SURVEYING THE HAREDIM AS INSIDERS: IDENTITY, OBJECTIVITY AND RESEARCH ETHICS

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In conducting social science research on religion, the religious identity of investigators (or lack of such identity) may pose various challenges to objectivity. This paper is based on our experiences, as haredi (‘ultra-Orthodox’ Jewish) sociologists, in conducting a women’s health survey amongst our own community. It discusses two particular incidents, occurring before and after data-collection, in which our status as insiders became an issue. We discuss how these incidents shaped our evolving views regarding the interplay between identity, objectivity, and research ethics.

Researchers as Insiders

There is a growing body of research, some of which has appeared in the pages of this journal, on how the identities of researchers influence their studies of haredim. In her article on insider-outsider tensions in fieldwork among haredim, Kaul-Seidman, following Heilman and Kugelmass, noted that the corpus of anthropological and sociological work on Jews “is fairly unique in that it has been and remains predominantly “native”’. She concluded therefore that “most ethnographers of ultra-orthodox Jewry are identifiable, to varying degrees, as “native” or “insiders” in that they share a broad identification and affiliation with the Jewish tradition or with Jewish people-hood”.

However, running through ethnographies of the haredi community, there are often discussions of the methodological and epistemological implications of the status of ethnographers as outsiders. They have detailed their struggles to master the language, dress, and customs which were needed to gain entrée to the community and gradually achieve at least partial, contingent acceptance as insiders. Frequently, these ethnographers describe tensions arising from their having led

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36
informants to believe (or done little to discourage the latter’s hopeful assumption) that they had some interest in joining the Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox community. Often, these researchers are secular Jews. Occasionally, they may even be Gentiles, rendering them total outsiders, such as Kaul-Seidman herself. But even when they are modern (that is, non-haredi) Orthodox Jews — thus sharing with their subjects important basics of belief and practice — they face substantial challenges arising from their comparative outsider status vis-à-vis the highly insular ultra-Orthodox world. This may be even more so in the Israeli context, given its marked sociocultural polarization.

In our own work, we faced the insider-outsider issue from a standpoint, and with a research method, which the literature seldom discusses in this context. The present authors — the core research team of an Israeli national survey of women’s health amongst haredim — are themselves members of the Israeli haredi community. While researchers of haredim have included modern Orthodox Jews and those formerly associated with the haredi community and/or its institutions, we are perhaps the first sociologists to study this community — and face insider/outside issues — as current active members. The key difference between us and previous researchers is that our close identification gives us a particularly direct, personal stake in the target population and its welfare. Moreover, unlike other researchers of the haredi community who discussed insider/outside tensions, we confronted these issues in relation not to ethnography, where these issues are more commonly discussed, but to survey research. There were two events (one occurring prior to, and one subsequent to, data collection) which led us to consider how our insider status related to our objectivity, how we managed these issues, and how our views evolved during the research.

Identity and Bias I: The Insider’s Defence

We first confronted the implications of our insider status fairly early. One peer reviewer of our grant proposal questioned whether we could study our own community with proper scientific objectivity. We believed this criticism to be unfair, particularly since ours was not an ethnographic study with wide latitude for investigators to define the research questions and methods, and to interpret the data. Rather, it was a replicatory survey based on an existing instrument, modified somewhat for haredi women. Presumably, only frankly unethical conduct, such as falsifying data to prevent disclosure of results somehow unflattering to the haredim would allow any of our putative biases to distort our work. Nevertheless, the comment did lead us to consider our position more carefully.
We began by noting that we shared the reviewer’s concern about the ethical implications of biases. In fact, we mentioned that scientific ethics was a major research field of one of the researchers, who had recently written a paper which included the following sentence, ‘As historian Gaetano Salvemini remarked, “Impartiality is a dream and honesty a duty. We cannot be impartial, but we can be intellectually honest”…’14 We continued that there are both controllable and uncontrollable biases. For the former, it is the duty of researchers to recognize their biases, and to ensure that they will neither distort the work nor deter from an honest rendering of the objective reality depicted by the data. We remarked that, on this score, we were at a loss how to demonstrate our scientific integrity to the reviewer. Should we submit a list of colleagues prepared to attest to it? Since we doubted that the reviewer would claim that professionally-trained haredi researchers were by definition less honest than their non-haredi colleagues, we added that we hoped that our religious orientation would not influence the reviewer’s confidence in our scientific integrity.

But what of uncontrollable biases — what the reviewer called ‘inevitable major biases and preconceptions’? Perhaps there comes a point when even researchers deeply committed to the truth are incapable of recognizing their biases. Here, integrity is insufficient. Researchers may simply be unable to see things differently from how their training, background, and interests incline them15: the fish doesn’t see the water…. However, surely this applies across the board. Since many Israelis, we noted, seem to hold fairly strong opinions about haredim,16 it is unlikely that only haredi researchers inevitably suffer from preconceptions. Perhaps actual members of the community would suffer from fewer such preconceptions and stereotypes, since their day-to-day, long-term immersion in the community gives them a more realistic, nuanced grasp. Why automatically assume that non-haredi researchers are neutral or capable of controlling their biases, and haredi researchers are not? In any case, we concluded, it has long been considered an advantage, to the best of our knowledge of the US research scene, for African-American and female researchers to bring to bear their deeper local knowledge on research about their respective communities. Need they bring white or male researchers aboard to keep them in line? The same presumably applies to the many Israeli kibbutz researchers who are themselves kibbutz members or products. While Robert K. Merton17 has made an eloquent case that researchers need not be members of the community they study, he hardly meant that they cannot.

If even honest researchers can remain affected by their background and commitment (despite seeking in good faith to control for their biases), then at least we can capitalize on this limitation. For, if our
haredi background will lead to biases in our manner of conducting the research, these biases would tend to complement the biases of previous, non-haredi researchers of the haredi community. Assuming that scientific integrity is evenly distributed across in- and out-group researchers (and across haredi and non-haredi researchers), and that all researchers are subject to some non-controllable biases, it would seem that the vantage point of those with deep personal knowledge of the community provides valuable insights which help offset whatever ‘in-group’ biases inevitably creep in, and counter-balance complementary biases of others.

While on the subject of identity, perspective, and bias, we noted that both co-principal investigators were raised in non-Orthodox households. Each received a full secular education, and each entered the haredi world only after he was married and had a child. Between them, their backgrounds included periods spent within secular, traditional, modern Orthodox, and haredi communities. Also, each of the three haredi members of the core research staff were immigrants from North America. Differences between the North American and Israeli haredi communities are substantial enough that, even as members, we remain to a degree marginal to the Israeli community, hence able to benefit at least in part from the outsider’s perspective. In conducting this study, therefore, we would have potential recourse to multiple insider/outsider perspectives (thus exemplifying their above-noted fluidity). In the end, perhaps our response seemed convincing, since we did receive the grant.

Identity and Bias II: Hidden Selectivity

During data analysis, however, another situation arose which made these issues more concrete, and led our position to evolve further. We were contacted by a newspaper reporter who wished to discuss our findings with us. She was primarily interested in the most sensitive part of the study, domestic abuse, though that was in fact only a small portion of the entire study and our data on this matter are difficult to interpret. That required us to confront the degree to which our reactions were influenced by our membership in the population under study. Over the years, Israeli newspapers (similar to the daily for which the reporter worked) have generally maintained a negative stance towards haredim. The research staff took no pleasure in the prospect of airing our community’s dirty laundry in such a forum. In fact, before data collection had even begun, we had briefly discussed our fears of having precisely such sensitive findings sensationalized by a newspaper. These concerns had a religious element: we feared that publicizing such problems might contribute to a hillul Hashem [desecration of the Lord’s Name], which in Judaism constitutes the gravest of sins. However,
even if we had been studying a community quite removed from our own, we might have hesitated to discuss domestic abuse with the reporter, for a variety of reasons: a sense of duty to avoid harming our research population, a wish to preserve our credibility with this community, and our personal distaste for controversy.

Of course those data were, after all, collected in order to assess, insofar as possible, the extent to which the haredi community required interventions in the field of domestic abuse. Indeed, rather than suppressing such data as our preliminary analyses had already generated on this topic, one of us had already presented them at a local conference of Orthodox mental health professionals. This was indeed the first time that any data from the study were presented publicly. As we saw it, we had collected the abuse data in order to transmit them to professionals able to address the problem, not to have the details featured in newspapers.

On the other hand, we understood that the study was conducted mainly with public funds, giving the public a stake in its findings. We also recognized that contact with the press was a legitimate part of our rôle as sociologists and that making ourselves fully available to the reporter would give us the opportunity carefully to explain the data, including both their limitations and wider significance — thus reducing the chance of distorted media coverage. Moreover, it would allow us to maintain our professional credibility, and avoid creating the impression that we (or our community) had something to hide. Finally, we recognized that it was no longer a secret that the haredi community also endured its share of psycho-social pathologies. Secular dailies in Israel had already revealed the existence of a shelter for haredi women victimized by domestic abuse, and fundraising efforts for that shelter had also been advertised in the haredi press. We therefore agreed to meet that reporter and to go over all our data as soon as we had completed data analysis.

This experience changed our outlook on bias. Unlike the case of earlier, non-haredi researchers, our current membership in that community created an especially direct identification with our research subjects: what reflected poorly on them also reflected poorly on us. Moreover, unflattering publicity could cause us personal fallout within our community. This is something rarely mentioned by any of those ethnographers referred to (in relative terms) as ‘insiders’ in the literature cited above. In this sense, compared with those researchers of haredim whose insider status rests on what Kaul-Seidman called their ‘broad identification and affiliation with the Jewish tradition or with Jewish people-hood’, we are ‘inner’ insiders.

In reflecting on this experience, we identified our potential vulnerability to a subtle pitfall: nothing so egregious as falsifying or otherwise tampering with data which could reflect poorly on our community, but
simply ignoring them. For, in a study with as many variables as ours, and
given the heavy time pressures on the core research staff, nothing could
be easier than just ‘never getting around’ to analyzing (not to mention
publishing) the domestic abuse data. Investigators typically ration
scarce time and energy amongst competing responsibilities of teaching,
research, and administration. Let us say our study could yield a possible
six or seven papers, but our other commitments realistically permit
development of only four. Why, we might readily ask ourselves (or
maybe not even consciously ask ourselves), make one of those four some-
thing unpleasant or embarrassing? Strictly speaking, this is not clear
suppression of data. And busy researchers will often strategically
select, of all projects competing for their time, those calculated to be
most useful for advancing their careers, which projects are not necessa-
ryly those making the greatest long-term contribution to science.

And yet . . . The current Code of Ethics of the American Sociological
Association\textsuperscript{24} contains some passages whose spirit (if not letter) bears at
least indirectly on the propriety of such practice:

\textbf{9.01 Adherence to Professional Standards}
Irrespective of their personal . . . interests . . . sociologists adhere to professional
and scientific standards in (1) the collection, analysis, or interpretation of
data; (2) the reporting of research; (3) . . . professional presentation, or
public dissemination of sociological knowledge. . . .

\textbf{13.04 Reporting on Research}
(a) Sociologists disseminate their research findings except where
unanticipated circumstances (e.g., the health of the researcher) or
proprietary agreements with employers, contractors, or clients preclude
such dissemination. . . .
(c) In presenting their work, sociologists report their findings fully and do
not omit relevant data.

The influence of non-scientific factors (such as personal or political
biases) on selections of which data to develop for publication may
constitute tension (if not a direct clash) between, in the Code’s terms,
‘personal interests’ and ‘professional and scientific standards’ in ‘the
reporting of research’. Writing about ‘indigenous anthropology’,
Moslih Kanaaneh explicitly rejects the claim that objectivity requires
researchers to be neutral or indifferent towards their subjects.
Rather, researchers require integrity: Kanaaneh holds that — despite
their engagement — they must be ‘able to tell the truth and the
whole truth’ about what they know.\textsuperscript{25}

But do researchers always tell the whole truth about what they know?
Hidden selectivity regarding which data to pursue is hardly limited to
research on religion, or even to social science. For example, David
Rier\textsuperscript{26} has reported something similar among public health scientists.
One investigator explained the fate of preliminary data which
suggested health risks from induced abortion, a practice personally endorsed by the researchers:

So all we could possibly do was write a paper with a bunch of limitations, that was on the side that none of us, in the whole team, were [sic] on the side of. And we just let it sit... I'm not lying to you [laughs]... we didn't have the right data, but it was also true that we chose; had we been on the other side of the induced abortion issue, we might have chosen to write the paper [emphasis added].

It is impossible to tell how often the personal commitments of researchers produce such selectivity, amounting to silent self-censorship. It might influence the writing-up of results, pursuit of research leads, or even the initial definition of research questions. Such decisions typically occur ‘backstage’. The ones a researcher lets get away — the papers which somehow never get written, the data never properly developed, the questions never asked — leave little trace, but bear ethical implications. In our own case, we anyway might have decided to submit the data (if warranted on technical scientific grounds) for academic peer-review. Wholly apart from intellectual honesty, such publication could be an important element in our case for resources with which to address the problem. Clearly, however, this experience demonstrated for us why those with a personal (or communal) stake in the findings must be particularly attentive to such self-censorship possibilities throughout the research process. Rabbi Dr. Moshe Bernstein, an Orthodox rabbi engaged in academic Judaic studies, has discussed the clash for scholars between religious faith and their academic research: ‘In practice... we all have issues which we have tacitly agreed not to touch. As a result, we must always be aware of our “compromised” status’. Our specific experience with the journalist seems something of an ethical grey area. True, such behaviour seldom features in important works on scientific misconduct. Yet it does suggest that those with a personal (or communal) stake in the findings must be particularly attentive to possible self-censorship, throughout the research process. To that extent, then, the initial reviewer who questioned our objectivity was perhaps not so unfair after all.

**Conclusion**

This paper reports our experiences while conducting a survey amongst our own community. At two separate stages of the work, we had to confront implications of our insider status. Our perceptions of how this affected our scientific objectivity led us to evolve beyond our initial stance of defensiveness. While we did not actually come to reject the arguments offered in our rebuttal to the reviewer of our grant proposal,
our contact with the journalist led us to a more nuanced position, with a
deeper awareness of the implications of our stake in the findings.

The literature on objectivity, bias, and ethical responsibilities in
science is vast and rich, and a proper treatment of this subject lies
beyond the scope of the present brief paper. However, the experiences
we have discussed here yield three lessons. First, even survey
researchers, and not just ethnographers, may need to consider how
insider/outsider issues can affect their work. Second, although this
applies also to outsiders (as even Wolfe — while criticizing insider
bias in the sociology of religion — noted, all students of religion ‘position
themselves’ relative to their subject), the direct identification of
insiders with their subjects seems to necessitate especial alertness.
Third, any researchers with a personal, religious, or ideological stake
in the findings are potentially susceptible to a subtle form of selectivity
bias — a bias which may infiltrate any stage of the research process, and
in almost any scientific discipline.

In conclusion, we suggest that it behoves all researchers — wherever
situated on the insider/outsider continuum, and in whichever methodo-
logical traditions they work — to be sensitive to the sometimes hidden
ways in which non-scientific considerations may shape their research
and its dissemination.

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NOTES

1 Alan Wolfe, ‘The Territory of Belief’, Chronicle of Higher Education, vol. 52,
2 Lisa R. Kaul-Seidman, ‘Fieldwork among the “Ultra-Orthodox”: The
“Insider-Outsider” Paradigm Revisited’, The Jewish Journal of Sociology
3 Samuel C. Heilman, ‘Jewish Sociologist: Native-as-Stranger’, American
4 Jack Kugelmass, ‘Introduction’ in J. Kugelmass, ed., Between Two Worlds:
5 Kaul-Seidman, op. cit. in note 2 above (p. 50, n. 13), appropriately cites
the caution of Kirin Narayan (see ‘How Native is a “Native”
Anthropologist?’, American Anthropologist [New Series], vol. 95, no. 3, 1993,
pp. 671–686) that the concepts of ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ fail to capture
important elements of the relations between researchers and the researched.
Similarly, Nancy A. Naples (‘A Feminist Revisiting of the Insider/Outsider

43
Debate. The “Outsider Phenomenon” in Rural Iowa, in Reflexivity and Voice [ed. by R. Hertz], London, 1997, pp. 70–94) and Bahira Sherif (‘The Ambiguity of Boundaries in the Fieldwork Experience: Establishing Rapport and Negotiating Insider/Outsider Status’, Narrative Inquiry vol. 7, no. 4, 2001, pp. 436–447) remind us that the terms ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ refer to fluid, shifting, relative statuses which are constantly under negotiation. However, the present discussion follows Heilman, op. cit. in note 3 above (p. 103, n. 2) in retaining the ‘insider-outsider’ terminology because, as did Heilman, we focus specifically on our own identities as members of the community we studied.

Kaul-Seidman, op. cit. in note 2 above, also noted that discussion of insider-outsider identities is a characteristic of research carried out since the 1970s. For an example of the older, non-reflexive type of study, see Israel Rubin, Satmar: An Island in the City, Chicago, 1972. Rubin collected his data for this ethnography of Satmar hassidim mainly in the early 1960s. Solomon Poll’s earlier The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg: A Study in the Sociology of Religion (New York, [1962] 1969), an ethnography of a similar population, did discuss insider/outside issues, but only from the non-reflexive methodological perspective of gaining access to the field. William B. Helmreich’s The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry (New Haven, 1982) constitutes a more recent example: the ethnographic portion of its data were gathered in 1974–75.

At least one researcher of haredim and their institutions has discussed how his research drew him nearer to the religious practices of his subjects. See Samuel Heilman’s works, The Gate Behind the Wall: A Pilgrimage to Jerusalem [2nd ed.], Jerusalem, [1984] 1995, and The People of the Book: Drama, Fellowship, and Religion, Chicago, 1987, pp. xi–xii. In The Gate Behind the Wall, p. 198, Heilman even claimed that, to an extent, he went native. Daniel Boyarin (‘Waiting for a Jew: Marginal Redemption at the Eighth Street Shul’, in Kugelmass, ed., Between Two Worlds, op. cit. in note 4 above, pp. 52–76 [pp. 72–74] and in a personal communication, 1 July 2005) has described how, as part of a dialectical process of researching Jews and fashioning his own Jewish identity, his participation in a marginal Orthodox minyan (prayer group) was a bridge to a stronger orientation towards halakha (Jewish law) in his own personal religious practice.

SURVEYING THE HAREDIM AS INSIDERS

9 See, for example, Samuel Heilman, Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry, New York, 1992.
11 Samuel Heilman is one of the few other examples of a Jewish sociologist describing insider/outider issues in his studying the religious world with which he fully identified, and whose practices he currently followed in his personal life. See his accounts of his participant observation research in the American modern Orthodox community: Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction [2nd edn.], New Brunswick, 1998, and ‘Jewish Sociologist: Native-as-Stranger’, op. cit. in note 3 above.
12 See, for example, Bahira Sherif, op. cit. in note 5 above.
13 Andrew M. Greeley (1987), practising as both Roman Catholic priest and sociologist, is a prominent case of a non-Jewish survey researcher who faced insider/outider issues. He has recounted the personal fallout he experienced from his surveys on U.S. Catholics and the Church. See Confessions of a Parish Priest: An Autobiography, New York, 1987.
14 That manuscript’s source for this quotation was Jacques Barzun and Henry G. Graff, The Modern Researcher (4th edn.), New York, 1985, p. 200.
16 See Efron, op. cit. in note 10 above.
19 See Efron, op. cit. in note 10 above.
21 Leviticus 22:32; Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yoma 86a; and Maimonides’ Code of Jewish Law, sect. Yesodei haTorah 5:1.
23 Kaul-Seidman, op. cit. note 2 above, p. 31.

Wolfe, op. cit. in note 1 above.