***‘I don’t want to be presented as some sort of freak-show... but you’re ‘one of us’’:* Stigmatised groups and decisions to participate in insider/outsider research**

**Abstract**

Drawing on a piece of mixed-methods research (n = 488), this article uses thematic analysis to examine the responses of women who form part of a stigmatized group (fans of male/male [m/m] sexually explicit media) as to whether and how the investigator’s perceived status as a community insider affected decisions to take part in a wider research project. While there exists a substantial body of work on insider/outsider research, much of it is either reflexive or theoretical in nature, focusing on the nature of the research process and the integrity of the data; very little work systematically asks people taking part in qualitative research how their knowledge of the investigator’s insider/outsider status influenced their decision to take part. While participants in this study acknowledged the existence of both acceptable outsider researchers and unacceptable insider researchers, it is clear from the data presented here that researcher positionality can play a key role in successful recruitment. The results of this study highlight that we need to think not only about how our positionality affects participant responses in qualitative work but also how it affects decisions to take part in studies in the first place. This is of particular importance when we are investigating hard-to-reach, stigmatized or marginal populations with already limited participant pools.

**Keywords** : insider research, stigmatized groups, sex, qualitative methods, pornography

While there exists a substantial and thoughtful body of work on insider/outsider research, much of it is either reflexive or theoretical in nature, focusing on the nature of the research process and the integrity of the data. Frequently, only anecdotal reference is made to how *participants* feel about taking part in an investigation managed by someone they identify as being embedded within their community (or not). There has been very little research on how participants view a researcher’s membership role, or attempts to systematically ask people taking part in qualitative research how their knowledge of the investigator’s insider/outsider status influenced their decision to take part. Dwyer & Buckle (2009:58) postulate that group membership is likely to be a benefit in terms of recruitment, claiming that participants often think ‘you are one of us and it is us versus them (those on the outside who don’t understand)’, but few researchers ever directly ask their respondents if this is the case. Even within the field of fan studies this question tends to be implicit rather than forming a defined part of the research question (see Booth, 2013; Hills, 2003). Given that participants are likely to have an emotional and political involvement with projects they choose to take part in, they will have their own view of both the purpose of the research and the researcher, and this will undoubtedly affect their decision to take part in any given research endeavour (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000). Ross (2017) therefore expresses surprise at the paucity of work that investigates *participants’* experiences of insider qualitative research.

This issue became key for me when I first started designing my research project looking at women’s engagement with male/male [m/m] sexually explicit media [SEM]. In terms of recruitment, I hit a bit of a barrier. I had plenty of friends and acquaintances within erotic writing circles, slash[[1]](#footnote-1) fandoms, and m/m pornography discussion forums, but I wanted to expand my research outside just people I knew. I had recruited for focus groups using a snowballing method, but this limited me to ‘friends of friends’, and I was aware this would result in a relatively specific UK-based sample. I had circulated calls for participants on public forums, but responses came in at a trickle. The problem was, I was recruiting from within a community which had previously felt much maligned by both academic researchers and the press. Women were understandably reluctant to take part in a lengthy survey that asked them to reflect on extremely personal aspects of their sexuality and identity without knowing who I was, or how I was likely to present their data.

My early ‘recruitment problem’ is not particularly surprising, given that it affects many researchers who work with stigmatised, vulnerable, or hard-to-reach populations. According to Wolgemuth et al. (2015), participants in qualitative studies often express concern about how their voices will be represented, particularly if they have seen their community portrayed negatively in previous research or the media. More specifically, earlier work has revealed slashers have long been wary of engaging in research about their fandom and fanshipping[[2]](#footnote-2) due to the historic portrayal of such fans as socially deviant (see Bennett & Booth, 2016). Discussing her survey with nearly 8,000 fanfiction readers and writers, most of whom were involved with slash, Morrissey (2008:55) writes that ‘asking questions of a community which faces stigma for its activities and interests involves a great deal of trust on the part of that community’. Sadly, this is a trust which has often been abused. There has been a long history of stigmatising women who have shown an interest in m/m sex; arguably part of a broader perspective that views all women who are vocal about their sexual desire, or who are proactively involved in consuming or creating SEM, as unfeminine, perverted, or abnormal in some way. This has led to a pathologising of such women, and has meant that they are often viewed with a mixture of distaste and fascination, receiving a level of scrutiny that fans of heterosexual pairings/media products have not (Neville, 2018).

Nowhere has this ‘outsider’ distaste towards women who produce and consume m/m erotic content been more apparent than in the arena of slash fandom, as such women combine both the ‘perversity’ of an interest in sex with the ‘craziness’ of the fan. In both scholarly work and popular culture the notion of the ‘crazy fan’ is well established (Jensen, 1992; Evans & Stasi, 2014), and has been liberally applied to women who ship m/m pairings (Asquith, 2016). This attitude was reflected in much early work on slash fandom. Despite identifying herself as a *Star Trek* fan, and a reader of its accompanying fanfiction, in her book *Enterprising Women* (1992) Camille Bacon Smith nevertheless takes a perspective that marks slash fans out as the ‘other’. Writing about her ‘discovery’ of the existence of slash fic, she exclaims that she wanted to ‘jump up and down and scream: “Look what I found!”’ (p.3). Bacon Smith goes on to claim that:

‘For most women [who write slash]... men are the alien, the other... A high percentage of the women... [are] not involved in relationships with men... and many… [have] never had long-term, loving, sexual relationships... A small but significant number of the women in media fandom suffer from extreme, health-threatening obesity, and that group tends to cluster in homoerotic genres’ (p.247)

Noting this fraught history, more recent work from within fan studies has looked for ways to improve both methodology and research ethics when investigating slash fandom. Busse & Hellekson (2006:24) state that ‘being embedded in [the] community – which we nevertheless study critically – can provide a useful approach’. They note that this idea is gaining traction in many fields where researchers routinely investigate groups who have been historically marginalised or stigmatised, due to the ‘trend in academic discourse to the personal and the realisation that no subject position is completely outside the field of study’ (p.24). Later work has also addressed how critical the issue of insider status can be in gaining access to populations within slash fic communities specifically. Fielding (in Freund & Fielding, 2013:332) comments that when she explained while recruiting for participants that her research interest stemmed from a history in fandom, ‘most participants seemed to be more comfortable speaking with [her]’– however, she does not provide further details as to whether or not participants elaborated on *how* her history affected their decision to engage with her research. Zubernis & Davies (2016) point out that it is important for fandom researchers to be open about their fannish backgrounds and to critically evaluate how their role in the community may have impacted their research – but, again, they do not dwell on the nature of participant decision making when it comes to taking part in ‘insider’ research. This is despite the area of women and m/m SEM providing rich ground not only for understanding how and why a researcher’s position *vis a vis* the community under investigation might affect decisions to take part in an academic project, but also for shedding light on the wider issue of how participants come to understand the role of the researcher as community insider or outsider, and whether this impacts on study recruitment.

**The windfalls and shortfalls of insider status**

There is a plethora of rich and diverse theoretical and reflexive work on the position of the researcher in qualitative study, which acknowledges that both insider and outsider perspectives have their windfalls and shortfalls – although, again, often very little mention is made of how these two positions may impact on participant decisions to take part in research endeavours. Bonner & Tolhurst (2002) outline three key advantages to being an insider researcher: a better understanding of the group’s culture; the ability to interact naturally with group members; and a previously established, and therefore richer, relational intimacy with the group. These advantages are often reflected upon by researchers in their methodologies. Talbot (1999:172), for example, interviewed mothers who had experienced the death of their only child, and noted that ‘several mothers said they would never have shared certain aspects of their experience if I had not been a bereaved mother also’. While insider research is not *de facto* participatory research, its association with both the inclusion of participants in the research process and methodologies focused on the fostering of co-learning and participant empowerment, has led to some schools of thought expressly valuing the insider position as integral to conducting effective and ethical research (Heron & Reason, 1997). It is easy to see how being an insider would be an advantage when researching both slash and porn watching communities, considering their historically stigmatised status and use of specific vernacular (e.g. OTP, shipping, UST etc.), but very few studies have asked participants to explicitly comment on this.

It is worth noting here that not only is it important to know whether insider research is more likely to appeal to wide and diverse groups of participants (thus recruiting more representative samples to any given study), it is also useful to know whether high levels of disclosure from the researcher – and the risks/exposure that that entails – makes any difference to the participant. As a researcher, talking about your own experiences of losing a child is no doubt painful. For me, revealing my identity as a writer of explicit m/m erotica, carries some level of professional risk within the academy. Do the potential recruitment windfalls of these sorts of disclosures outweigh the shortfalls (personal and professional)?

While the benefits of insider status have long been commented upon, so have the drawbacks. Insider knowledge is not perfect, and Taylor (2011:6) warns that we should not ‘presume that as an insider one necessarily offers an absolute or correct way of seeing and/or reading the culture under investigation’. Numerous scholars have also pointed out that a researcher who is also embedded in the culture of study can never assume totality in their position *either* as an insider (community member) *or* as an outsider (academic researcher), given the boundaries of each category are always porous (Merton, 1972).

Greater familiarity with the field or group under investigation can certainly lead to a loss of objectivity (DeLyser, 2001) – although, arguably, if you are entering the field of fandom studies with preconceived ideas about ‘crazy fans’ there is very little objectivity in an outsider position either. Fay (1996:9) pertinently asks the question, ‘Do you have to be one to know one?’ He maintains that being a member of the group studied is neither necessary nor sufficient to be able to ‘know’ the experience of that group. After all, ‘knowing an experience requires more than simply having it; knowing implies being able to identify, describe, and explain’ (p.20). Academics are not novelists, and neither are we journalists: we do not simply ‘give voice’ to our participants, rather we try and construct something meaningful from their voices. Fay goes on to argue that sometimes *not* being a member of a group can better facilitate the knowing of the group – as it means the researcher has greater distance from what is under investigation and is less likely to become conflicted by their own, sometimes confusing and contradictory, feelings, goals, and motives. Adler & Adler (1987) have also noted a ‘stigma’ attached to the role of the insider researcher, observing that readers may be less likely to view data collected and analysed by an insider as being objective. Again, it is possible that participants are often aware of these ‘insider researcher’ shortfalls, and may actually preferto take part in projects that are conducted by people they see as neutral observers as opposed to members of their own community.

However, what much of the existing work in this area does not investigate in any great depth is how much these pros and cons matter to *participants*, and whether or not they factor in decisions to take part (or not) in a research project. So, back to my ‘recruitment problem’. My friend and fellow writer Anna suggested a way forward. ‘You need to attach a link to the survey on your stories,’ she said. ‘Nobody could read your writing and think you didn’t “get it”. People will be happy to take part once they know you’re *really* one of us.’ This got me thinking: how much would it *actually* matter to my participants that I ‘got it’? Would me being seen to be ‘one of them’ influence their decision to take part in my research? If there is a significant proportion of people who are likely to self-select out of research where they do not feel they will be identified with or understood – that the researcher doesn’t ‘get it’ - this calls into question how representative such research can be. This is of particular importance when we are investigating hard-to-reach, stigmatised, or marginal populations with already limited participant pools.

I decided to include a question at the end of my questionnaire to elicit responses that would address these queries: ‘Do you think there would be an issue with me doing this research if I didn't sit 'inside' the community? Why do you think that? How did it affect your decision to take part in this study?’

This paper explores the responses of 488 women involved with m/m SEM to better understand how my position as an insider researcher influenced their decision to take part in my study.

**Method**

**Participants and procedure**

Data were collected via an online questionnaire (with open text boxes as well as closed questions). I am a writer of m/m SEM, and was able to use my existing contacts to signal boost the call for participation, using a snowball sampling method. I also advertised the survey on websites affiliated with visual pornography and written erotica, or hosting discussion boards on related topics. At all stages during the recruitment process I was open with potential participants about my own position as a user and creator of m/m erotic content, and a member of several slash fandoms. Not only did I clearly state this in the participant information sheet, I also provided a link for potential participants to read some of my erotic fiction. In addition, I included a link to the survey, with an invitation to take part, at the top of a slashfiction story I wrote on AO3[[3]](#footnote-3). As of December 2019 the story had received around 70,000 hits and been translated into Chinese and Russian, so was a useful tool in directing participants to the survey. Participants were asked a range of questions about their engagement with m/m SEM. However, this paper specifically focuses on the answers provided to the question ‘Do you think there would be an issue with me doing this research if I didn't sit 'inside' the community?’ (which asked for a yes/no/not sure response) and the open text follow up question, ‘Why do you think that? How did it affect your decision to take part in this study?’

This sampling strategy recruited a total of 488 women. Respondents consisted of 40 different nationalities, and a range of ethnicities (which they were free to self-define). Approximately 79% of women identified as White/Caucasian. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to over 65. Forty five percent (45%) of participants identified as heterosexual, with 31% identifying as bisexual, 5% as pansexual, 5% as asexual, 4% as lesbian, 3% were questioning their sexuality, 3% as queer, 3% as demisexual, and 2% did not state a sexual orientation. Forty eight percent (48%) of respondents were in a relationship at the time of taking the survey, and only 19% had never had a romantic relationship. Seventy two percent (72%) of the respondents watched m/m visual pornography, and 84% were involved with slash fandom. Clearly, volunteer bias means that this sample is not representative of all women who consume or produce m/m SEM, and the specificity of the sample, particularly in terms of ethnicity, is acknowledged.

**Analysis**

The analysis of the data took a contextual thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Although often (implicitly) framed as a realist/experimental method (Aronson, 1994), Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is essentially independent of theory and epistemology, and is thus compatible with both essentialist and constructivist paradigms within the social sciences.

Participants don’t always agree with each other, and this was certainly the case with my sample. They can, and do, have different reasons as to whether and how my positionality impacted on their decision to take part in the research project. These reasons can all help to shed light on the nature of this phenomenon, even if they seem at times to contradict each other. My analysis thus takes a ‘contextualist’ perspective, one that sits between the two poles of essentialism and constructionism. Contextualism is the position that all knowledge is local, provisional, and situation dependent (Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). It seeks to acknowledge the ways individuals make sense of their experience, but also, in turn, the ways the broader social context impacts on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of ‘reality’. Such an understanding implies that all accounts, whether those of participants or researchers, are understood to be subjective, and therefore not necessarily invalidated by conflicting with alternative perspectives. However, within a contextualist framework there *is* a desire to find some kind of grounding for results (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). This can be accomplished, in contextual thematic analysis, by the researcher representing the perspectives of participants through basing findings in participants’ actual descriptions (Tindall, 1994). Braun & Clarke (2006:81) state that contextual thematic analysis can thus be ‘a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of “reality”’.

Responses to the question under investigation in this paper were analysed following the phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the data were read and an initial list of ideas was generated about what was in the data and what was interesting about them. Second, codes were sorted into potential themes, and relevant coded data extracts from within the identified themes were collected. Themes were then reviewed and refined, and sub-themes were created. The thematic analysis resulted in 57 codes, which were grouped into 10 sub-themes, 3 key themes, and an additional standalone theme that specifically referred to research logistics as opposed to insider/outside status. The analysis was exhaustive in that 92% of the data was allocated to at least one theme.

**Results**

Seventy three percent (73%) of the women who completed my survey felt that my position as a community insider (variously identified by them as a fan, a watcher, a reader, a writer) presented an issue for the research in some way, or at least that it *might* do (*n*=488). Only 27% of participants *didn’t* feel that my (self-disclosed) position as an insider researcher was an issue when conducting research into women and m/m SEM. Obviously this does not necessarily tell us anything about how this impacted on their decision to take part in the study, but answers to the follow-up questions were able to offer a range of insights into how community membership of investigators impacts on decisions to take part in research.

The three key themes that were derived from the open text responses can be broadly understood with the framework of the participants’ responses to the above yes/no/not sure question. Those who did not see my insider status as an issue *per se* (and so responded ‘no’ to the original question) tended to fall within the first theme: *‘****epistemology is key’***. These respondents were more interested in whether we can ever really *know* anything about a community – does research work? Does it reveal anything truly meaningful? – than any individual researcher’s positionality. Those who had mixed feelings, or who weren’t sure whether my insider status was an issue, tended to fall within the second theme: *‘****ethics is key’***. These participants did not believe that insider/outsider status mattered provided research was conducted in an ethical manner, and researchers themselves made every effort to understand the community they were researching and present them to the wider world in an unbiased manner. Those who answered that there felt there *would* be an issue with me carrying out the research if I was a community outsider tended to fall within the final theme: *‘****membership is key’***. For these respondents, my identity both as an m/m fan, and, interestingly, as a woman, was viewed as central to their decision to take part in my project. A final standalone theme (‘***logistics***’) focused on the practicalities of circulating calls for participants if a researcher was not already embedded in the community under investigation. Respondents within this theme stated that while they weren’t particularly concerned as to my insider/outsider positionality, they didn’t see how I would be able to ‘get [the survey] to people’ without knowing where to advertise it, or without having been able to attach a link to it on my story on AO3. All three key themes and nine sub-themes are discussed below.

**Epistemology is key**

The three sub-themes within this theme were concerned with the nature of research itself. Respondents who did not think that my insider status was an issue *per se* explained that this was because they felt *all* research had the potential to be problematic, regardless of who was carrying out (‘***Research as inherently problematic’****)*. To this extent, research was viewed as fundamentally appropriative and exploitative. There was an awareness that even so-called ‘insider’ researchers were outsiders when carrying out academic studies insomuch as they had ‘their academic hat on’ and this meant they were more interested in external goals such as publication, promotion, and occupational success than in representing the community under investigation. To this extent, insider/outsider status of a fan community was regarded as almost irrelevant; researchers are always to some extent ‘outsiders’ as they have goals extrinsic to that community. As one participant explained,

‘academic research into people's lives and cultures in general is a crazy concept, [there is a] lot of potential [for it] to be fucked-up, appropriating, misrepresenting, disrespectful, exploitative. That can all happen w[ith] a researcher from the community too of course. I think there are issues w[ith] you doing this research at all’ (American, 18-24, single, queer).

Other respondents within this theme acknowledged that, while there may be some advantages to me being an insider researcher, it also meant that I was more likely to bring my own ‘baggage’ into the research process (‘***Researcher baggage’***).Women commented on how I might be in a ‘better’ position to conduct research on their involvement with m/m SEM if I wasn’t part of the community myself as it ‘would probably make [me] more able to judge the answers without the bias of [my] own thoughts on this topic’. There was also an awareness of the issue with insider research raised by Adler & Adler (1987), that ‘scientific research without such [insider] bias would probably look more credible to the general crowd’. Many respondents who raised issues with insider bias did, however, feel it needed to be held in balance with the intrinsic bias that outsiders could bring to a research project – hence there was a general uncertainty around whether a ‘true’ answer to any research question could ever be reached:

‘Both sitting 'inside the community' and an outside researcher would approach this issue with bias. You, as someone on the inside, may be more inclined towards sympathy or empathy towards the issue, but that is still a bias. I can picture you reading the answers to this questionnaire and perhaps being judgmental towards the fact that I feel shame over my involvement in this form of erotica in the same way that I can picture someone outside the community feeling judgmental towards the fact that I'm involved at all. So, from my perspective, the 'issue' is there in either case’ (American, 25-34, married, heterosexual).

Finally, there was a subset of women who stressed that ‘good’ research had certain inherent qualities: validity, reliability, robustness, a lack of bias – and that these qualities could be achieved by any researcher if a project was well designed (‘***good research is good research’***). There was a feeling here that objections to outsider researchers were simply part of ‘community policing’ and that it was not possible to study something as complex as ‘human sexuality without studying some not-like-you people’. Several respondents mentioned that vigorous, reliable research provided a useful function in that it ‘gave [participants] a voice’, and, to this extent, the positionality or voice of the researcher themselves was irrelevant. This subtheme chimes with Scott’s (1998:4.4) observation that some participants hope that ‘”being researched” c[an] transform their experiential knowledge into legitimate academic discourse’.

**Ethics is key**

This theme tended to include participants who did not believe that insider/outsider status mattered provided research was conducted in an ethical manner, and researchers made every effort to fully understand the community they were researching. These women highlighted the importance of respect when interacting with a community **(‘*A little respect’****)*. As long as researchers ‘remain respectful’ and ‘non-judgemental’, then insider/outsider positionality was not, in of itself, seen as a major issue. However, some respondents added the caveat that they believed an insider researcher was perhaps more likely to approach the investigative process with a respectful attitude than an outsider researcher:

‘There would and there wouldn't [be an issue with you carrying out this research if you were b[‘[an outsider], it would all depend on how you presented yourself, whether you were planning to view it as some kind of fetish, because for the most part I don't think it is, whether we would be viewed as ‘gay groupies’, and whether or not you would be respectful and understanding of our feelings and our writing’ (Canadian, 18-24, single, bisexual).

There was a strong feeling among respondents who were ambivalent about insider status that, even if a researcher wasn’t what Taylor (2011) terms an ‘intimate insider’, they still had to ‘pay [their] dues’ (‘***Earning the right’****)*. ‘You have to be in a subculture for a while to earn the right to ask questions of it, IMO [in my opinion]’, as one respondent noted. Respondents observed that a willingness to participate in the community being researched lent you a certain amount of ‘street cred’ and ‘respect’ from community members. As one woman stated:

‘My sister is an anthropologist. For her to write something on the Senegalese Wolof, I would not demand that she 'be' Wolof, but I would demand that she try as hard as she could over several years to come as close as possible to embodying that/living in it. Same goes for a study like this. I'd be happy if you were an outsider, as long as you had spent the time’ (American, 25-34, married, heterosexual).

**Membership is key**

The final theme mainly constituted participants who stated that they would not have taken part in the research had they not been convinced of my insider status (and that I had legitimately satisfied their criteria for this status, i.e. they had read and/or were familiar with my writing and various online personas). These women felt that in being ‘one of [them]’ I would have a more sympathetic, and ultimately more accurate, perspective on the community (‘***One of us’***)*.* Several participants noted that ‘it takes one to know one’ and that my insider status not only made me more ‘trustworthy’, but also ‘cut down the chances of [me] making some huge blunder or misinterpreting some core basic concepts’. Respondents also felt that being ‘one of [them]’ meant I wouldn’t have ‘an agenda’ or be seeking to use or spin the information I gathered for my own gain. In this sense they regarded any potential findings from my research as more trustworthy.

‘Science should just be science. But it is so often influenced by the individual doing the research. Someone outside the community might be just fine. But I would be initially suspicious that the research would be because he/she wanted to discredit the community first. From within the community, if the research points to unpopular opinion, then I would trust that it wasn't because of poor research skills or an agenda, but because it really does point that way’ (American, 35-44, separated, heterosexual).

Some respondents also specifically mentioned that familiarity with my writing meant they were more likely to trust me, and regard me as a true insider, with one commenting:

‘I feel very confident telling you stuff because I know you get it… Because I ‘know’ you (more so that I've read your stuff too), I care and want to help, and I know you want to get the nuances of the field, in all its glory’ (English, 45-55, in a relationship, a little bent).

Others who were less familiar with my creative work nevertheless often mentioned either researching me online themselves or asking for the opinions of people who were involved in my specific fandoms to ensure that my claim to be an insider was genuine. As one respondent wrote, ‘Some of my friends ‘vetted’…you, which is why I responded; I suspect someone delved into…your background deeper than I knew before giving you a stamp of approval’ (American, 55-64, single, heterosexual).

A number of respondents felt that my insider status was crucial to their decision to participate in the research project because of the negative way they felt the community had previously been portrayed by outsider academics (‘***The freak show’****)*. Specific mentions were made of earlier work: Oggas and Gaddam (two evolutionary psychologists affiliated with the University of Boston who carried out a controversial study on women and m/m slash fandom) were referred to as ‘evo psychos with [a] book deal’ and Bacon Smith’s work was alluded to by a respondent who spoke of her annoyance at being portrayed as a ‘fat, crazy, hot and bothered freak’ by the academy. Women were concerned about being described as ‘sexual deviants’ or being shown in a negative light. There was a feeling that ‘all too often’ people wanted to present women’s interest in m/m SEM as ‘a sort of freak show’. The terms ‘freak’ and ‘weird/o’ were mentioned over 50 times.

Several respondents discussed how, while my insider status (membership of the fan community) hadn’t influenced their decision to take part, the fact that I was a woman, and a feminist, had (***‘Membership of the sisterhood’***). There was a feeling that women’s sexuality is often studied from ‘the outside’ insomuch as it is studied by men, and that this forms ‘part of a wider misogynist narrative’ in which ‘female sexuality… [is] misrepresented’. Male researchers of female sexuality were described as ‘paternal’ and ‘condescending’ with a tendency to ‘mansplain’. Participants involved in slash fandom were aware of a double standard in how slash was viewed as a derivative genre – ‘silly females writing their own fantasies’ – whereas male-authored fanfiction was seen as a worthy pursuit, with one noting ‘I feel the fact that the community is dominated by women makes it easier for people to dismiss/be disdainful’ of it. There was also a perception that men were ‘freaked out’ by the idea of women liking m/m sex, despite the fact that ‘[men] think watching girl-on-girl porn is totally normal’.

Finally, some participants felt that insider researchers were more likely to ‘give something back’ to the community under investigation (‘***Sharing is caring’***)*.* Insiders were viewed as being more likely to stay in touch with the community after the research had finished, allowing for the sharing of results in a collegiate manner that may well help improve the community in some way. As one participant noted, ‘I don’t object to the community being held up to a mirror, so long as we learn something from it’, with another commenting, ‘It's a community, and communities share. An outside researcher is taking, but not giving anything back to the community… [instead just] using, or stealing, from the community’ (American, 55-64, married, heterosexual).

**Discussion: The acceptable outsider and the unacceptable insider**

The results of this study highlight that we need to think not only about how our positionality affects participant responses in qualitative work, but also how it affects decisions to take part in studies in the first place. Interestingly, the opinions of participants on insider/outsider researchers are broadly in-keeping with the variety of views that have been expressed by academic writers and methodologists. Participants are aware that there are windfalls and shortfalls when it comes to being investigated by an insider researcher, and, indeed, that there are positives and negatives to being involved in academic projects more generally. However, it is clear that with a historically stigmatised community such as this, insider status can play a key role in encouraging potential respondents to take part – over two thirds of the women who responded had at least some misgivings about participating in research undertaken by an outsider. While most of the subthemes from within ‘Ethics is key’ and ‘Membership is key’ show that participants understand that insider status isn’t a ‘get out of jail free’ card for doing the hard work of analysis or trust-building, and nor does it give a magical understanding of how participants feel, they do reveal the crucial importance of ethical, empathetic research to the researched community.

As I progressed through the analytical process, it struck me that the data could also be organised around the four points of ***unacceptable and acceptable outsiders***, and ***unacceptable and acceptable insiders***. It is clear from reviewing the above themes that not *all* outsiders are viewed as problematic or untrustworthy, even by a stigmatised and/or vulnerable minority community; equally not *all* insiders are viewed as *de facto* worthy of participants’ time and emotional openness purely by virtue of their (perceived or self-declared) community membership. However, the importance of having acceptable credentials (be they extrinsic to the community: a history of conducting ethical, empathetic research, a willingness to embed oneself in the research group etc.; or intrinsic to the community: involvement in similar activities/fandoms, similar life experiences etc.) was stressed by nearly every participant as being central to their decision to take part in any piece of research.

Much of what is contained within these concepts chimes with feminist critiques of representing minority cultures and subgroups (Alcoff, 1991). Within these critiques, more politically balanced presentation is said to require negotiating etic/emic perspectives in prior knowledge and knowledge seeking procedures (aka methodology). The importance of selecting research tools that operate to reduce the potential for power dynamics that empower the researcher and disenfranchise the researchee is highlighted (Kvale, 2006). Such critiques argue that building respect with a population leads to a more valid and reliable representation of the phenomenon under investigation - not only can we learn more and better, but we can do so in a way that ensures we can continue to engage with the people we want to learn more about. To this extent, the positionality sometimes adopted by outsider researchers (and, indeed, one considered a vital pretext to certain kinds of data analysis, such as Grounded Theory) – that of an impartial and objective academic who approaches the field without prior knowledge, ‘parachute[s] into people’s lives… and then vanish[es]’ (Gerrard, 1995:59) – has been criticised. Drew (2006:40) refers to these researchers as seagulls: ‘…a “seagull” is a researcher… who flies into a community; craps all over everything then leaves the community to tidy up the mess’. While many participants are comfortable responding to calls put out by outsider researchers they believe will produce high quality, unbiased research (‘acceptable outsiders’), it is clear the majority of my participants are extremely non-receptive to taking part in research designed by seagulls: the ‘unacceptable outsiders’.

Desire for inclusion in the research process has been expressed by participants in other marginalised groups; for example, the ‘nothing about us without us’ movement from within research on disabled people’s rights and activism (Stack & McDonald, 2014), which has also become a key refrain in research into the legal status of sex work (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). However, this concept tends to have been emphasised where it pertains to problem-focused research that is targeted at influencing or changing policy (Minkler, 2005). Understandably, perhaps, this has been seen as less of an issue in research that merely seeks to describe or understand a community - but this study shows that insider status matters a great deal to a sizeable proportion of participants, even though their lives are unlikely to be *directly* affected by the findings of any research project. The emphasis on authenticity, empathy, and reciprocal labour seen in the ‘Sharing is caring’ subtheme also reaffirms what has long been implicit in fan studies methodologies. Booth (2013) talks about the importance of making academic texts accessible to fen who have given up their time to participate in research, and of attending fan conventions to present data, and Fathallah (2016:253) discusses her policy of producing her own fanfic as a form of reciprocity, noting that ‘reciprocity to the community has mainly been a process of becoming more conscious and conscientious about practices… which [also] benefit [her] as a researcher’. To become an ‘acceptable insider’ requires real work, not simply community membership.

The ambiguity expressed by participants in the subthemes within ‘Epistemology is key’ also chime with existing debates within the methodological literature. ‘Researcher baggage’ resonates with previous work exploring the drawbacks to researching a community as an insider. For example, Zinn’s (1979) work with a Mexican American community explores the political challenges an insider researcher sometimes faces given the expectation that, as someone who understands the community intrinsically, they will be sympathetic in their analysis and always accountable, while Taylor (2011) notes that an insider’s close personal ties to the culture under investigation may make them resistant to an unsympathetic critique of the field, or, if they offer such a critique, they may be at risk of damaging or losing their closeness to the field or the friends they have within it. It is clear from this paper that participants often give researcher positionality the same nuanced consideration that researchers themselves do, and that it can impact participants’ decision to take part in a project in much the same way it can go on to impact the process of data collection and interpretation. ‘Unacceptable insiders’ exist, and participants are wary of taking part in work designed by researchers they designate as such.

Taken as a whole, these results show that while participants are largely aware of the drawbacks of insider research, if they’re not comfortable with how they see a researcher as positioned then they likely will not take part in a research study. This finding is crucial to any meaningful reflection on inclusivity in recruitment and sampling for qualitative research. It is interesting to note that even with a process as remote as recruiting for an online survey - where issues of rapport and affinity are arguably less relevant than with face-to-face interviews or ethnographies – the perceived identity of the researcher can still be key. Discussions over how in/outsider status might influence data analysis, and reflexivity about our role as researchers in the research process, continues to be welcome and important. But ultimately, if we only consider insider status in qualitative work at the point of data analysis, it may well be too late. The responses recorded here suggest there is a significant proportion of people who are likely to self-select out of research where they do not feel they will be identified with or understood, which calls into question how representative such research can be. This is of particular importance when we are investigating hard-to-reach or marginal populations with already limited participant pools.

It is also of note that specific awareness of both my identity as a writer of m/m SEM and as an academic was quite high in the sample, with a number of participants discussing how I had been ‘vetted’ prior to them agreeing to take part. This not only included reading my stories, but also looking at my Twitter profile, and examining my University profile page and previous research outputs. In today’s media savvy world academics can no longer hide our opinions in obscure journals – participants will likely be able to find out about our politics and our views on certain topics via a few clicks of a mouse. Taken alongside the clear preference expressed by respondents for feminist or action-research models, where researchers share data and ideas with the community under investigation, it is likely the day of the ‘seagull’ is done. The democratisation of research means that it is no longer the prerogative of academics, and competition for access to under-researched communities is high. Participants who belong to stigmatised groups want to see their voices reflected, and they want to feel fairly represented – and a significant proportion of them believe this is more likely to happen when the researcher is a member of that same group, although outsider status is acceptable provided the researcher has a track-record of empathetic research. As well as speaking to a need for greater diversity within academia, this paper highlights just how crucial it is for researchers to be attuned to the needs of the community under investigation, to understand how they operate, and above all, to treat them respectfully.

However, the subtheme ‘Research as inherently problematic’ raises a serious challenge as to how researchers can engage with stigmatised communities in ways that most effectively serve the ends of social justice (see Barratt & Maddox, 2016). It is easy to stress the importance of respect and a lack of judgement with communities who align with our own and/or prevailing sensibilities within the academy. Few scholars would argue that women should not be integral to research on their sexual habits and behaviours, or that disabled people should not be involved in projects that have the potential to impact on their lived experiences. However, it is more difficult to argue for the necessary upholding of these values, and, indeed, the preference for research from an ‘insider’ perspective, when we look at communities more likely to be labelled as ‘controversial’ within an academic sphere, such as the far right. Doubtless, people who consider themselves far right activists would also prefer to be studied by a sympathetic and respectful insider researcher, than by a deeply critical outsider researcher. Should we therefore expect an academic to hold Nazi beliefs in order to research these communities? Should we work closely with such communities to produce work that they feel is not overtly critical or damaging to their perception of themselves? If a large proportion of participants from within such communities would refuse to take part in a research project managed by a left-leaning academic, what knowledge are we losing in terms of not achieving a complete picture of such communities?

While researchers have discussed the importance of emphasising to ‘controversial’ groups/fans that the intention is not to judge them for their membership/fandom – for example, Bethan Jones’ work with fans of the indie band Lostprophets following the lead singer’s conviction for multiple counts of child sexual abuse (Jones, 2016, in Deller, 2018:26); or Chelsea Daggett’s (2015:52) call for ‘compassionate analyses’ of maligned communities such as true crime ‘fans’ – approaching a research area with a non-judgemental and empathetic attitude is not the same as *belonging* to the group being researched. To this extent, I find myself agreeing with the participants from within this theme who struggle with the very concept of research and how it can *ever* be truly ethical or produce knowledge that is free from bias or agenda.

The high value placed by a number of participants on insider status within the ‘Membership is key’ theme also raises questions about how the lengths researchers should be prepared to go to in order to demonstrate their ‘insider’ status. For example, within the field of sex work research, where there is a similar desire for inclusive and participatory work carried out by sex working academics, ‘outing’ yourself as a member of a historically stigmatised group can carry serious consequences for your career (Heineman, 2016). Declaring myself, publicly, to be a writer of erotic stories carries with it some degree of risk, as does explicitly linking my academic profile with my identity as a fanfic author. I am not simply giving up my ‘cloak of academic objectivity’ (Jamison, 1995:203) when I confess to my status as a community insider, I am also outing myself to my academic peers as one of ‘those crazy hot and bothered freaks’ that a participant ironically refers to herself as. I owe a huge debt to my participants. They have freely given to me their rich and frank insights into matters that are extremely personal to them. Nevertheless, I find myself asking: do my participants have a right to know my sexual fantasies because I have asked for theirs? Do they have a right to know my personal political beliefs? Do my employers? Do my reviewers? If ‘knowing’ the researcher matters to many participants from stigmatised groups, as this study suggests it does, we need to carefully consider how to balance their needs/values with our own rights to privacy and protection.

**Conclusion: Two tips for recruiting stigmatised groups to your research project**

* Think carefully about how open you are willing to be about your own views, perspectives, and lived experiences, and what the consequences of being open might entail. However, if (and only if) you feel comfortable doing so, sharing more of yourself (including any contributions you have made to the community in a personal capacity outside of work within the academy) is generally appreciated by prospective participants and can have a positive impact on recruitment.
* Regardless of your insider/outsider status with regards to the community you are investigating, think about the ‘story’ told by your previous research papers, university website, blogs, social media commentary etc. Is this one which is likely to make members of stigmatised groups trust you and feel comfortable taking part in your study if they were to ‘vet’ you via an extensive online search? If not, maybe reconsider whether you are the most appropriate person to be carrying out this research.

*References*

Adler, P. and Adler, P. (1987) *Membership roles in field research*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Alcoff, L. (1991) The problem of speaking for others. *Cultural Critique,* 20:5-32.

Aronson, J. (1994) A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *Qualitative Report,* 2(10):1-3.

Asquith, D. (2016) Crazy about One Direction: Whose shame is it anyway? In Bennett L and Booth P (eds.) *Seeing fans: Representations of fandom in media and popular culture*. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 79-88.

Bacon-Smith, C. (1992) *'Enterprising women': Television fandom and the creation of popular myth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Barratt, M.J. and Maddox, A. (2016) Active engagement with stigmatised communities through digital ethnography. *Qualitative Research,* 16(6):701-719.

Bennett, L. and Booth, P.J. (eds.) (2016). *Seeing fans: Representations of fandom in media and popular culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Bonner, A. and Tolhurst, G. (2002) Insider-outsider perspectives of participant observation. *Nurse Researcher,* 9(4*):*7-19.

Booth, P. (2013) Augmenting fan/academic dialogue: New directions in fan research. *The Journal of Fandom Studies,* 1(2):119-137

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3(2):77–101

Busse, K. and Hellekson, K. (2006) Introduction: Work in progress. In Hellekson, K. & Busse, K. (eds.), *Fan fiction and fan communities in the age of the internet*. London: McFarland, pp.5-32.

Cotterill, P., and Letherby, G. (1993). Weaving stories: Personal auto/biographies in feminist research. *Sociology, 27(1),* 67-79.

Daggett, C. (2015). Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold: Antiheroes for outcasts*. Participations, 12(2),* 45-77.

Deller, R.A. (2018). Ethics in fan studies research. In P. Booth (ed.), *A companion to media fandom and fan studies*. London: John Wiley.

DeLyser, D. (2001) ‘Do you really live here?’ Thoughts on insider research. *Geographical Review,* 19(1/2*):*441-453.

Drew, N. (2006) The seagull imperative. *Australian Community Psychologist,* 18(1):40-41.

Dwyer, S.C. and Buckle, J.L. (2009) The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 8(1):54-63.

Evans, A. and Stasi, M. (2014) Desperately seeking methodology: New directions in fan studies research. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies,* 11(2):4-23.

Fathallah, J. (2016) Transparency and reciprocity: Respecting fannish spaces in scholarly research. *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, 4(3):251-254

Fay, B. (1996) *Contemporary philosophy of social science: A multicultural approach.* Cambridge: Blackwell.

Freund, K. and Fielding, D. (2013) Research ethics in fan studies. *Participations,* 10(1*):*329-234.

Gerrard, N. (1995) Some painful experiences of a white feminist therapist doing research with women of colour. In Adleman, J. (ed.), *Racism in the lives of women*. Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, pp. 55-64.

Heineman, J. (2016) *Schoolgirls: Embodied practices among current and former sex workers in academia.* PhD Thesis, University of Nevada, USA.

Heron, J. and Reason, P. (1997) A participatory inquiry paradigm. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 3:274-294.

Hills, M. (2003) *Fan cultures*. London: Routledge.

Jaeger, M.E. and Rosnow, R.L. (1988) Contextualism and its implications for psychological inquiry. *British Journal of Psychology,* 79*:*63-75.

Jamison, K.R. (2015) *An unquiet mind.* London: Pan Macmillan.

Jensen, J. (1992) Fandom as pathology: The consequences of characterization. In Lewis, L.A. (ed.), *The adoring audience: Fan culture and popular media*. London: Routledge, pp.9-29.

Kvale, S. (2006) Dominance through interviews and dialogue. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 12(3):480-500.

Lee-Treweek, G., and Linkogle, S. (Eds.) (2000) *Danger in the field: Risk and ethics in social research.* Psychology Press.

Madill, A., Jordan, A. and Shirley, C. (2000) Objectivity and reliability in qualitative analysis: Realist, contextualist, and radical constructionist epistemologies. *British Journal of Psychology,* 91(1):1-20.

Merton, R.K. (1972) Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. In Merton, R.K. (ed.), *Varieties of political expression in sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.9-47

Minkler, M. (2005) Community‐based research partnerships: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Urban Health,* 82*:*ii3–ii12.

Morrissey, K. (2008) *Fanning the flames of romance.* MA dissertation, Georgetown University, USA.

Neville, L. (2018). *Girls who like boys who like boys: Women and gay male pornography and erotica.* London: Palgrave.

Ross, L. (2017) An account from the inside: Examining the emotional impact of qualitative research through the lens of ‘insider’ research. *Qualitative Psychology,* 4(3):326-337.

Scott, S. (1998). Here be dragons: Researching the unbelievable, hearing the unthinkable. A feminist sociologist in uncharted territory. *Sociological Research Online, 3(3),* 98-109.

Stack, E. and McDonald, K.E. (2014). Nothing about us without us: Does action research in developmental disabilities research measure up? *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities,* 11(2):83-91.

Talbot, K. (1999) Mothers now childless: Personal transformations after the death of an only child. *Omega,* 38(3*):*167-186.

Taylor, J. (2011) The intimate insider: Negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider research. *Qualitative Research,* 11(1):3-22.

Tindall, C. (1994) Issues of evaluation. In Banister, P., Burman, E., Parker, I., Taylor, M., and Tindall, C. (eds.), *Qualitative methods in psychology*. Buckingham: Open University Press, pp.142-159.

Vanwesenbeeck, I. (2017) Sex work criminalisation is barking up the wrong tree. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour,* 46(6):1631-1640.

Wolgemuth, J.R., Erdil-Moody, Z., Opsal, T., Cross, J.E., Kaanta, T., Dickmann, E.M., and Colomer, S. (2015) Participants’ experiences of the qualitative interview: Considering the importance of research paradigms. *Qualitative Research,* 15(3):351-372.

Zinn, M.B. (1979) Field research in minority communities: Ethical, methodological, and political observations by an insider. *Social Problems,* 27(2):209-219.

Zubernis, L. and Davis, K. (2016) Growing pains: The changing ethical landscape of fan studies*. Journal of Fandom Studies,* 4(3*):*301-306.

1. Slash fiction is a genre of fanfiction that focuses on interpersonal attraction and sexual relationships between fictional characters of the same sex, believed to have originated in the 1970s when female fans started to compose stories based around *Star Trek* where Kirk and Spock had a romantic - and sometimes sexual - relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fanshipping (sometimes just shipping), a term derived from the word ‘relationship’, is the desire by fans for two or more people or fictional characters to be in a relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. AO3 [Archive of Our Own] is a multi-fandom archive designed to host web-based fan fiction as well as fandom nonfiction. The archive contained around 5 million fanworks as of July 2019 (see http://fanlore.org/wiki/Archive\_of\_Our\_Own) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)