

## Insider or Outsider?

### Exploring the Fluidity of the Roles Through Social Identity Theory

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# Insider or outsider? Exploring the fluidity of the roles through social identity theory

Exploring the fluidity of the roles

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the fluidity of the fieldwork roles “insider” and “outsider.” The paper aims to move the discussion of insiders from an a priori categorized status and contribute to the literary insider–outsider debate by unfolding the micro process of how the role of an insider is shaped *in situ*. Grounded in empirical examples, the paper illustrates how the researcher’s role is shaped through interactions with organizational members and by context.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is based on an ethnographic study in an IT department of a Nordic bank and draws on empirical material generated through a combination of data: shadowing, interviews, observations and documents. Excerpts from fieldnotes are included to invite the reader into “the scenes” played out in the field and are analyzed in order to illustrate the shaping of roles *in situ*.

**Findings** – The study finds that, independent of the researcher’s role as sponsored by the organization, the interactions with organizational members and context determine whether the researcher is assigned a role as insider or outsider, or even both within the same context.

**Originality/value** – The paper contributes with a new discussion of how the roles of insiders and outsiders are fluid by discussing the shaping of the roles *in situ*. By drawing on relational identity theories, the paper illustrates how interactions and context influence the researcher’s role, grounded in empirical examples. In addition, the paper discusses what the assigned roles enable and constrain for the ethnographer in that particular situation.

**Keywords** Social identity theory, Outsider, Fieldwork, Roles, Insider, Sponsored research

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

The role of insider has been a topic of interest within the fieldwork literature for decades and remains a topical theme. Within the field of anthropology and ethnography, there has recently been a general shift toward doing ethnography and anthropology in organizations (in opposition to what is sometimes called “real anthropology,” the study of a foreign culture, e.g. an Indian tribe, Peluso, 2017). Organizational ethnography is not new, but the amount of studies of organizations has increased over the years (Cefkin, 2009). In addition, more and more organizational ethnographers are conducting research in organizations for the business as opposed to ethnographies of the business (Fayard *et al.*, 2016; Jordan, 2013; Malefyt, 2017; Peluso, 2017; Sedgwick, 2017). When the researcher is doing research for the business, the researcher is often categorized as an insider because of their affiliation with the organization, as sponsored by the organization (Fayard *et al.*, 2016). Although this particular form of ethnography does not exhaust insider methodology, its growth does mean that debate of insiders is more relevant now than ever.

A number of scholars have discussed the concerns and challenges of being an insider (e.g. Alvesson, 2009; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). There is also a growing field of

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scholarship, informed by authors who are or have been insiders, that explores the spatial and temporal boundaries to insider research (e.g. Brun-Cottan, 2012; Fayard and Van Maanen, 2015; Fayard *et al.*, 2016; Hepsø, 2012). Fayard and Van Maanen (2015, p. 11), for example, pose the questions: “Who are the insiders? The outsiders?” and argue that the boundaries are “unavoidably blurred and indistinct.” Brun-Cottan (2012, p. 166) describes it with these words: “Labelling an ethnographer an insider or an outsider may well depend on the ethnographer’s relationship to the person who is doing the labelling.” In contrast this, paper seeks to move beyond the process of categorization and instead unpack the labeling by investigating how the role as insider or outsider is being assigned to the researcher *in situ* as influenced by context and interaction with organizational members.

This paper falls in the latter of the two categories of literature, mentioned above, a study conducted by a researcher who is doing research for the organization studied, as sponsored researcher. By following relational identity theories such as social identity theory and identity theory, the paper argues that the role as insider is fluid and determined by the situation rather than a priori determined such as determined by the role as sponsored researcher. By building on the assumption that the role as insider is fluid, the paper addresses two fundamental questions: How is the role as insider shaped by the context and through interactions with organizational members *in situ*? And how does that enable or constrain the ethnographer in that particular situation?

Studies of and by insiders, such as Brun-Cottan (2012), Fayard and Van Maanen (2015) and Hepsø (2012), examine both the none-fixed character of insiders and debate some of the consequences these might have for the researcher. However, these studies build on an assumption that the role of insider is dependent on the affiliation with the organization, or labeling, and hence static within a relationship with another organizational member. This leaves a research gap of debating the roles as constituted through interactions and context *in situ*, where the fluidity of the roles must be investigated through the micro processes. By analyzing fieldnotes, written by the researcher while being in the field, the paper demonstrates how the role as either insider or outsider is shaped in interactions with the organizational members *in situ*. It contributes to the insider–outsider debate with an empirical grounded discussion of the micro processes, illuminating the fluidity of the roles as insider and outsider. In addition, it contributes with a discussion of how that enables or constrains the ethnographer in that particular situation.

### **The insider–outsider debate**

Definitions and discussions of the role as insider can be found in many shapes within the literature of organizational ethnography and business anthropology, e.g. insider (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Ybema, 2009), at-home ethnographer (Alvesson, 2009), corporate ethnographer (Cefkin, 2009; Jordan, 2013; Sedgwick, 2017), contract ethnographer (Fayard *et al.*, 2016), consultant anthropologist and anthropologist for a business (Peluso, 2017). The literature tends to agree that the “insider” is a label used to denote researchers who are doing research in an organization, they are either part of (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), have a “natural access” to, are an “active participant” in (Alvesson, 2009) or are sponsored by (Fayard *et al.*, 2016; Peluso, 2017), for example, as an employee (Sedgwick, 2017). This might seem indisputable, but what the literature also reveals is the gray zone, the blurred lines between being an insider and an outsider, a discussion which is much broader than a matter of an employee contract or affiliation with an organization.

Some accounts, such as Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) discussion of being an insider, as well as that of “at-home” ethnography by Alvesson (2009) center on the concerns and challenges posed by being an insider. This literature is limited in the extent to which it engages in a discussion whether and when the researcher is constituted as an insider. In contrast, other scholars question the apparently clear distinction between being an insider and outsider to argue that the positioning of for and of businesses is fluid (Cefkin, 2017;

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Fisher, 2017; Peluso, 2017). In addition to the literature of insiders and outsiders, there are a number of studies by insiders, literature written by scholars who has been in the role as insider (e.g. Flynn, 2009; Suchman, 1985; Wynn, 1979) and in some cases, explicitly discussing the role from within (e.g. Brun-Cottan, 2012; Fayard and Van Maanen, 2015; Fayard *et al.*, 2016; Hepsø, 2012; Järventie-Thesleff *et al.*, 2016; Jordan and Lambert, 2009; Malefyt, 2017; Nagle, 2017). In other cases, the researcher's role could be called quasi-insider (Fayard and Van Maanen, 2015), where the researcher moves into a role close to the characteristics of an insider, even though the researcher is not, for example, sponsored or employed by the organization (e.g. Forsythe, 2001; Krause-Jensen, 2010; Kunda, 1992; Orr, 1996; Weeks, 2004).

What characterizes the studies by either insiders or quasi-insiders are the more complex and rich descriptions of the role of insider or outsider, unfolding either the blurred lines between being an insider and outsider or illustrating the fluid character as this quote by Fayard and Van Maanen (2015, p. 18) signifies: "None of these roles were fixed or static but were rather fluid, continually being restructured, retained and abandoned in the course of our interactions with those in the company." What this quote also shows is that the roles as either insider or outsider are not static, which is also argued in the study by Westney and Maanen (2011). Brun-Cottan (2012, p. 165) argues that the researcher can contain both roles within the scope of the same project: "It would simplify discussion if the ethnographer steadfastly maintained the position of insider or outsider throughout an engagement. However, in some cases, a person may occupy both roles within the scope of one project." This new wave of debates about the role of insider by insiders illustrates that discussions around the shaping of the role as either insider or outsider are relevant. This paper falls into the same group of studies, discussing own role as insider from within the organization. However, there is still a gap in the literature required by the unpacking of the labeling and in addition, a need to explore the empirical dimension of how the fluid role as insider is being shaped through interactions and context in a particular situation. Offhand, the role as sponsored researcher falls into the category of insiders, but by applying relational identity theories, the paper aims at unfolding the fluidity within that role.

### Fluid identities

One's identity, or self-definition, is a product of social interaction grounded in specific contexts as specific times such that one's sense of self-in-organization is emergent and somewhat fluid. Thus, the process of identification is crucial because the nature of identity and the extent of identification are not determined by the preexisting nature of the person or organization. Individuals, groups, and the organization mutually shape one another over time and become comingled: Each level of analysis is neither static nor discrete, neither independent nor autonomous (Albert *et al.*, 1998, pp. 213-214).

Identity and identification have often been defined in fairly static terms, whereas Albert *et al.* (1998) above argue that identification and identity is more fluid, being shaped through social interactions and context, making the process of identification crucial. Similarly, identity theory (e.g. Burke, 1980; Stryker, 1987; Stryker and Serpe, 1982) and social identity theory (e.g. Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982, 1985) focus on social interaction as influencing identities and acknowledge that situational factors are important in the construction and reconstruction of roles (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). Hence, moving the focus from an individual level (particular in the fields of development psychology, social psychology, symbolic interactionism and psychodynamics) to a relational level (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998). The assumption of the self as socially constructed shaped by interactions and situation makes contextual factors and relations to other organizational members crucial in defining the role in a specific situation.

Building further on identification as none-fixed, Pratt (1998, pp. 174-175) relates the discussion to organizational identification and argues that the lines between organizational insiders and outsiders are diffuse: "Although studying phenomena such as 'organizational groupies' has remained largely outside of the scope of research on organizational identification, it is clear that this aspect of identification may become increasingly important as our notion of what an 'organizational member' is becomes broader and the boundaries between organizational insiders and outsiders become more diffuse."

This paper draws on a perception, similar to Albert *et al.* (1998), Pratt (1998) and scholars of identity theory, e.g. Burke (1980) and social identity theory, e.g. Henri Tajfel and Turner (1979), of identity and identification as fluid, relational and continuous, thus making the interactions and context crucial to understand where and how the researcher becomes an insider or outsider. By drawing on these scholars, it is possible to unfold how a role is shaped *in situ*, rather than making the affiliation with an organization determine for the role. To discuss the process of identification, it is essential to unfold the micro processes by showing the interactions between researcher and organizational members as well as to include rich descriptions of the relevant context. Hence, this paper draws on pieces of empirical material to illustrate how the identification process unfolds through interactions between researcher and organizational members in order to unfold the fluid role of sponsored researcher.

### Methodology and data analysis

The study takes place in a large Nordic bank with approximately 20,000 employees. The bank consists of a number of business units as well as several staff functions. The unit of analysis in this study is the IT department of the bank. The IT department has approximately 2,700 employees, located primarily on three sites across the world. The department is divided into six areas; five of them are development areas and the last one is the infrastructure area. The main responsibility of the infrastructure area is the maintenance of all IT systems in the bank, whereas the development areas cooperate closely with the business units to develop new IT systems and solutions.

Throughout the study, the researcher was sponsored by and employed as a researcher in the IT department. Prior to being employed in the IT department of the bank, the researcher was, for five years, employed in the HR department of the bank at the headquarters. Because of that position, the researcher had already established relations with some in the IT department, mainly managers and HR partners from the HR unit of the IT department. The agreement of the IT department sponsoring the research was made between the researcher and top management of the IT department, while being employed in HR.

The empirical material used for this paper is part of a wider research project focusing on organizational changes. Due to the employment in the IT department, the researcher had a desk in the department, sitting next to secretaries, planning consultants, executive assistants and communication consultants. As part of the ethnography conducted, the researcher wrote fieldnotes based on more than 100 days of observations gathered through the day-to-day work in the staff function. The style of the fieldnotes leaned heavily on what Czarniawska-Joerges (2007) terms "dramaturgical" or what Agar (1995) calls the "scenic" method. The reason for choosing a dramaturgical-diary style was to get as rich descriptions as possible of the scenes played out in the field including the polyphony of voices involved in the scenes. The scenes were written retrospectively, shortly after the scene had played out or during the evening.

To explore the field in the beginning of the research, the researcher made an agreement with a middle manager from the infrastructure area to shadow (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007) him for two weeks. The researcher had met the middle manager a couple of times beforehand and because of his position as manager of one of the core areas of the infrastructure area as well as their already established relation, he had been selected.

As part of the shadowing, the researcher followed him from morning, when he arrived at the office, to afternoon when he left the office. His calendar was almost filled up with meetings from morning to afternoon and the researcher attended all meetings except three during the two weeks of shadowing. Each evening, the researcher wrote fieldnotes of the observations made during the day, constructed from the accounts of jottings written between or during meetings. The 78 hours of shadowing resulted in 34 pages of fieldnotes. After the period of shadowing, the researcher interviewed both the middle manager who has been shadowed, as well as four of his direct reports. These interviews together with a number of explorative interviews resulted in 17 interviews in total. In combination with the daily observations, shadowing and interviews, the researcher had access to internal documents, meetings, presentations and informal meetings. This triangulation served to provide a variety of perspectives and interactions with organizational members to illuminate the researcher's role in the field.

The analysis of the empirical material was an iterative process. After the two weeks of shadowing, the researcher started to read through the pages of fieldnotes and realized that there was something interesting around the researcher's own role in the field. How could the researcher end up, having so many reflections and observations of own role, when the aim of the shadowing was to observe the middle manager James and his job? It was a paradox. As a first step in the analysis, the researcher selected carefully all parts of the fieldnotes, which either described a scene involving own role explicitly or reflections made about own role in the field. These excerpts of fieldnotes were discussed with a number of researchers and scholars at different occasions: seminars, courses and supervision meetings, while the researcher simultaneously explored the theoretical discussions within the insider–outsider debate. After these discussions and insights from the literary field, the researcher pinpointed a research gap and the selected excerpts for this paper were made solely by the researcher based on an assessment of which excerpts were most illustrative in the discussion of the role as insider.

### **Becoming an insider**

This section presents one out of three excerpts of fieldnotes, illustrating the fluidity of the roles as insider and outsider. All three examples illuminate the micro processes that constitute the researcher's role as either insider, outsider or both in a specific situation. The first illustrates how the researcher becomes an insider.

#### *Context*

It's the seventh day of shadowing the middle manager James and he has a scheduled meeting with the HR partner Emma from the IT department. The researcher and the HR partner Emma know each other because of the researcher's former job in HR. The researcher is not aware of the participants or purpose of the meeting before the meeting takes place:

8:30-8:56 When we enter the meeting room, James asks Emma if she knows me. "Of course [...]", she replies. We have cooperated, when I was employed in HR in the headquarters. It is actually a bit awkward because she obviously doesn't know what my role is in this meeting, even though James has explained it as "my shadow for a couple of weeks".

The first 10 minutes of the meeting is mainly small talk. James and especially Emma keep involving me in the conversation such as "You have heard about the Specialist Program, right?", "Have you met Poul Black" (former Head of the IT-department). I haven't thought that much about it during other meetings but normally it is only the first couple of minutes of a meeting that the participants notice me. After that point, they concentrate on the topic of the meeting and it seems like they totally forget, I'm there. But it is different this time. I think it is due to our relation – me and Emma's [...]. (fieldnotes, 7. Day of shadowing; February 7, 2017).

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Prior to this meeting, James and the researcher had attended a number of meetings together, often with James presenting the researcher as his “shadow.” In most cases, there has been no questions from other organizational members in regard to this introduction of the researcher. But in this case, Emma and the researcher already know each other because of the researcher’s former position in HR, which influences the shaping of the role as insider in this situation. Within identity theory, it is argued that roles and related role behaviors are negotiated through interactions and when verified, a strong attachment to the group develops (Stets and Burke, 2000). Thus, Emma is confused about the researcher’s role in this meeting because she only knows the researcher from the former position, where the role as insider or the role as part of the group of HR employees was negotiated. Now, in a new context because of the already established relationship between Emma and the researcher, the researcher is again assigned a role as insider. The first interaction between James, Emma and the researcher thus influences the rest of the meeting. As long as Emma sees the researcher as an insider, she expects the researcher to have knowledge about the matters of the meeting, and hence keeps involving the researcher in the conversation. James builds on this perception as well by involving the researcher as an insider in the conversation, which is unusual for the meetings, James and the researcher have participated in together. In opposition to an a priori categorization of the researcher, this interaction shows how the role as insider is shaped through the interactions by the organizational members including the researcher and the context. In this situation, the researcher’s role is shaped as an insider due to an already established relation to one of the organizational members. In addition, James accepts that the researcher is assigned a role as insider and builds further on this by involving the researcher in the conversation as an insider.

### **Becoming an outsider**

In contrast to the empirical material above, showing how the researcher’s role as an insider is constituted by the interactions with the other organizational members, the next piece shows a different situation: how the researcher’s role is constituted as an outsider.

#### *Context*

It is the second day of shadowing the middle manager James and this excerpt describes pieces of a 45 minutes scene from the morning in the open office landscape. The researcher stands in the open office landscape together with the management team, consisting of Simon, James, Casper and Philip:

8:05 James arrives and jokes about his bus drive this morning. After some small talk, he tells me that he had asked Michael (from top management) about me attending the CAD-meeting (with external vendors) later on today. Michael said “fine”. That was exactly my thought. That Michael would be okay with that. He always is. But I don’t want to seem that I know Michael that well. Yesterday, James came with a joke to another colleague (I haven’t met before), in front of me, that I would hand over a report to Michael after these two weeks of shadowing.

8:43 Simon arrives and tells an anecdote about his car, while he starts his computer at the desk next to mine. He tells it to Casper and James, but it seems that they ignore him and just keep working. James only response with a “Oh”. Simon continues the story about his car. They still don’t respond to it. I find a bit awkward because I stand in the middle and I don’t want to try to be part of the conversation if Simon doesn’t want me to.

8:46 Awkward with Simon – we hadn’t really said “Hi” and we stand next to each other. What is he thinking about me?

8:49 I stand up just because everybody else does, even though I normally don’t. But Casper made a joke about it (me sitting down while they all stood up) yesterday and I just want to fit in. We all stand

up: Me, James, Casper, Philip and Simon. Still feels a bit awkward to stand with the management team, I normally don't have anything to do with (fieldnotes, 2. Day of shadowing; January 31, 2017).

In this excerpt, there are at least four indicators of the researcher being assigned a role as outsider. In the beginning, James talks, to and about, the researcher as an outsider. First, he refers to a conversation he had had with Michael, where he asked Michael about the researcher attending a specific meeting. It could be questioned if James would have asked for permission if the researcher was indisputably an insider. In this case he does, making the researcher an outsider where access must be negotiated.

Second, James had, the day before, made a joke about the researcher handing in a report of the observations made in the period of shadowing. In that situation, James alludes that the researcher is an outsider. If he saw the researcher as an insider, as just one colleague among many, he would probably not joke about the researcher using the observations of him as part of a report to top management.

The continuation of the researcher's observations made that morning builds further on to the shaping of the researcher's role as an outsider. In the second part, the role of outsider is implicitly shaped by (a lack of) interactions between the researcher and the organizational members. Because they, or at least one of the managers, ignore the researcher, the researcher becomes an outsider in opposition to being part of the in-group as an insider. Identity theory builds on an assumption that people come to know who they are through interactions with others and in this situation the researcher reflects on own role as an outsider. Not defining own role as a member of the group of managers, because of the lack of interaction with them, and the context.

In addition, the researcher reflects on the situation the day before, where the role of outsider was constituted in the joke made by Casper about the researcher being different. Drawing on identity theory, the situation can be described as the researcher tries to adapt to the role as insider, by matching what the researcher thinks are the expectations of appropriate prescribed behavior by the other organizational members, by standing up as the others (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). Even though, the researcher tries to match what they expect from an insider, the researcher ends up in a role as outsider.

### Shifting roles

The excerpts above illustrate how the researcher in the first case is assigned a role as insider, and in the next as an outsider. However, the fluidity of the roles as insider and outsider can sometimes be identified within the same situation. This shift in roles is illustrated in the excerpt below.

#### *Context*

It is the afternoon of the second day of shadowing the middle manager James. James and the researcher have joined a Skype meeting about an IT incident together with Peter, who is a direct report to James. The three of them are sitting together in a meeting room. On the table in the middle of them, there is a speaker connected to a computer, from which there is constantly people talking. During the first two days of shadowing James, the researcher had participated in a couple of similar calls. Though this is the first time that Michael from top management chooses to participate in the call:

15.30-16.16 [...] While we are sitting at the call, Michael (from top management) walks by, looks through the windows into the meeting room and enters the door. It does not seem to bother either James or Peter, who almost don't react to it. Even though, I don't think he comes by often – it is pretty far from his office. It must be only at special occasions like an incident, a breakdown [...] The meeting continues [...].

Shortly after the call has ended, Michael turns to me: "So, what did YOU get out of that?" I really don't know which kind of answer he expects from me, so I feel my way around by saying "Now, I

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have been here for two days [...]”. Michael interrupts me with a “No! What did you get out of this specific meeting?” I try with a “so, now I start to see a pattern [...]” James interrupts me and says: “Tell about the matter of the meeting”. Michael responds with a “No, about the form”. I continue with “It’s okay, James [...]”, while raising my hand to say that I’m okay with the question, “[...] because I see a pattern [...]” [...] I continue, telling about what I saw happening in the meeting [...]. Michael says: “Yes! Please, handover these observations to the OS team [...] this is an outside-in-perspective”. James turns to me and says: “I will help you with the contact details”. I respond to them with “I will write down my unpolished observations”. Michael ends the conversation with “Yes, please” (fieldnotes, 2. Day of shadowing; January 31, 2017).

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In the beginning of the excerpt, the researcher describes a situation which is similar to many others during the two weeks of shadowing: James, and in this case Peter and the researcher attend a Skype meeting. The researcher’s role in the meeting is rather natural in the room, as an insider. When Michael from top management enters the room, it changes something in the mind of the researcher due to Michael’s role as sponsoring part of the research project. When Michael opens a conversation with the researcher by saying: “So, what did YOU get out of that,” it changes the role of the researcher in relation to the other organizational members. In other meetings, and the beginning of this meeting, James (and Peter) more or less ignore the existence of the researcher, taking the researcher as a natural part of the situation. But after Michael had started a conversation with the researcher, not being able to answer the question or at least in need of support, James starts to help the researcher by answering which confirms the role as an outsider. What also happens during this conversation could be argued to be a negotiation between the group members Michael and James about the researcher’s role as either in or out of the group. In the last part of the excerpt, Michael says explicitly that the researcher brings an outside-in-perspective with the response to his question and James builds further on the role as outsider by saying that he can help with contact details. This situation illustrates how the role as either insider or outsider is being shaped by interactions and how a shift in interactions can change the assigned role. Throughout the meeting, the researcher’s role shifts from insider to outsider, but the context stays the same.

Thus, the fluid character of the role, shaped through interactions, has been illustrated by first a situation where the researcher’s role can be described as an insider, thereafter as an outsider and finally, a situation showing a shift from insider to outsider through interactions with organizational members. In addition, the context plays a crucial role. James is a constant part of the interactions in all three excerpts, however, the contexts shift throughout the scenes, as does the researcher’s assigned role as insider or outsider.

### **Discussion: consequences for the ethnographer**

The excerpts above illustrated how the role of insider might be usefully considered to be fluid rather than an a priori categorization. The context and interactions with organizational members in a situation shape the role of the researcher as insider or outsider. However, a central question still remains unsolved: How does fluidity enable or constrain the researcher as ethnographer in that particular situation? Within identity theory, the concept of self-verification underlies the behavioral processes, where in this case the researcher acts in accordance with the assigned role to maintain consistency. Hence, leading the researcher to act in keeping with that which most clearly represent the assigned role enables and constrains the researcher in that particular situation (Stets and Burke, 2000). For that reason, it is crucial to discuss what practical consequences the assigned role, as either insider or outsider, have for the researcher as ethnographer.

The practical implications for the ethnographer can both be found in the assigned role of insider and outsider. In the first excerpt, the researcher is assigned a role of insider during

the interactions with James and Emma. The researcher's assigned role of insider creates a barrier for James and Emma to move on to discuss the matter of the meeting. While engaging the researcher in the conversation, they spend the first 10 minutes of the meeting involving the researcher in the conversation and as a result end up small talking rather than focusing on the matter of the meeting. However, the insider knowledge the researcher has in this meeting might enable the researcher to understand the matter more in details than if not having any pre-knowledge of the matter.

In the second excerpt, the researcher is assigned a role of outsider while standing in the open office landscape with a management team. As an example, the comment about the researcher handing in a report to top management can create a barrier to the respondents to speak honestly while the researcher is around. Contrary to that situation, when the management team does small talk as part of their morning routine, the researcher's lack of involvement in the conversation, because of the assigned role of outsider, might mirror the daily routines better than if the researcher was involved.

Finally, in the third excerpt, the researcher is asked to give an outside-in-perspective, which changes the role as purely researcher to be a kind of consultant. This can constrain the researcher in focusing on the research, while being expected to advise the organizational members as well. What constrains and enables the researcher as sponsored researcher become visible in this case. One on hand, the sponsored role enables the researcher to naturally enter into different situations and relations. On the other hand, the researcher is expected to give something in return as, for example, consulting advices.

The shifting role of insider or outsider enables and constrains the researcher depending on the particular situation. If succeeding in gaining from both roles, the researcher can experience the world freshly from the outside and knowingly from the inside (Davis, 1973). However, the shifting identities as a result of interactions with organizational members as well as determined by a particular context or situation made the shift between insider and outsider uncontrollable by the researcher. Thus, it is difficult for the researcher to benefit from both roles, but this should not hinder the researcher in attempting to experience the field freshly from the outside and knowingly from the inside. By experiencing both roles during the fieldwork, the researcher can benefit from rich empirical material containing both perspectives.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to explore the fluidity of the roles as insiders and outsiders, by first investigating the literary debate about insiders and outsider. Traditionally, the literature of insiders has circulated around the pros and cons of being an insider, moving into a bigger field of scholars writing about their own experiences as sponsored by the organization or doing ethnography for the business. The latter part concludes that the idea of pure insiders is gone to be replaced by a more blurred picture of the lines between being insider and outsider, and between doing ethnography for and of businesses. However, the insider-outsider debate still lacks an empirical discussion of how these roles are shaped and assigned *in situ*, unfolding the labeling of roles. At first, this paper can be placed in the latter category of studies because it is written by a researcher who is sponsored by the organization studied. However, the paper also argues that we need to move beyond the discussion of pros and cons of being an insider, beyond the argument of blurred lines between doing ethnography of and for a business, and instead unfolding the micro processes of the shaping of those roles. Founded in social identity theory and related approaches which posit identity and identification as fluid, shaped by interactions and context, the paper illustrates how the researcher is assigned roles as insider or outsider depending on situation, relations and interactions rather than determined by affiliation with the organization as sponsored researcher. By contributing with an empirical grounded

discussion of how the roles as insider or outsider are fluid and can shift swiftly, the paper has a contribution to the identified research gap within the insider–outsider debate. Finally, the paper argues that the assigned role has consequences for the researcher as ethnographer in that particular situation. While unfolding how the roles enable and constrain the researcher as an ethnographer, the paper not only discusses how and when the researcher is assigned a particular role, but also which practical consequences that role has for the researcher in that particular situation.

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