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Abstract

Conducting research among peers and communities that a researcher also serves may be both daunting and rewarding. Researching peers may make the researcher feel uncomfortable raising certain questions that are sensitive or that could be construed to be testing their competencies. This paper is inclined more towards showing that it is advantageous to be an insider, whose position can facilitate collection of information that could not have been accessed, or revealed to an outsider. The paper reports on fieldwork conducted in a low-income country in Sub-Sahara Africa as part of a doctoral study with communities affected by disasters and those that work with such communities. The paper demonstrates the complexities of conducting such research and provides some insights that may be useful to insiders, outsiders or "in-betweeners" embarking on fieldwork in low-income countries and among vulnerable population struggling with manifold stresses and shocks.

Keywords

Insider Researcher, Social Desirability, Malawi, Research Ethics, Peer Research, Gatekeepers, Semi-Structured Interviews

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Researching Peers and Disaster Vulnerable Communities: An Insider Perspective

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Conducting research among peers and communities that a researcher also serves may be both daunting and rewarding. Researching peers may make the researcher feel uncomfortable raising certain questions that are sensitive or that could be construed to be testing their competencies. This paper is inclined more towards showing that it is advantageous to be an insider, whose position can facilitate collection of information that could not have been accessed, or revealed to an outsider. The paper reports on fieldwork conducted in a low-income country in Sub-Sahara Africa as part of a doctoral study with communities affected by disasters and those that work with such communities. The paper demonstrates the complexities of conducting such research and provides some insights that may be useful to insiders, outsiders or "in-betweeners" embarking on fieldwork in low-income countries and among vulnerable population struggling with manifold stresses and shocks. *Keywords: Insider Researcher, Social Desirability, Malawi, Research Ethics, Peer Research, Gatekeepers, Semi-Structured Interviews*

Introduction

The identity and position of a researcher can play significant roles in influencing the research process. Identities that are socially ascribed or those that are achieved can make one an insider or outsider (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Muhammad, Wallerstein, Sussman, Avila, Belone, & Duran 2015). Merton (1972) defined insiders as "members of specified groups and collectivities, or occupants of specified social statuses" while outsiders are the "non-members" (p. 21). The insiders have some "privileged access to particular kinds of knowledge" (Merton, 1972, p. 11). Other than identities such as sex, age, ethnicity, Mercer (2007) argues that there are other dimensions of the insider-outsider position, such as research's time and place, power relationships between researcher and those being researched, researcher's personalities as well as the research topics.

Power relationships, which are often negotiated between the researcher and participants during the research process (Brooks, te Riele, & Maguire, 2016; Parameswaran, 2001), can change depending on time and context of research. This can make the outcomes of the relationships contradictory or unexpected (Brooks et al., 2016). Researchers should, therefore, not just be aware of power dynamics in research, but they should be able to negotiate them. Negotiating power dynamics also entails that researchers should aim at promoting the participation and empowerment of research participants. In this way, the two parties consider each other as equals, rather than where one is taken to hold privileged loci (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, & Muhamad, 2001). This is particularly so with research conducted with vulnerable communities.

This paper is not a report on the findings of a research, but presents methodological reflections in conducting insider-research within a low-income country in Africa. It draws on the unique issues experienced during conducting the qualitative component of a broader mixed-methods doctorate study, where focus groups, semi-structured interviews and participant observations formed the qualitative portion. Rather than dwelling on the insider-outsider debates, I focus on six key areas within the insider theme: researcher identity, social desirability, neutrality, ethics, peer research and gate keepers. While these areas are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive in the context of insider research, they present different perspectives on the dynamics of qualitative insider-research. These are particularly relevant for those conducting research within their own institutions, among peers and/or with vulnerable communities that they also professionally serve. Within each aspect, I portray the challenges that I faced, or anticipated to face, and how these were negotiated and resolved during fieldwork. Rather than considering the insider researcher as wielding a "double-edged sword" (Mercer, 2007), I mostly look at the multiple opportunities that are presented to an insider researcher and how encountered challenges were addressed. I, therefore, argue that the "double-edged sword" could sometimes be an "edgeless sword" working more to the benefit of the insider researcher.

The paper begins by providing a brief overview of current debates on the insider-outsider positions, before reflecting on the methodological experiences in relation to the six areas. Although this article is not a report of my research findings, to provide context for the discussion of insider-researcher issues, I will briefly summarise the nature of the research as background for the discussion to follow. In some instances, I refer to specific issues encountered during conducting fieldwork to provide evidence for the arguments being made.

The broader study focused on assessing why some households with similar exposure and vulnerability to floods resettle while others do not. The study was conducted in two districts of Nsanje and Chikwawa and the city of Mzuzu in Malawi, sub-Saharan Africa. All three areas were affected by floods between 2015 and 2016, which necessitated government to implement a resettlement programme as a way of preventing future risks. Data was also collected from practitioners mostly based in Lilongwe, Malawi's capital city where the majority of government ministries and departments as well as head offices for non-governmental organisation and development partners are based. At the national level, the resettlement process was being led by the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA) in the vice president's office. I was working for DoDMA as a technical officer at the time I commenced the study. I, therefore, started my research not just familiar with the work of most actors in the field but I also knew most of the key actors. I had also actively participated in the development of a number of policy and regulatory instruments that I was also studying, and had also worked within the local communities I was studying.

Insider, Outsider or In-Betweener?

Previous scholars such as Olson (1977) considered the insider and outsider positions to be mutually exclusive. Scholars now recognise that the two are best considered as a continuum, where the positions can be negotiated and renegotiated and can oscillate from one context to another (Griffith, 1998; Mullings, 1999; Kusow, 2003; Mercer, 2007; Muhammad et al., 2015). As Mullings (1999) argued, "no individual can consistently remain an insider and few ever remain complete outsiders" (p. 340). Muhammad and colleagues (2015) add: "identity is a complex, multi-layered, and dynamic phenomenon that is both fluid and situational, yet retaining core characteristics" (p. 1047). For instance, one can be an insider because they share race or ethnicity with the research participants, but at the same time other attributes such as gender, level of education, social class and age may make them outsiders (Merriam et al., 2001).

The fact that one is a native does not automatically mean that respondents would consider him or her an insider, which also suggests that it is possible for a researcher to be an insider in a foreign place and an outsider in his or her own home area (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010). There can, therefore, also be an "insider-outsider" or "in-betweener" position (Brooks et al., 2016). Griffith (1998) further cautions that attributes such as race, education, gender or ethnicity do not in themselves ascribe one an insider or outsider. Instead, the political circumstances, relationships between researcher and those being studied and research practices are what determine whether one can be an insider or outsider.

Being an insider offers multiple opportunities; yet, it can also be a source of challenges. The very same attributes such as gender, ethnicity or age that may place an insider at an advantage in one context may play to his or her disadvantage in another situation (Hockey, 1993). Insiders are considered to have less challenges in getting access to research sites and the data collection process is faster than for outsiders (Mercer, 2007). Participants may be more willing to reveal issues to an insider researcher since they feel their views also reflect those of the researcher, so whatever he/she writes will also be true for the researcher as it is for the participants (Hockey, 1993). Knowledge or connection to the group being studied by insiders can help in providing richer insights and enhancing understanding and interpretation of information (Mullings, 1999; Shah, 2004).

However, being an insider can make a researcher prejudiced or ignore some issues that could be picked up by someone less familiar with those being researched (Merton, 1972; Mercer, 2007). Respondents may also be afraid to be judged by insider researchers and, therefore, less willing to share their information with them (Shah, 2004). Respondents who are aware of the researcher's stance may be biased in providing the information that the researcher wants to hear (Mercer, 2007). Insiders may also end up taking issues for granted with their greater familiarity (Shah, 2004), and can shy away from asking questions they feel are obvious or not important (Hockey, 1993). Being an insider can make one avoid asking questions on sensitive topics and the shared history with respondents may influence how he or she is perceived (Mercer, 2007). Mercer (2007), therefore, compares conducting insider research to "wielding a double-edged sword" (p. 7).

Researcher Identity

I commenced my research wielding this seeming double-edged sword. I assumed that my identity as a researcher was critical not just in terms of methodological concerns, but the theoretical position in relation to the substantive issues being studied. The fact that I had worked with government in areas related to the study may have had an effect on my objectivity and could have biased me towards particular viewpoints. Besides, my position also held some power connotations that might have affected the type of responses offered by participants. Because I spoke the language of the people in my study areas, was familiar with the environment and had worked in the communities, I considered myself an insider. Yet, some participants at local level viewed me as a powerful outsider basing on my social status and my previous position as a government official. To mitigate against these perceived challenges, the design of the study ensured triangulation at different levels of data collection. I also recruited four research assistants to assist with the data collection and conducted part of the field work jointly with another doctoral student who was an outsider.

Researchers have to decide which aspects of their identity to reveal to research participants (Mullings, 1999). While it was possible to hide my identity as a government employee, in a number of instances this was not feasible. At times I conducted interviews in communities I had visited before as a government officer and some people still recognised me. Even abstract things like type of vehicle used revealed our identity: some members of the community could identify us even before alighting from our vehicle. The vehicle used had registration numbers and a visible logo that could easily be linked to my institution. It also had the name of the organisation which meant some people knew who we were. In two cases, some community members said: "we had seen this vehicle when we were in camps," and that could not be refuted.

In other cases, research participants may not really care about some identities of a researcher. My research was conducted in areas with high illiteracy rates. Yet, when making introductions as students, some viewed that status inferior or irrelevant. This could partly be the case in over-researched communities where they are used to interacting with professionals and to them a PhD has no meaning. Some did not apparently know what it meant to be a doctoral student and had to ask for clarification. Besides, my participants were individuals who had been displaced by floods and had been in camps for six months, during which they had interacted with people from all walks of life. These included the head of state, international and local development partners and various other categories of people. Interacting with a student could, therefore, not be viewed as something out of the ordinary to them.

The Challenge of Social Desirability

Researching about people's behaviours has its own challenges that might affect the validity and reliability of the data produced, especially in cases of self-reported behaviours. Participants also tend to judge researchers based on their social class, ethnicity, race, nationality, religious background, profession, age and gender, which may create a bond, suspicion, or antagonism (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Shariff, 2014). Social desirability is a major threat to the kind of information that research participants are able to provide. People tend to report or associate themselves with socially desirable behaviours and hide those that are not (Bernard, 2011, 2013; Bryman, 2016). This can be worse in situations where researchers are insiders who have been, or are, also involved in the subject under study (Mercer, 2007). Bernard (2013) suggests several reasons why people are inaccurate reporters of their own behaviour, one of which being that "interviews are social encounters. People manipulate those encounters to whatever they think is their advantage" (p. 209). Edwards, Thomsen, and Toroitich-Ruto (2005) talk of two different manifestations of such behaviour: *demand characteristics* where respondents are well-informed and would like to influence the results of the research or *self-presentation bias*, where they are just trying to present a more positive sight of their own behaviour.

As an insider researcher, I considered social desirability a major threat to the reliability and validity of the data collected from participants. Since my research looked at factors that were affecting disaster risk reduction and the majority of these were being attributed to government, some research participants could have been reluctant to open up and reveal issues to me. However, in my case, I found that most participants were more willing to reveal intimate or sensitive details, or malpractices when they were aware of my position as a government officer. Could social desirability have been at work? In some instances, it was obvious that issues were being exaggerated, while in others it was difficult to know the veracity of the information. I was, thus, always conscious of such likelihoods, and avoided taking the issues at their face value. With multiple participants, I was able to ask the same questions with different participants. When in doubt, I also made sure I covertly verified with at least one other source within the same community. Where issues raised were about someone's character, I checked with them to get their side. Often, the verification process revealed other pertinent details that had been omitted by the initial source(s).

As Boeije (2004) study showed, some people may want to be present during interviews to control their self-image, so that those being interviewed would be unable to present them in any negative way. Bernard (2013) calls this the *third-party-present effect*. According to Bernard (2013) and Boeije (2004), there can be social desirability in responses, or response effect when a third party is present during interviews, where interviewees can manipulate their responses so that they present themselves in a desirable way. In my case, local chiefs and other local elites often wanted to be present during focus groups. While I was mostly able to request them not to be present, in a few instances this was not possible. In one case, a local chief who had provided resettlement land for some displaced households was present during a focus group with the resettled people. Whenever someone from the resettled community raised a concern, the chief was swift in coming in and reproaching them. Since these people were seeking refuge in his area, they were constrained in what they could say and most of them ended up not saying much. This assertive *self-presentation* (Boeije, 2004; Edwards et al., 2005) by the chief was obviously being done to suppress any shortcomings from his side. Even though I had informed the chief that I was there solely as a researcher, he still wanted to present himself as “the Good Samaritan,” and impress me as a government officer. For such cases, I always re-arranged proper interviews and focus groups on a different date, where the third party was not present.

Neutrality

To what extent can a researcher remain neutral? When some malpractices have been discovered in the course of the research, or some pertinent issues that require urgent attention are not being addressed, what is the role of the researcher under such circumstances? Achieving neutrality throughout the research process, especially for insider researchers, may neither be desirable nor tenable (Drake, 2010; Walford, 1994). It is also important for a researcher to deal with tensions that may arise in trying to differentiate between his or her professional position and that of a researcher. Researchers may come across information critical to their organisation in the course of the research and they have to weigh whether it is best to act on the information or not while also considering how that could impact the research process (Floyd & Arthur, 2012). However, in acting upon issues, researchers should refrain from influencing the outcomes of the research itself, while maintaining objectivity.

In some areas, respondents informed me about malpractices or implementation shortfalls. The issues were being raised on the expectation that I would be able to resolve them, report to my superiors for redress, or just for my information as a researcher. However, when the issues were raised against someone else, I handled them by not confronting the concerned parties, but by raising the issues as part of the data collection process. Where I had already interviewed such people, I met them again for follow-up interviews. In all cases, despite several requests from communities, I avoided mediating or making decisions on issues raised.

Two examples illustrate this dilemma, one where a researcher can influence some action on an issue and another where he or she is limited in what can be done. These two cases illustrate the dilemma that insiders can have in the course of fieldwork. In the first case, I was informed that an officer from one of the local NGOs providing support to the displaced had fraudulently collected money from community members on the pretext that it would be used to transport relief items to the community. The concerned NGO was among those on my list of interviewees and when I met one of the NGO’s managers, I raised the issue as a way of verifying the allegations without revealing the location. The manager indicated he had received reports about the issue and promised he would visit all the concerned communities to clarify and refund the money that had been fraudulently collected.

In the second case, a local chief raised an issue in the course of interviews about some of his subjects who had deserted him by resettling while he and a few households had refused to move. He claimed to have reported this to his senior chief and to government officials. The resettled group, on the other hand, accused the chief of putting their lives at risk by forcing them not to resettle. In both cases, the issues were being reported on the assumption that I would act. Both were very serious cases and in both instances, I was able to interview all the relevant parties, with different outcomes. In the first case, the concerned NGO took action to address the issue: this did not affect the outcome of my research. The second case was a local governance issue that, even as a government officer under normal circumstances, I could not have addressed. When I talked to council officials, I was told that there was nothing the council could do as it was the council that was encouraging people to resettle.

Another struggle on the neutrality of an insider is whether to inform research participants about the true nature of certain beliefs they hold that could be facilitating certain behavioural outcomes being studied. To what extent should a researcher reveal information he or she is aware of? Mercer (2007) and Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommend that researchers should avoid the temptation of expressing their views or contradicting research participants on the issues being discussed. “It is very hard for us to remain silent when an interviewee bases his or her comments on what we know to be false or distorted information” argue Rubin and Rubin (2012, p. 84), before adding: “… but we know we need to keep quiet. An interview is not about educating or debating with the interviewee but hearing what he or she has to say.”

However, for insider researchers who have been part of the policy measure being studied, this can be challenging. For instance, one observation made during interviews and focus groups was that some communities were living in denial and wishful thinking, accepting the present situation on the hope that government would do something to address the flood risk. While I was aware that these beliefs were not correct, telling the communities so could have inadvertently made some of them change their decisions and perhaps proceeded into resettling. As a government officer whose office was championing the resettlement process, that would have been the most desirable outcome. But as a researcher, I would have influenced the outcome of what I was studying.

Ethical Dilemmas

Writing within the context of educational research, Floyd and Arthur (2012) term the ethical dilemmas faced with insider researchers as external and internal ethical engagements. External ethical engagements refer to ethical approvals that researchers seek from internal ethical review boards, while the internal is about the ethical dilemmas resulting from the interactions and dynamics existing between the researcher, participants and institutions during fieldwork. The nature of this study raised some ethical issues, most of which falling within the internal ethical engagements category, or what Brooks et al. (2016) call “the ethics of positionality” (p. 2) The ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Sussex’s Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee. Further approvals were provided in Malawi at national level and at district level where fieldwork was conducted.

A primary ethical concern stemmed from the fact that the research was predominantly conducted in areas where literacy levels are very low and obtaining written consent from most participants was not possible. As such, the study followed a recommendation in the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics (2015), where verbal consent was obtained by reading out the consent form and recording the process of obtaining verbal consent. In addition, for each focus group or interview conducted, and where the respondent(s) was/were unable to write, a witness signed on their behalf whenever such a literate person was present. For focus groups, there was often one person within the group who could read and/or write who signed on behalf of the group: wherever possible, at least two people were asked to sign from among focus group participants.

Studying one’s institution may also create ethical pressures, such as revealing identities of informants or even removing some parts of the findings that are considered critical to the institution. For those intending to continue working with the institution after the research, they may be constrained in what they ask and report so as to maintain good relationships with colleagues or the institution (Brooks et al., 2016; Mercer, 2007; Platt, 1981). Anonymity can also be lost when one is conducting research in their own institution or among peers, especially those that one is strongly connected to (Hockey, 1993). Floyd and Arthur (2012) argue that institutional anonymity is "meaningless for insiders" (p. 177) as the information can still be easily linked to the institution.

Unlike, perhaps, when working within a school or NGO, there is only one government institution responsible for disaster risk management in Malawi and it could not be anonymised. I was given consent to reveal the identity of my institution: if this consent had not been provided, it would have been impossible to hide the identity, making the whole study almost meaningless. Anonymity challenges also applied for certain public figures, whose identities I could not reveal under certain circumstances as a government officer myself. This was also an individual debate, where I had to weigh the extent to which some findings that reflected negatively on some public figures could be revealed. Changing the positions of those being referenced was one strategy I used: for instance, instead of reporting that research participants said a particular "cabinet minister did this and that" I had to rephrase it into something less familiar without skewing the meaning.

For my research outcomes, I also shared initial reports with some of the institutions to ensure that the findings reflected what they had provided. While advisable, this can bring challenges of its own. In several instances, I was told that I was too negative in my reports and was asked to tone down a bit. The process of sharing findings with participants can also be frustrating and time consuming as responses may not be forthcoming, even from people one closely knows. In one case, I sent an email to senior local government officials to verify some of the information I reported on. I was referred from one officer to another, some of whom did not even acknowledge receiving my emails. I got a response after three months of persistent email reminders. In other cases, feedback was never provided at all.

Being an insider can also be challenging where one comes across information that is important to the study but cannot be used either because consent has not been granted or because the information is classified. Some scholars recommend not revealing information that has been obtained through privileged access outside the framework of the research or without consent, though this may also depend on the purpose of the research and target audience (Griffiths, 1985; Mercer, 2007). On several occasions, I came across pertinent information through internal email communications or attendance of restricted meetings. In other cases, I had privileged access to formal communications or documents that were not in the public domain. In case of letters, for me to use such information I had to seek consent from both my institution and the authors. While in some cases this was possible, there were cases where consent was not provided by one or both parties, yet the information could have enriched my study.

Researching Peers

Part of my research involved interviewing and observing people within the institution I work for but also interviewing peers I have worked with from other organisations. Brooks et al. (2016) posit that respondents may be reluctant to be critical when they know that the researcher has some allegiance to the institution that is part of the study. However, in my case, this also depended on the rapport that had been established in the pre-research context with peers. In her study, Mercer (2007) also felt more of an insider and at ease when interviewing people, she had previously socially interacted with than those she had not. Writing within the context of community based participatory research, Muhammad et al. (2015) used a research team identity that combined people with different identities such as ethnicity and social class to limit power and positionality dynamics in fieldwork. Their reflection on the study shows that where the identity of the researcher was matched with that of the participant(s), some challenges such as lack of trust, social distance and data access were minimized.

I found most officers that I professionally supervise and other peers that I talked to very frank in their discussions on institutional challenges. In one instance, during discussions on institutional challenges affecting disaster risk governance, an NGO officer gave an example of incompetency on an issue that we both knew I had been involved in, but without referring to me. In another instance, pointing at me in the presence of another colleague, and without being confrontational, a district officer who reports to me said: "these bosses do not think of us here at the district level." While these may present rare cases, overall, the majority of respondents were not affected by my position in providing responses: reflexively, I may have prejudged reactions of my research participants on the basis of the literature.

Hockey (1993) argues that insiders may not be able to ask questions that they feel are very obvious or irrelevant. The issue of you "already know" (Merriam et al., 2001) could be challenging. For me, this was mostly evident when interviewing peers. How could I go to my superior and ask him "how do you define climate change?" (p. 410). or "how is climate change different from climate variability?" regardless of how I phrased the questions? Even for those not from my institution, such questions coming from me may have been construed as testing their professional competency. In one interview, instead of answering my question, one respondent told me: "you already know these issues better than I do. I should actually be the one asking you."

Platt (1981) reports of asking peers some technical questions about their work which she would later compare with official documents and judge their level of awareness. This aspect was not revealed to them and some respondents had to look up the correct answers. One of my research questions focused on policies. Respondents were being asked if they were aware of policies on climate change and disaster risk management, if they had participated in their development and if they felt the policies were effective. I took a leading role in the development one of the key policies and I knew all those that had been involved in the process. For these, I felt uncomfortable asking such "obvious" questions when I already knew the answers. Respondents that had participated in the process might have been surprised to see me asking such questions. At the same time, I felt some would be reluctant to disclose the ineffectiveness of such policies in the presence of someone who had actively been involved in their development. So, while I organised all interviews, I stayed out of some interviews. For my "outsider" colleague, asking such questions was easier as she was asking from the point of "true ignorance." It also allowed candid discussions that generated helpful responses.

The Multiple Faces of Gatekeepers

Use of gatekeepers is an essential part of the research process. However, their use can be both helpful and a source of challenges. Where the researcher is able to, it is important to choose gatekeepers properly. Whether the researcher and gatekeepers knew each other before or not, or share some common attributes such as gender or age may affect their relationship in terms of reciprocity, rapport and trust (Sanghera & Thapar-Bjorkert, 2008). In my case, most village level gatekeepers were identified by the district councils. Those identified were all involved in disaster risk management issues at community level. This was advantageous not only because they considered me as someone who was their "boss", but that they had first-hand information on the issues I was interested in, including the key people to talk to or invite to focus groups.

In some context, access to research sites or participants depend on the goodwill of gatekeepers as some hold powers to deny a researcher permission to conduct a study or meet certain participants. This can be so even where such gatekeepers have no legal right to control consent of individuals to participate (Sanghera & Thapar-Bjorkert, 2008; Wiles, Heath, Crow, & Charles, 2005). Gatekeepers such as chiefs in rural areas within developing countries fall within this group. The first step in conducting research in such context is to seek permission from local leaders, even when accompanied by district-level officials or someone from the same area. Part of my research involved participant observation. On one occasion, I accompanied a team of district officials to a village for a preparatory meeting towards commemoration of the international day for disaster reduction. A senior chief of the area publicly censured our team and almost sent us back because we had not sought permission from him to conduct the preparatory activities in his area. After some other local leaders talked to him, he grudgingly allowed us to proceed. While ordinarily I would have sought such permission, on this occasion I accompanied district officials who are considered superior to the chief and who did not see the need to do so. Incidentally, this too was an important finding for my study as it revealed the power that chiefs hold at local level. On the next occasion when I returned to the same area, I made sure that that chief was my first point of contact!

There are also positive sides of working with gatekeepers. Presence of some gatekeepers and researcher's identity can make research participants reveal pertinent issues that could have remained hidden from the researcher. Whether a researcher conducts interviews in the presence of third parties such as gatekeepers or partners largely depends on the type of research approach adopted and the subjects of the research (Boeije, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In an interesting case, I organised a focus group with some community members with my gatekeeper present. Instead of discussing the issues I had prepared, some local leaders, upon seeing my gatekeeper who was a district council officer, took advantage and said there was an issue they wanted to present to us first before we could start our focus group. The district officer asked them to put aside the issue for the time being and focus on the purpose of the meeting. However, I noted that the discussions would not be fruitful if their issue was not presented first. Besides, my research also looked at the role of local leaders in adaptation decisions. The issue itself turned out to be very relevant to my research and could possibly not have been revealed during normal focus group discussions in the absence of my gatekeeper. So, I became a participant observer. My planned focus group did not proceed and I had to rearrange it to another date, where I attended without the gatekeeper.

While having gatekeepers present during interviews can be helpful, it can also negatively affect the process of generating information (Bernard, 2013). This was common where sensitive issues were being discussed. During one focus group with chiefs who had refused to resettle, I asked why they had not followed their senior chief who had resettled. When one chief started narrating the reasons that sounded very political and interesting to my study, a few chiefs looked uncomfortable and my gatekeeper told the chief: "what you are saying is not relevant, just answer what you have been asked." Immediately, the mood changed. In previous interviews, my gatekeeper had been very helpful and had encouraged participants to open up, urging them to talk when there was silence or even paraphrasing my questions. I had taken this as a positive development, but this interjection was unexpected. I could not overrule him and bring back the issue as it was also obvious some chiefs were not comfortable with the direction the discussions were taking. In this case, I had to come back alone on a different day to talk to the chief and other key informants using interviews to understand the issue.

Gatekeepers can also take advantage of the researcher's position and make unnecessary demands, when they expect some financial gains from the process. While it is recommended to pay gatekeepers for their time but also to cover meals in cases where interviews take the whole day, using locally based ones is more convenient and less costly. When gatekeepers are from government or NGO at district level, they expect to be paid the rate they normally receive for attending workshops, which can be much higher than what a local gatekeeper would demand. In addition, where one has research assistants, each of these would require someone to be directing them within the village to avoid going outside the focus areas: so those from the district level may not be helpful.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on the challenges and opportunities that come with conducting insider research on vulnerable communities and peers in the context of a developing country. The choice of my methodology was partly to address some of the fears I had regarding my identity and positionality, and the power attributes that came with it. However, in retrospect, some of the assumptions and fears I had in relation to my identity ended up being unfounded. Agreeing with Mercer (2007), being an insider can be compared to wielding a double-edged sword, but in some cases, as demonstrated in this paper, the sword can be, or be made to be, blunt on both edges or even edgeless. Assumptions that research participants will always be affected by the position of the researcher may lead to research designs that just end up being cumbersome than providing any easiness during fieldwork. The work rapport that insiders build with participants before the research is key in determining the success of insider research, especially in the context of peer research.

However, this does not mean it is always good to be an insider, and caution is required. This is especially pertinent when working with peers and vulnerable communities where the researcher stands in a position of authority. Social desirability remains a prominent hurdle. Insider researchers should be cautious and should gauge whether the issues being presented to them are reflections of reality, or being said in anticipation of some outcomes beneficial to them, or are being said just to please the researcher-practitioner. Considering that it is almost impossible to know how research participants will behave during fieldwork, researchers have to be vigorous when designing studies and err on the side of caution. The field of qualitative research offers several options that scholars can tap from, including the use of multiple data collection methods and using multiple participants.

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