INSIDER/OUTSIDER STATUS OF "RETURNING" RESEARCHERS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The identity of the researcher during the social research process has been extensively debated and discussed in the academic community, particularly in sociological qualitative research. The reflection of a researcher's identity helps to unveil issues of power and privilege that are inherent with individuals in a social research context and shows rigour in conducting research. In line with the post-modern qualitative research paradigm which views the researcher's presence and influence as unavoidable and a resource which must be properly utilized, this article provides a scholarly discussion on insider/outsider negotiation of researchers who have left their native countries to study abroad and return home to conduct fieldwork. The article discusses researcher positionality and influences of power (whether real or perceived) on data collection and research rapport with native respondents, through three case examples from fieldwork carried out in Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Ghana. The article concludes that "returning" researchers to their native countries of birth take a dual position of both insider and outsider, depending on different contexts.

Keywords: Returning, qualitative research, Sub-Saharan Africa, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Nigeria, insider, outsider, positionality, power.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of globalisation brought with it new opportunities for people in less developed countries to study abroad in more developed countries. This ability to immigrate as an international student has been made possible through many Global North country government scholarship initiatives meant to improve the development of the Global South through education. A greater number of these international students are postgraduate students from Africa who have spent years in the United Kingdom, Norway, Ireland, United States, Canada and China. Often this group of students return home to conduct research in their native communities and this has brought on a new set of challenges for qualitative fieldwork. As researchers, hereon referred to as returning researchers, have left their native countries to live in another country for a number of years studying. This article shows how they attempt to negotiate their position as researchers back in their native country.

The assumption that they may have assimilated new cultures during their time abroad, makes their insider status difficult to negotiate. There is a noted difference between real and perceived positionality both on the side of the researcher and the field participants. A few studies outside those that ethnographic in nature, to our knowledge, explore the issue of returning researchers(see e.g. Jonkers and Tijssen, 2008) and fewer still, in Sub-Saharan African context, especially focusing on returning researchers' fieldwork experiences (see e.g Visser, 2000; Mandiyanike, 2009. This article contributes to filling that gap of knowledge about returning researchers in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is hoped this will add to the body of knowledge on how to conduct fieldwork and issues that arise during fieldwork.

The sociology of insider and outsider status is crucial to the world of data collection (Merriam, et al 200)1 but there has been a move from earlier depictions of insider/outsider as being one or the other, towards a more flexible relationship between the two. Merriam et al (2001) differentiate between the types of insider/outsider relationship with four typologies; the indigenous insider, the indigenous outsider, the external insider and the external outsider. This article takes the "returning" researcher as a type of indigenous insider, described as one who endorses and speaks with authority about the beliefs, values and culture of the community of respondents and the indigenous outsider, who because of living outside the country for some years (depending on years spent abroad) and assimilating another culture is regarded as outside but still connected to their indigenous community.

The levels of cultural assimilation into a community that is regarded as outside one's own will influence how the researcher is regarded by the community of respondents they want to research (Merriam, et al 2001). In other words, the community of respondents will perceive the researcher according to their own understanding of their background and current status compared to theirs. Participants will have certain pre-conceived ideas about the researcher. This becomes particularly important since qualitative researchers are often regarded with more scrutiny than quantitative researchers since they seek to "explore and go deeper", most often into subjective and personal issues (see Holliday, 2007:144). It thus becomes important to address the dynamics of the researcher's identity on the research process.

In line with this postmodern paradigm, this article will illustrate how the native identity of three "returning" researchers granted them initial access to their research respondents, but as the research process ensued, the researchers found that they could not describe themselves as either an insider or an outsider because of them having spent some years abroad. The perception that the researchers had a "Western" identity that was gleaned from their time abroad impeded a sense of shared experience with the field participants. At times, the researchers were regarded as novice when it came to understanding the issues being faced by those who remained in the country and never migrated or left the country for any reason.

The idea of the "returning" researcher being perceived as having a more "superior", Western or global mentality, academic training and way of life will illustrate how the perception of fieldwork participants can establish a power divide that cannot be ignored. In some cases there could be an emotional response, close to anger and a sense of betrayal at the "returning" researcher for having left the country in search of greener pastures (especially in the case of Zimbabwe) when others remained to struggle through the economic crisis. It is these tensions, that are inherent in qualitative social research, that this article seeks to highlight, as well as point out the ways in which three "returning" researchers handled and managed to continue their research projects to completion.

In some studies, factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, and race may at different times, outweigh the cultural identity of the researcher (Marayan, 1993). The "returning" researcher, at the onset of the research may perceive their insider status as being based on their nationality and ability to speak the same language as the respondents. Language and professional identity in one of the case examples, brought about a mutually perceived homogeneity; where the "returning" researcher was able to speak the local language (Shona) and also belonged to the same profession of social workers as the respondents. Hence, culturally and professionally there were grounds to regard them as an insider.

The following section will now illustrate and discuss the case examples in more detail.

Negotiating Insider/Outsider status of the "diasporan researcher"
Experience from Zimbabwe

As a Zimbabwean born, South African trained social worker, I returned to my native country, Zimbabwe, as a researcher in 2014. This was after a period of ten years living in South Africa and beginning a Masters' degree in Ireland. I still identified as Zimbabwean, although I had spent a number of years outside the country. The research study I was to conduct was based on professional social work practice on children living in residential care in Zimbabwe and it included fieldwork carried out between April and July 2014, the complete duration of the project being 9months. The fieldwork comprised of interviews and focus group discussions with social workers and caregivers (child and youth care workers) working under the Department of Social Service in the Ministry of Social Welfare, residential care facilities in Zimbabwe and academic institutions. By virtue of being a Zimbabwean by birth, my initial identity as a researcher was based simply on my being a native Shona speaker and citizen of the country. The shared social work profession was also a point of mutual homogeneity with the social work participants who took part in the study. There were immediate shared understandings of the plight of children in institutional care and the challenges of the social work profession related to lack of human and capital resources to provide care. The shared language proved beneficial in the ability to establish rapport with participants as well as shared sentiments in local vernacular that someone who does not speak the same language cannot appreciate. In this regard, as a "returning" citizen and researcher I gained initial access to the respondents and felt connected to the research process as an insider. The length of time spent away from Zimbabwe did not have an influence at this point since there was evidence that I was still well conversant with the local language, culture of respect and shared value systems. However, during the process of the research and building rapport, some of the respondents began to point out some differences that could not be overlooked. Firstly, although both myself and the respondents belonged to the same social work profession, one or two of the respondents pointed out in the dialogue during the interviews, that the fact that my social work training was from outside Zimbabwe, I could be treated with suspicion and scrutiny. It was pointed out that, although the purpose of the research was explained in the seeking of consent, that no one can be really sure what "those who are from abroad" would do with the information they get in the country. This had both social and most importantly, political connotations, because it is common for Zimbabweans to treat the West and anything from the global North with scrutiny and mistrust since the economic and political sanctions on the country in the year 2000. In this regard, most of the respondents needed a guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality before they could feel comfortable to participate in the interviews. Some respondents also felt uncomfortable with their responses being recorded, for the same reason.

It can be seen from this example that there was a level of distrust that came from my identity as a "returning" researcher and being affiliated to an institution in the West for my research. The respondents needed to be sure that their responses will not be used for any political gain and that they would not be in any danger for participating in the study. It became clear that I needed to negotiate my position as an indigenous insider who understood and empathised with the Zimbabwean social workers and the local situation, although I had received different social work training and lived in another culture for almost a decade.

Secondly, it became apparent that as a "returning" citizen and researcher, I needed to be teachable and not show my overseas training as being more superior to the Zimbabwean training and to emphasise common goals of the research for the care of children, not only in Zimbabwe, but in the Sub-Saharan African region. Tensions arose during one interview where the respondent began talking about how Zimbabwe went through a brain drain since the economic crisis in 2008 and a lot of professionals, such as myself, left the country in search of greener pastures. This was an assumption by the respondent that anyone who left the country at this time, had fled the economic crisis and as such, should be treated with distrust for betraying the country and the profession. People who have lived abroad or overseas for a time are perceived as "snobs" when they return home to their native countries with "their international education and foreign accents" and have no understanding of what social workers and civil servants in the country experience. In this interview, it became clear that the perceived superior education and possible financial stability that I would possess, based on my identity as someone who had spent years abroad made it impossible for me to understand or empathise with the Zimbabwean situation. The negative perception and attitude presented by this participant mirrored the mentality of the Zimbabwean society towards returnees. It was verbalised that I was a novice when it came to understanding social work in Zimbabwe, based on my having spent time outside the country. It did not matter, in this instance, that I had left Zimbabwe prior to the 2008 economic crisis and ensuing brain drain for educational purposes and not to flee the economic crisis. Years of overseas exposure compromised my insider status and earned me a new perceived identity . Once this misconception was communicated it brought tensions between myself, as a researcher and the participants who felt the same sentiments. The emotional responses of this particular respondent were not based on truth but purely on perception.

In my fieldwork experience, in some cases, the professional social work identity brought a sense of shared understanding and homogeneity based on language and nationality. However, within those similarities were also differences, that is, social work training outside Zimbabwe and mistrust for having lived within a Westernised culture there was a perceived inability to understand the Zimbabwean society. The political tensionns were also hard to ignore due to the history between Zimbabwe and the West. They however, manifested as power dynamics in the research process and affected my insider/outsider position. I found that during the process of this study, I was both an insider and an outsider.

Experience from Ghana

As someone who was born and bred in Ghana, going back for data collection as my part of my masters' thesis, I saw and experienced situations which hitherto should have been normal for me, but which created tensions for the research process. When I returned, I was accepted by my respondents as a researcher almost immediately because of my ability to use the local Akan language. The aim of the research was to find out whether insurance buyers are satisfied with insurance companies and their services. As part of this mixed-method study, I conducted interviews as well as a survey to entrepreneurs who were managing their own ventures. The study also included the normal everyday worker who purchases insurance policies. Therefore my target group included working people who had an opinion about insurance companies and the services they provide. This identity gave me a relatively easy access at the beginning and my language ability helped in building a trusting relationship based on mutual understanding that was crucial for the research process.

In the course of this exercise, however, several things came up, which affected the research process and it did not flow as smoothly as anticipated. At the initial stages, the respondents saw me as one of their own. They saw me as a Ghanaian who needed their help and they were willing to offer that help related to the study questions. Whether I was more knowledgeable than them in terms of insurance policies did not matter at this stage. Our views on the economy and the need for insurance were perceived to be the same. The respondents underscored the importance of having insurance in a country such as ours since many uncertainties prevail. Some participants gave practical examples of how they had benefited immensely from having insurance. As one stated in the quote below:

> *My car was involved in an accident but because of the insurance I had, I was paid a claim which enabled me to buy a new car.*

Another respondent had also been compensated from an insurance policy that he had when his office was burgled. This indicates that most of the respondents had a fair idea of why they should have insurance. However, they mourned the fact that some of these insurance policies are compulsory according to the laws of Ghana and they do not have the choice as such. In all these matters and others such as the inflation rate, there was a general agreement and shared understanding.

However, as the research process went on, the participants began to feel that I was a different person than at the start of the process. My having spent time outside the country was beginning to affect the research process. I don't exactly know what I did but the respondents began to have the perception that I was different. Even though they initially identified with me as a Ghanaian and we both spoke the same language, they started to point out some differences. Few of the respondents felt that my absence in the country for two years had clouded my thinking and hence my judgement of issues. For instance, one respondent exclaimed that I had lost touch with what is going on in the insurance industry. The issue arose when during the interview we began discussing insurance premiums. Most of the respondents owed insurance premium and they knew that paying their premium on time was good. For the fact that I was a coming from abroad, it was assumed in the responses that I may not agree with them on the reasons why they were unable to afford the premiums on their insurance. Their argument was based on my inability as a returnee to feel the economic hardship of the country, therefore I could not possibly understand them. This brought a divide that was not evident before. From this stage on, the respondents began to scrutinize every question I asked, trying to ascertain whether I was for them or against them by asking:

> *Why are you asking me this question?*

It became apparent that there was the perception that I had some superior knowledge that they did not possess and that by conducting this research, I was testing their intelligence. In fact, at one point one respondent exclaimed that with the questions I was asking, it did not appear like I was just a Masters' student as I had claimed. She thought I was working for one of the insurance companies. I wondered where this sudden suspicion had come from and there were now tensions in the interview process.

The level of my education also affected my "insider" status. It is seen as a privilege and a prestige to have a Masters' degree in Ghana, more so when this degree is being proferred by an institution outside Ghana. This perception put an undue pressure on the participants because most of them had only finished high school. I realised the inherent power relation that was at play due to this and saw its potential for affecting some of the responses. Only few of the respondents had a Bachelors' degree or above.

Fortunately, those who had initially agreed to participate in the study agreed to continue even after knowing I was studying towards a Masters' degree. Religion was not an issue, only few respondents enquired about my religion during the initial relationship building exercise and it did not create any issues. This is probably because Ghana, there is freedom of religious expression.

My age at one point also undermined my "insider" status. Some of the respondents who viewed me as younger than them insinuated that I may not understand certain things because I'm young. One of the questions I asked was around the purchase of insurance on credit basis, and one respondent mentioned that I do not understand because I'm young. My marital status and the number of children also affected my insider status and on the other hand, made my outsider status prominent since I am a single man with no children and I was interviewing men with families. Some respondents stated that what they were saying could be understood better if I was married or had children.

Overall, these experiences gave me a different perspective of the research process. It broadened my understanding of the power dimensions between the researcher and the respondent. Power and positionality changed for me along the research process and it was always based on a piece of information given to the respondents which then was used during their responses. My identity as a "returning" researcher affected my research identity along the way of the research process. At some point I was seen as an insider, at another point I was seen as outsider.

Experience from Nigeria

Although I was born and bred in Nigeria, I had spent most of my time in a different part of the country than my native land. I returned to the South Eastern part of Nigeria for my undergraduate studies and then to work as a University lecturer. Since then, I have spent the better part of my time outside, getting academic and professional training that were quite distinctive. The most recent fieldwork experience was a two-pronged study. On one hand, we were expected to assess the defunct Maternal and Child Health care programme. On the other hand, we were also expected to provide estimates of the unit costs for providing quality MCH services. The field work was carried out between April and May, 2016. The fieldwork comprised of in-depth interviews with the stakeholders of the programme in the state Ministry of Health, health departments at the local government; and the heads of the clinics. We also had focus group discussions with the women who had benefitted from the stated programme and the members of the ward development committee for the political wards were the clinics were located. We also collected quantitative information from the clinic records to enable us have an estimate of the costs a similar programme and also to develop a toolkit for programme analysis.

Since my own assignment was in the South Eastern part of the country, I was initially accepted by the participants of the study because I was a native Igbo speaker. Being an economist, with no basic knowledge about the health aspect of the study, there were obvious difficulties in understanding some of the terms that were included in the interview guide. My approach towards the women was more sympathetic to the shared understandings of the plight of our gender especially in a patriarchal society like ours. Being in the public sector, I could relate when issues of the lack of human and capital resources needed to provide quality care were mentioned. The shared language was highly important for many of the respondents, who felt more relaxed in speaking the Igbo language without fear of making mistakes when speaking in English. This enabled me to have direct access to the respondents and feeling connected as an insider to the research process. My travels outside Nigeria, in search of learning, had neither hampered my understanding of the language nor had it made me forget about the culture and norms of the land, which was appreciated by the respondents in the study I was conducting.

The fact that I did not fully understand the health terms did not hamper the rapport I had built with the respondents. In other words, I was treated politely and the respondents answered the questions as well as they could. When asked to provide consent, they did so willingly since the information would be confidential. They were more excited about the potential for getting new funding for the program as a direct consequence of having benefitted from the program. This is stated clearly in the words of one of the beneficiaries:

> *When I came to deliver my first child, I was told it was free. I was in a hurry to take in for the second child, I did so free of charge. Returning for the third time within a year, I was told that the program was over.*

There was however, a slight bit of anxiety for the women as they had received many such visits with promises about health care provisions which were mostly hijacked completely or diverted to semi-urban and urban areas. This had clear implications, if the intended beneficiaries have a sense of mistrust, they might be sluggish in participation which may have adverse effects on their unborn children.

Being away for a while placed me in the position where I could make references for the women about the experiences of non-Nigerian women, which they found valuable. I could also sympathise with them about their experiences. In all, I could say that I felt like both an insider and an outsider within the research process.

DISCUSSION

Although the three "returning" researchers in this article are from different countries and have different research backgrounds, they shared similar experiences of conducting fieldwork back in their native countries. They all had experienced living abroad in a different culture and felt their ability to speak their native language was all they needed to build rapport with their respondents. Their case examples show that there is more to the insider/outsider positioning than they had initially assumed.

The Nigerian example shows the "returning" researcher using her position to her advantage and she was not treated with suspicion nor did the researchers feel threatened. In her case, she explained how she used her exposure and knowledge from outside Nigeria to inform some of her respondents about different experiences of women. In contrast, the "returning" researcher in Zimbabwe was perceived to have a more superior academic training and instead of that being seen as an advantage and a learning point, it made the researcher an outsider and further increased the distance between the researcher and participants. This shows the complexities inherent within an insider/outsider status and that it is not easily negotiated or assumed as one or the other. This assertion supports the trend on the insider/outsider debate which sees the move beyond a strict insider/ousider dichotomy (Kerstetter, 2012). This view states that researchers' identities are relative and dependent on the research context. In one instance the researcher can find themselves being an insider and having an advantage of access, then in the next instance they can be an outsider with outside knowledge to offer respondents, which is also advantageous as seen in the Nigeria example, or an outsider to be treated with suspicion as in the Zimbabwean example.

The ability to converse in the local language, even after years outside the native country, was similar for all the three collaborators in this article. This language ability offered them initial access to their respondents in all three case examples. Whether it was Akan, Igbo or Shona, all three "returning" researchers in their different research settings were able to claim an insider status based on their language ability. It is not surprising that this allowed the researchers in this study to be accepted because a lot of people who have left their countries and are living in the diaspora often come back claiming an inability to speak their native language, which is evident in the diaspora-homeland debate. Sheffer (2003) stated that second, third and fourth generation diasporic communities cannot speak their native language and still this does not mean they do not get accepted into their communities nowadays. However in a Sub-Saharan African context, the ability to retain one's original language even after living in Western countries is an advantage.

The Ghanaian example showed a research journey that started out smoothly and then changed as the research went on. The case begs the question of how much of a researcher's background must be shared with respondents because in this case, it was seen as a disadvantage. Similar to the Zimbabwean example, once the participants realised or fully understood the "returning" researcher's identity they made assumptions relating to the inability of the researcher to understand what is going on in the native country. Perhaps in the building of rapport, the researcher shares how long they have been outside the country and this affects some of the respondents and, as seen here, affects the reaction of the respondents to some of the questions asked in the studies. This seems to be in support of the assertion that the researcher' role in qualitative research involves him/her empathising and giving a bit of themselves to the research process in building a relationship with respondents (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Prejudices and stereotypes are inherent in qualitative social research, as the literature states (see Holliday, 2007; Babbie &Mouton, 2001) and these case examples show that these need to be negotiated. Also this article clearly shows how as researchers we can be both insiders and outsiders to a particular community of research participants at many different levels and times (Villenas, 1996) which goes against a strict insider/outsider dichotomy that some recent studies have proposed. The study in Zimbabwe also found internal variations within groups that were initially perceived to be homogenous and these were based on class, education and perceived economic status. Building relations based on trust and mutual understanding with the respondents form a big part of the qualitative research process and this was the same experience for the three researchers" .

CONCLUSION

The practice of doing social research comes with a number of challenges and issues which arise during the research process. This article explored the issues that arose whilst negotiating an insider/outsider status for three "returning" researchers" originally natives of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Their acceptance into their native community was based on language ability and areas of mutual understanding such as shared profession and views on the current state of affairs that come with being a citizen of a particular nation. However, during the course of the research, all three researchers, although they were conducting research in different settings and for different reasons, faced some similar issues when it came to negotiating their positionality as researchers. Whether they were an insider or outsider became dependent on how their respondents perceived them. Only in the Nigerian case did the tensions of being a "returning" researcher become an advantage in terms of knowledge sharing. In the case of Zimbabwe and Ghana, both researchers" started off with a perception of themselves as insiders and ended with a reality of neither being an insider or an outsider. Both could apply. Therefore, the issue of being an insider or outsider whilst doing social research is complex and as this article shows, it cannot be assumed from the onset. It is rather, a status that is negotiated with respondents and can vary in different contexts depending on the characteristics of the respondents. Researchers returning from the Western countries, when returning back to their native countries can only hope for acceptance and mutual understanding. The insider/outsider status from these cases, is completely out of their hands and up to the fieldwork particants, whether they choose to accept them as an insider or not and how that influences the data collection process. However, whether the researcher is an insider or outsider, as illustrated, this can either be seen as an advantage and respondents learn from the outsider or as a disadvantage when they are regarded with suspicion or seen as a threat to the respondents and wider society.

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