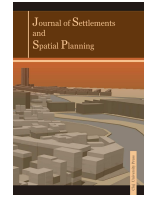




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The Outsider Advantage. Interviewing Planners and Other Elites in the Polish-German Borderland

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ABSTRACT

As conducting interviews with elites is increasingly common, an important debate has emerged around the researcher's positionality as an insider/outsider also in a geographic sense. Three standpoints can be distinguished. Initially, some emphasised the advantages of the insider in eliciting interesting and sometimes even sensitive information from informants. More recently, several scholars suggested that this position is never stable. Our experiences are however more in line with those who demonstrated the advantages of being an outsider. Coming from outside the study area may be particularly helpful when interviewing elites on sensitive issues such as contacts in a borderland with a troubled history, like between Poland and Germany. Our 38 interviews reveal three patterns. First, blaming the other side is not unusual on both sides of the border. Second, de-emphasising the importance of cooperation is more common on the Polish side, but also occurred on the German side. Finally, a discourse of re-establishing the historically coherent region is clearly present on the German side, but lacks almost entirely on the Polish side. It is doubtful whether we would have been able to elicit such attitudes from both studied groups had we belonged to either one of them.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the dismantling of physical borders in the European Union, opportunities for cross-border activities are only partially exploited. According to Yoder for instance *"despite the expansion of the opportunity structure for greater German-Polish cross-border cooperation, interaction still tends to be among elites"* [29, p. 119]. This makes it the more necessary to study the attitudes and perceptions of local and regional elites who are in a position to shape such contacts. An important challenge when interviewing elites is obtaining *"the interviewees' own perception of events and not the "public relations" version of a story, which they think the interviewer would want to hear"* [15, p. 485].

This article aims at contributing to the debate on the researcher's positionality by showing the outsider's advantage in eliciting elite standpoints

beyond the official discourses of integration and cross-border cooperation. I will do this by presenting and critically reflecting on our interviewees' accounts of these issues. This can be done by carefully listening to *"what is said, how it is said and what is not mentioned at all, what subjects are strengthened in discourse and what others are suppressed, highlight and indicate personal and/or shared motivations and values, dependencies and structures of power"* [6, p. 364, original emphasis]. We begin by discussing the debate on the researcher's positionality in elite interviews, and in particular the insider/outsider dilemma.

2. THE RESEARCHER'S POSITION IN ELITE INTERVIEWS

There has been a debate in the literature on the researcher's role as an insider vs. outsider in data-gathering generally, but also in elite interviews

specifically. Outsiderness can of course refer to several aspects: those often dealt with include professional background [12, p. 323-324], age [24], [11, p. 198], race, class, gender, ethnicity [16], and the amount of time the researcher spends with the interviewees [12, p. 317].

To begin with, as academics our *professional background* is usually different from our interviewees'; since publications and presentations are the main means of exchange, it is relatively uncommon for scholars to interview other researchers. In our case, we actually included a few academics among our interviewees, though this was also related to the relative difficulties of finding earlier studies from our study area.

When it comes to *age*, Sabot was able to interact somewhat easier with interviewees of her age than with older ones [24, p. 333]. This aspect is more difficult in our case to make a statement about, as the age-span within our group varied between 25 and 65 years. But the fact that our team consisted of several researchers including two professors may certainly have functioned as a "gate-opener". 'Race' is a term and an identity-marker not commonly used in Europe, but I am providing some reflections on ethnicity below. While 'class' is also a difficult concept that is best treated in relative terms, our interviewees did not include actors identified by some as 'ultra-elites' [30], [26]. Another aspect in which we were more often 'insiders' than not is that of *gender*, since the majority of our interviewees belonged to the same sex as us, that is male. This was difficult to avoid given the gendered elite landscape in Central Europe: in practice, our male interviewees were in some cases accompanied by female colleagues, but often clearly younger and much lower positioned (like assistant, trainee or similar). Sabot found that "[g]ender factors do matter but it seems that it becomes secondary to other positional factors, like being a local researcher" [24, p. 334]. In the end, gender-issues did not constitute the primary focus in our interview topics.

Our interest lay in issues related to *ethnicity*, an aspect that largely distinguished us from our interviewees and one that will receive most attention in the remainder of this paper. True, some interviewees also experienced their ethnic outsiderness as shifting [16], sometimes even consciously and strategically playing with being for example British or American [12, pp. 321-322]; but such attempts to represent oneself in ways that render one "as either a partial 'insider' or 'outsider', had its share of ethical dilemmas" [16, p. 347; see also 12, p. 323]. Finally, one can gradually become an insider by meeting the interviewees several times, to the extent of developing sympathy [15, p. 490] or even becoming friends [12, p. 317]. Since we only met four of our interviewees twice, we did not enjoy such an opportunity or ran this risk. The arguments made thus far on the outsider's position can be put into three

groups. Especially earlier, some scholars argued that 'insiders' – i.e. researchers who study a group to whom they belong – have an advantage because they are able to use their knowledge of the group to gain more intimate insights into their opinions [1], [13]. Rivera et al. for instance were conscious of "a general suspicion of foreigners" in Russia [22, p. 683].

More recently, a consensus has been emerging on the relativity of outsiderness [5, p. 263], [20, p. 480]. Thus, Herod talks of "*degrees of outsiderness in which there is a continuum of outsiderness along which researchers operate*" [12, p. 326]. For Mullings, the binary implied in the 'insider/outsider' debates ... is less than real because it seeks to freeze positionalities in place, and assumes that being an 'insider' or 'outsider' is a fixed attribute [16, p. 340]. The 'insider/outsider' binary in reality is a boundary that is not only highly unstable but also one that ignores the dynamism of positionalities in time and through space. No individual can consistently remain an insider and few ever remain complete outsiders.

While this approach of toning down a strict distinction between being an insider or outsider may be relevant in many cases, it is less so in others. Some of its proponents have accounted for their personal ties to the national groups they were studying [e.g. 11, p. 198], [15, pp. 489-490], which are of course not there in all interview situations.

Hence, the previous approach needs to be complemented with accounts of cases where researchers were clearly geographical outsiders and experienced to have benefited from it, as we did. Several scholars felt namely that by not belonging to a group under study, they are more likely to be perceived as neutral and therefore be given information that would not be given to an insider [7]. Herod found that he received a warmer reception as an outsider conducting research on trade union officials in Eastern Europe than as an insider in the US: "*the very fact that I had travelled several thousand miles to talk with them may have led the Czech and Slovak trade unionists to take me more seriously because I myself had obviously put in a great deal of effort to get there*" [12, p. 317]. Further, he felt that his position precisely as an "outsider" has sometimes positively helped in the research process because it has allowed him to appear as a "neutral" or "impartial" observer of events" [12, p. 322].

Among those acknowledging the foreign outsider's advantages Sabot's study is of particular interest, for two reasons [24]. First, she did fieldwork within the framework of the same study in her native city in France and two other cities in Scotland, gaining her experiences both as an insider and as an outsider. Second, her study is a rare case since she had the chance to verify her observation of the outsider advantage by meeting an American colleague, who

happened to be asking the same questions from the same elites in the same French city, in the same time period. Her conclusions are clear: Local elites distribute their knowledge very differently to foreign or local researchers. ... foreigners are given more information as they easily generate confidence in local elites. ... a foreigner is more likely to gain access more quickly to higher echelons and to be given more sensitive information. She/He is also able to circumnavigate cultural taboos whereas the local researcher is tied by his/her own culture... thus the foreign researcher is allowed to ask almost anything. Conversely, a local researcher has to expend effort and time networking through the hierarchy and, even then, may not gain access to the crucial information influencing decision-making [24, p. 334].

Apart from some reasons mentioned above, an important explanation given by foreign researchers for their special treatment is that they are perceived as less of a "threat" to local elites since they rarely return [24, p. 332] or share the gained information with other local actors [12, p. 323]. As a foreigner, it is also easier to "play dumb" in interviews and thereby elicit more sensitive information [12, pp. 322]. The empirical chapter will present some examples of the above that we encountered.

3. GERMAN-POLISH CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION IN THE EYES OF LOCAL ELITES

The empirical material is based on our interviews with 38 local and regional elites conducted during the years 2008-2010 on both sides of the German-Polish border (see Figure 1).

The chosen area is of particular interest as a large Polish city (Szczecin, >400,000 inhabitants) is directly bordering a much more sparsely populated German region (Vorpommern) characterised by emigration. This situation coupled with the gradual opening of the physical border could at least hypothetically imply an increased incentive for cooperation [14], as evidenced elsewhere in Europe [4].

One hampering factor however is the area's contested history [19], with the centuries-long German majority population expelled after WW II, leading to German hesitations to recognise the border up until the early 1990s.

A majority of our interviewees consisted of local and regional administrators in key positions (especially planners, but also mayors, project managers, etc.), with the rest being academics, businesspeople, journalists, and a headmaster. They included actors involved in various institutionalised forms of cross-border cooperation, and others that were not. The interviews were conducted during a number of fieldtrips undertaken in the area, by visiting one interviewee after the other. As in Herod's case, the fact

that we travelled a long distance to meet them in their offices may well have contributed to their great willingness to cooperate: only two persons (a politician and a journalist) did not show up, and in both cases the meeting should have taken place in a restaurant rather than their offices [12, p. 317]. As another sign of success, in quite a few cases we were referred to other respondents at the end of the interview [10, p. 434].

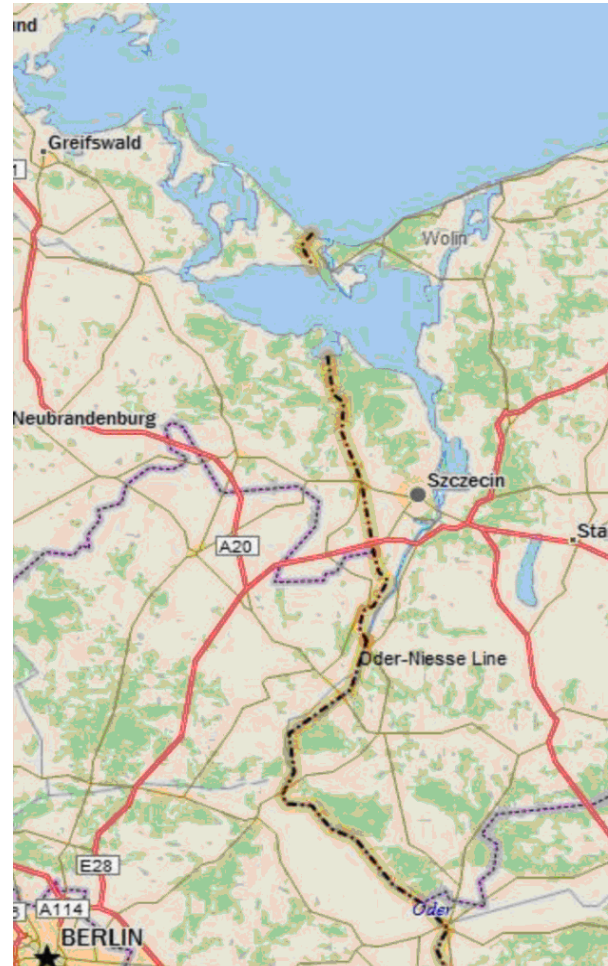


Fig. 1. The northern half of the German-Polish borderland [31].

As introductory warm-up questions, we usually asked more generally about what kind of cross-border projects they knew of in the region, if any [10, p. 437]. These included tourism-related activities, river landscapes, integrated coastal management, transport infrastructure, and cultural and educational exchanges. We then gradually moved towards more sensitive questions on the subjective experiences of cooperation.

A number of patterns emerge from the gained material. In particular, *blaming the other side of the border (actors or institutions)* is quite common when cooperation has been challenging or a particular project could not be implemented as smoothly as expected. Unlike with non-elites [2], such attitudes are of course expressed less explicitly and in a different language by elites (even if some more direct accusations will also be

presented). But when one takes a careful look at the material in its entirety, the interviewees' national bias often becomes obvious. Hence, responsibility for difficulties or sometimes even outright failures are more often transferred to the other side, whereas successes more commonly associated with the achievements of the own country. This is interesting as realising cross-border projects always needs at least some involvement from both sides.

Thus a German transport project manager somewhat proudly pointed out that the recent extension of the Usedomer Bäderbahn (UBB, the railway network on the divided island of Usedom) into Świnoujście represents the first German infrastructure project on Polish soil, while no Polish means of transport are so far operating on the German side. We also learned from another German transport project manager, that this undertaking was not without difficulties: both sides were sceptical at the beginning, not least regarding the financing. In the end 90 per cent of the investment was realised from European money; the rest was 'a pure German investment, entirely according to German prescriptions'. Indeed, the Polish State Railways (PKP) did not have anything against this. But while some Polish politicians were positive, others were more sceptical and tried to pose unrealistic demands, such as financing the building of roads, a school or a kindergarten in Świnoujście, or even a tunnel between the city and the entirely Polish island of Wolin (see Figure 1). The German transport project manager concludes that 'such mentality is different and alien to Germans'. Another German officer deeply involved in cross-border issues told us Świnoujście's mayor was forbidden from above from attending the opening ceremony of the new border-crossing railway. Nevertheless, the project is seen as a success and there are plans for the UBB's further expansion inside the Polish territory. However, a Polish official told us that Świnoujście's administration is not sure whether it would like this to happen. She also mentioned that the German part has difficulties attracting money for building the second phase. What she did not say is whether the Polish side made any efforts to achieve this (even if it did). Overall, a German real-estate agent believed the island of Usedom will grow together, but so far most Germans consider the German part only, with Świnoujście being marketed as 'Polish Baltic coast'. When for instance an agent advertises an object under the category Ahlbeck (a famous high-end seaside resort on the German side of the border) and clients discover that it is in Świnoujście, this is apparently not accepted.

According to a German officer deeply involved in cross-border issues, in the early 1990s, Poland regarded cross-border cooperation as a tool of re-Germanisation; thus Szczecin did not really take up the role as a cross-border regional centre. He believes the basic fear remains with Poles whether Szczecin will

return to Germany. He noted that Warsaw, but also his Land (state) Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, wanted to avoid alienating the borderland further from their respective territories. Thus while successive Polish governments have talked of investing in Szczecin, little was done so far. The (German) motorways do not continue after Szczecin, and the city's links with central Poland are given priority. As a confirmation of a fear of a 'German return' still being present in Poland, a Polish academic mentioned a case of a recent court decision approving a German citizen's claim to her former property near Gdańsk. He further noted the peculiarity that Szczecin is now considered as a domestic destination by Deutsche Bahn (DB), the German national railway company.

As a further illustration of the challenges with cross-border developments, two German public officers mentioned the planned establishment of a local branch of the University of Szczecin on the German side (which would be the first division of a Polish university abroad) is since some years delayed by the hesitancy of Polish authorities. This is so despite the university's space-problems and the German side having an oversupply of spacious buildings. At another meeting, a German expert blamed Polish administrators for making planning mistakes, for instance of motorways.

According to a German politician of a mainstream party, "the Poles want to make money from the cooperation", without reflecting over whether such incentives could also exist on the German side. He further believed the Protestant-Catholic divide is important, and saw Poland as a nationalist country. The interviewee judged that "cultural differences do exist and Polish culture is sometimes alien to Germans". He also informed us about a recent scandal involving a Polish entrepreneur driving his products across the border to put the label 'Made in Germany' on them, adding that such cases get picked by the radicals. On this issue, he noted "not all local voters of the far right are Nazis, but rather dissatisfied". Irrespectively of to what extent this comment is valid, it can be seen as a strategy to de-emphasise the dangers with the far right in Vorpommern, a region described by a Polish respondent as a headquarter of the German far right [23]. In a somewhat similar vein, a German mayor acknowledged there are problems with the far right in his town, but added the sometimes exaggerated image of anti-Polish vandalism as transmitted by media throughout Poland as another problem. A Polish official deeply engaged in cross-border cooperation described the problem with the German far right more in details, telling us about how some were damaging cars with Polish number plates etc. However, she also added that such incidents were vigorously reported upon on Polish national television, imaginably influencing the whole nation's image of 'the Germans', the challenges of open borders, and even that of the European integration.

There were a number of further utterances illustrating the blaming of the other side that also reflect the standpoint of the respective national government. Thus a group of local Polish administrators talked negatively about Nord Stream (a German-Russian gas pipeline bypassing Poland through the Baltic Sea), emphasising the environmental controversies around it. At the same time, we learn from a Polish regional marketing officer that Poland wants to import gas from Norway, via a pipeline through Sweden and similarly through the Baltic Sea. Another Polish civil servant noticed some concern on the Polish side for Germany recently making a decision, without consulting the Poles, on a new coal-fired power station to be located near Poland.

Another somewhat related type of comments in the interviews was those *de-emphasising the importance of cross-border cooperation* in the region (whether legitimately or not). This was particularly – though not exclusively – common with Polish interviewees. Thus a Polish academic saw little potential in the direct environs of Szczecin, mostly due to the limited human activity there. He instead emphasised the importance of connections to other large cities, especially Berlin; though even the latter not for itself but for Szczecin's contacts with the rest of the world (e.g. through Berlin's airports). He judged that from an economic perspective the links with Hamburg and Copenhagen are of higher significance, referring to Stouffer who argued that the physically proximate is not always the most obvious choice [27]. According to the Polish researcher, there are more studies on the German-Polish borderland in Germany than in Poland – “there is not much to research about”. Further, he shared a Polish regional marketing officer's view that there is more competition than cooperation between the two sides of this border. German medical tourists come to the Polish side for the prices mainly. While the Polish scholar recognised this industry as a good potential for the region, he added there are for instance communication-problems between Germans and Poles, with the latter often choosing English before German as their first foreign language. The few who learn German do it to receive well-paying customers.

That English is much more popular on the Polish side could not just be confirmed by us but also by a group of Polish officers deeply involved in cross-border cooperation, who thought this depended on Polish students' perception of their neighbouring German area as poor and lacking perspectives. The officers further mentioned there are fewer common projects now than a few years ago, which can be due to the more intensive attention to cooperation around the time of Poland's EU-accession (in 2004).

According to a Polish regional policy-chief fairs are occasionally organised together, but little else (e.g. no industrial parks or cross-border

agglomerations). Even while there are no demands from Warsaw, the Polish border region prioritises developing along a north-south rather than an east-west axis (i.e. towards Germany). This was confirmed by another group of administrators in Szczecin, the city which even hosts the technical secretariat of the Central European Transport Corridor [3], a north-south axis. Yet another Polish administrator confirmed that contacts with the direct German neighbourhood are not very tight.

But at least two German interviewees where also de-emphasising the importance of cooperation with the Polish side. According to an academic, little exchange is taking place between his organisation and its counterpart in Szczecin. They are occasionally meeting spatial planners from the Polish side but what usually happens is “they are chatting a bit and exchanging name cards, but little more than that”. He even found that cross-border projects are concentrated around a narrow elite that tends to allocate resources to actors within the network. Another German actor deeply involved in cross-border cooperation was sceptical about the future of Szczecin, referring to the challenges in front of the city's major employers such as the shipyard or the university.

A final pattern in the interview material is the explicit reference to the borderland as *one common or shared region*, not just in historical but even in present terms. While historical consciousness is strong in both countries (illustrated by a German interviewee's reference to the over sixty-year-old German-Polish neighbourhood in the region as relatively new), this particular notion was only – and often unreflectively – used by German interviewees. It should be noted that we did not particularly ask any interviewee about the area's history, but were most likely given such information since a) they found it important, and/or b) they believed we as outsiders lacked basic knowledge of these aspects. Once an interviewee started talking about history, however, we did of course in no way try to divert them, as each version or period of history accounted for is crucial for understanding the local elites' perception of their native area.

Thus a mayor started the interview by emphasising that historically his town had always lived with and from Szczecin. According to another civil servant, “economically this is one area”. Two more public officers reminded us that what today remains of the German side had belonged to the urban hinterland of Szczecin before the war: “we want to re-establish this as one region centred around Szczecin, restore the infrastructure, roads, and bicycle paths”. However, they find there are still problems with human relations, with strong national feelings in Poland and xenophobia on the German side. They therefore thought that “on both sides, we have to realise that this is one, shared region of Europe”.

In a similar vein, another actor deeply involved in cross-border projects said “one goal is to reconstruct the old infrastructure such as the Berlin-Świnoujście railway, which once took two hours to travel”. He also referred to a report on an integrated transport plan for Usedom and the Polish island of Wolin [21], financed by Germany’s Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Development. According to a representative of another town, “Szczecin is still the capital of Pomerania, although not formally”. He told us the local expellee commemoration stone is a private initiative to promote cooperation with the present population of formerly German areas. While this motivation might have been present, the stone actually commemorates expellees from formerly German territories only (see Figure 2), rather than for instance all victims of the post-war expulsions, including Poles.



Fig. 2. A commemoration stone for expellees on the German side of the border (Photo by Thomas Lundén).

Still, two German interviewees were more reflective with using the notion of a shared region. One of them mentioned that the term ‘Pomerania’ is still politically loaded. But he also emphasised that around 60 per cent of the inhabitants in his town have an expellee-background (he must have included their descendants), with many originating from Szczecin but also from the former East Prussia. Further, these associations shall be working for reconciliation; with members travelling to Poland and meeting the people that replaced them (or more likely their descendants), but also ethnic Germans and Kashubs, giving them presents, books etc. Another actor deeply engaged in cross-border cooperation mentioned rhetorical mistakes have been committed; with the ‘Oder-region’ for instance later renamed as ‘Oder-partnership’.

As an illustrative counter-narrative, a Polish academic talked of a “pioneer approach” to the region as important for understanding it. This perspective highlights that Poles are still relatively new to Szczecin: even Smolensk (today in Russia) was Polish for a longer time – although adding that today nobody would claim

it to be that. Thus the border mentality is very important: “this has often been a border to fight for”.

4. CONCLUSION

Unlike some European border cities such as Lille [18], Basel [28], or Bratislava [9], Szczecin is not located in a region where “a cross-border regional system structured as a network of high-density towns located close together” can be easily developed [18, p. 1]. Several of our interviewees expressed that the two sides directly at the border have little to offer each other. As shown, several Polish informants emphasised instead on the importance of Szczecin’s links to other larger European cities. It is therefore not unlikely that this and other places in the borderland will further deepen types of cooperation not based on adjacent territories such as town twinning, which may also be more rooted in bottom-up initiatives [8].

Yet apart from structural reasons, attitudes of local elites are at least as important in explaining levels of cross-border cooperation. Our interviews reveal three patterns. First, blaming the other side is not unusual on both sides of the border. Second, de-emphasising the importance of cooperation is more common on the Polish side, but occurred also on the German side. Finally, the discourse of re-establishing the historically coherent region is clearly present on the German side, but lacks almost entirely on the Polish side. The study thus confirms that borders survive in attitudes, narratives and discourses even once the physical barriers have been lifted [17, p. 152], [25, p. 235].

Moreover, being outsiders in a geographic sense appeared as a clear advantage in the interview situations, allowing the informants to freely express their experiences and concerns related to local cross-border cooperation. Thus many of their utterances, consciously or subconsciously, reflected national or self-centred positions and discourses, rather than a commitment to integration and cooperation. It is unlikely that we would have been able to elicit such narratives had we arrived from either side of the border under scrutiny.

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