insider experience combined with appropriate theoretical tools, prompted greater scrutiny of such claims and more extensive and varied questioning around issues of individual and collective distinctiveness. As a result of this approach, the vast majority of those who attempted initially to distance themselves from notions of collective identity, subsequently indicated through their answers to a myriad of other questions, both strong levels of group commitment and significant levels of adherence to existing goth values (ibid.). This enabled a careful and, I believe, strongly justified theorisation of the complex tension experienced by many goths (and, I suspect, participants of similar youth groupings) between intense feelings of collective identity and shared discursive aspirations to individuality.

Examples such as this one, I hope, illustrate the potential value of insider experiences as a significant additional resource through which to help interpret what one may see and hear in the course of research. However, over-reliance upon such experiences may lead to equally significant difficulties. Most obviously, those who fail to achieve the aforementioned transition from insider to insider researcher may indeed suffer problems of 'over-rapport' and lack the ability or motivation critically to analyse the perspectives or activities of participants (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 111). In the case of youth cultures, there may be a danger that insider

researchers are unable to disconnect themselves from group ideologies or that, as a result of a sense of loyalty, they begin to take on the role of what Bennett terms, 'subcultural spokesperson', rather than that of critical analyst (Bennett, 2003). Meanwhile, for those who, like myself, do find themselves able and willing to take a critical perspective, there remains a more general danger of over-reliance upon one's previous insider experience as the basis for such a perspective. This may result in failure to recognise or sufficiently to 'unpick' elements of culture which insiders tend to take for granted, or in the excessive imposition of existing viewpoints and experiences in the course of verifying and interpreting data more generally. In other words, rather than being regarded as a valuable additional resource, there is a danger that insider experience may start to become 'an end in itself' (Bennett 2002), and, as such, a liability.

In the interests of maximising the usefulness of their interpretations, then, those who conduct insider research must learn to utilise their personal experience selectively, without being confined to it. An ability to adopt a more distanced, analytical perspective, or to 'see the familiar as strange' (Foster 1996: 59) may be crucial both in respect of the research agenda and the interpretation of data. Such 'stepping back' may require more than merely a period of deliberate separation from the field prior to or during the course of writing up, as is sometimes recommended in the case of non-insider ethnographies. Ideally, the insider researcher should combine insider experience with more distanced perspectives throughout the project. In the case of Roseneil's research on Greenham women, a gap of four years between her involvement with the protests and her research project is

regarded by the author as having been essential to her ability to gain sufficient critical distance (1993: 192). Meanwhile in my own case, there was no such initial gap, yet I found that the practicalities of taking field notes and conducting interviews, alongside my continual attempts to reconcile observations with theoretical questions (and vice versa) enabled my viewpoint fairly smoothly to shift from that of insider to that of insider researcher.

While the means through which 'distanced' viewpoints are accessed may vary from case to case, it is clear that insider researchers must learn to avoid over-estimating the extent of their initial 'insight'. Ensuring that one's position of social proximity is beneficial rather than problematic requires an ongoing reflexive and reactive approach to the ways one is positioned and the potential implications of these throughout the research process. As Charlotte Davies has argued, the extent to which researchers are involved in the groupings they study is less important in the evaluation of ethnographic interpretations than the overall quality and reflexivity of their research approach (1999: 73-74). Previous experience and preconceptions, then, can often be utilised as a means to guide elements of the investigative process and to assist in the interpretation and verification of data, but should not be relied upon to the extent that, by themselves, they start to shape findings and conclusions.

## **Conclusion**

It has not been the intention of this paper to propose the notion of insider research as an appropriate descriptor for every situation in which there is some semblance of cultural similarity between researchers and their

respondents. Neither have I sought to argue that the elements of social distance which sometimes will position researchers as outsiders to the cultures they study, ought to be regarded as insurmountable barriers to effective research. Needless to say, research by non-insiders has been and will remain essential to the understanding of youth cultures, not least of course, in the case of projects focused upon those young people whose socio-economic backgrounds are least likely to be represented within the world of academia.

Yet for those researchers who do occupy a position of initial proximity consistent and substantial enough to warrant the notion of insider research as set out here, there is clear value in attempting to share understandings and reflections on the possibilities and problems which may emanate from such a circumstance. In essence, this paper has argued that the position of insider researcher may offer significant potential benefits in terms of practical issues such as access and rapport, at the same time as constituting an additional resource which may be utilised to enhance the quality of the eventual understandings produced. Crucially, however, the securing of such benefits is at least as dependent upon the 'researcher' element of this dual identity as the 'insider' element. Insider researchers, then, must utilise a careful, reflexive research approach to ensure that any potential benefits of their initial proximity are realised without the emergence of significant difficulties. Finally, like all ethnographers, insider researchers should attempt to discuss their position and the ways it may have affected their research. It is hoped that in the case of those who research youth cultures, this paper may encourage such reflections.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Moore's recent reflections on some of the practical implications of her personal proximity to those she studied provide a notable exception and are referred to from time to time in this article (2003).

<sup>2</sup> In contrast I was given a sense of the difficulties which might be faced by those perceived as outsiders when one of the respondents to a self-completion questionnaire administered as part of the project – which contained no clues as to my own identity – provided a series of highly defensive responses, including one which read 'if you were one of us, you would not need to ask'.

<sup>3</sup> Karenza Moore, for example, has suggested to me that because there is normative pressure within club culture for participants to be rather blasé about or even proud of their experiences with illegal drugs, it is possible that clubbers taking part in interviews may be wary of disclosing personal anxieties about the effects of drugs to an interviewer they perceive as an insider (email communication 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, often the feminist argument was not merely that women were better suited to understand women, but that, in relation to patriarchal society as a whole they occupied a unique 'outsider within' position, providing unrivalled insight into both male and female elements of that society (Harding 1991). The reader will appreciate that this more general argument falls outside the particular remit of this paper.

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